

August 25, 2019
Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

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PRESSING ON

Philippians is widely regarded as one of Paul's most joyful letters, and it is. However, today we have come to the section of the letter that deals with some unhappiness, some uncertainty, some difficulties within the Philippian Church. To assert his authority, he lists off his impressive credentials. He notes them in the past tense, because when Paul wrote to the Philippians he was advanced in years... sitting in prison... facing a fraught and fearful future... anticipating what could well turn out to be a painful and undignified death.

In this passage it seems like he's caught up in a sense of nostalgia... reflecting on his life... the good, the bad, the in between. Paul examines his past: the privileges into which he'd been born... his achievements and his mistakes and failings.

Philippians 3:4-14

⁴even though I, too, have reason for confidence in the flesh. If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: ⁵circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. ⁷Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. ⁸More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. ¹⁰I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, ¹¹if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. ¹²Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. ¹³Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

Prayer

God, source of all light, by your Word, you give light to the soul. Pour out on us the spirit of wisdom and understanding, that our hearts and minds may be opened to know your truth and your way. Amen

Introduction

There are many themes to which Paul makes reference in this passage: contentment; gains and losses; perfection ... all of which could be fodder for our reflection today. The theme I invite you to ponder with me today is found in the final sentence of the text we have just heard, is mentioned twice in the last three verses: **Pressing On**.

Paul's Accomplishments and Mistakes

By way of a framework, Paul begins to list the things that he has done right in his life. He offers a personal inventory of achievements. Paul had a great past—an impressive resume. He had been a rising star, the golden boy of the religious establishment.

In verses four and five, Paul notes his resume which would be enough to make any Jewish man boast.

- *Circumcised on the eighth day*. In other words, "born scrupulously to Jewish parents as an observant Jew from birth"
- From the tribe of Benjamin, the tribe that gave Israel its first king, King Saul, after whom Paul was originally named.
- A "Hebrew of Hebrews" he spoke and read the language of the torah - Hebrew.
- He was a Pharisee, the denomination known for their most careful attention to keeping God's law in every detail. The very name, *Pharisee*, means, "Separated Ones." They were, as Jesus noted, stricter than the Law. At the peak there were no more than 6,000.

Something that Paul does not mention is that he is a Roman Citizen and literate in the Greek language. In so many words Paul achievements would have made any Jewish Mother proud...

Paul also notes his mistakes. He had been so zealous in defending the law—he persecuted the early church. One can only imagine the session of personal remorse he had about that.

In regards to all the gains and losses for which he accounts—in verse eight he says that he regards them as rubbish. The Greek word used here is much stronger than garbage, filth, or refuse. It refers to dung—excrement—you know ... It's all a pile of --- (well you fill in the blanks.)

Despite his advancing years...despite his predicament...despite the uncertainty that he faces...Paul's isn't seeking to escape into the past. Nor is he trying to escape into dreams for a distant future. Ultimately, none of that matters... It all pales in comparison to what Paul describes as the "surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord." Paul admits that the Christian faith is a journey and he hasn't yet arrived at the destination's end. Paul says: I want to keep striving. I want to grow, to learn, to change. I want to endure what I face with dignity

and honour. I want to be faithful to God in how I live, and speak, and act. I want to make Christ's love known—in the way that I face the challenges of the present. I want to become more Christ-like." I want to be "in Christ."

Leaving Those Things Behind

While they are unlikely bedfellows, there is some symmetry to remarks attributed to Albert Einstein and the Apostle Paul's line of reasoning. Listen to these words attributed to Albert Einstein:

"I must be willing to give up what I am in order to become what I will be."

Paul said he was leaving behind those things that he once treasured. He was no longer going to live life looking through the rearview mirror, but through the windshield. He was no longer going to allow his yesterdays to rob him of his tomorrows.

Here's how he puts it: "This one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize." Paul never provides a definition. He never tells the Philippians exactly what "the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" is. He simply advised them, encouraged them, exhorted them to seek it; to set aside their past and seek out God's call for their future.

Conclusion

Singer Ray Charles said, "Live every day as though it were your last and one day you will be right." You have a future filled with God's favor in front of you, but you cannot obtain the prize, until you are willing to shed off what is encumbering you, keeping you, from Pressing On—from straining forward. ¹²Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. ¹³Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus."

Closing Prayer

Loving and gracious God, as we are assured of Your renewing mercy, healing touch, and strengthening comfort; we will, therefore—press on—living the lives of forgiven people, transmitting the grace which comes to us and extending to others. Move among us to share the love you have shown to us with patience and good humor, Mighty God; help us keep our eyes on the prize. Amen