

## Pressing On

One of the things that makes the Book of Philippians so dear to me is that it is so clearly a letter to friends. It is not like the Gospels, a retelling of the story and teachings of Jesus with a theological theme in mind. Nor is it like Paul's letter to the Romans, an introductory letter to a church he did not know, carefully constructed to lay out the basic themes of his message and ministry. No, Philippians, like most letters I write to friends, is a stream-of-consciousness communication. Paul may have some particular points he wants to relate but he often interrupts himself with bits of news and meanderings to other topics. It makes the book fun to read but hard in some respects to preach. That's why I'm not picking up in verse 14 of chapter two, where we left off last week, but instead jumping into the middle of verse 4 of chapter 3.

Of course, if you're like me, you will immediately wonder what's being left out. So, I'll tell you, quickly, before we get into the meat of the passage this morning. Verses 14 through 18 of chapter two continue Paul's call to the Philippians to pattern their lives after Christ. I commend those verses to you as containing some lovely writing but they are not necessary to the point that Paul is making and so the lectionary and I have omitted them. 2:19 – 3:1 are personal remarks by Paul about his co-workers, Timothy and Epaphroditis, and we may come back to those verses in a few weeks when we look at the end of the epistle, as the strands of Paul's writing tie up there. Verses 2, 3 and the first part of verse 4 in chapter 3 are a warning to the Philippians by Paul against his rivals but I'm less interested in what Paul says about his opponents than I am in what he says about himself. Frankly, I've had enough negative politicking lately to last me for a while.

What Paul says about himself sounds rather like boasting at first or at least like a campaign ad, which in some ways it is. It is likely a response to what his opponents have been saying about him: that his view of salvation by faith is cheap grace, that he downplays the demands of God's law because he himself couldn't live up to it. Paul tackles such a charge head-on. He lays out his résumé for the Philippians: He is a true Jew, no convert or child of converts. Just as God commanded Abraham, his parents had him circumcised on the eighth day of his life. His heritage is that of the tribe of Benjamin, a point of pride for Benjamin was the only one of the twelve patriarchs born in the Promised Land. Benjamin was traditionally the tribe that led Israel in battle and the only tribe besides Judah to stay faithful to the house of David after the death of Solomon. Truly, Paul is a superlative Jew, a Hebrew of Hebrews. Before his experience on the Damascus road, he had been counted with the Pharisees, the strictest observers of God's laws, conservatives in the true sense of those who keep the old ways and protect them from corruption. Indeed, to protect the observance of God's laws, Paul had been willing to put blasphemers to death, including the motley group of followers of that ragtag Galilean prophet who, even in death, threatened to lead God's people away from the traditions Paul and the Pharisees were sworn to uphold. No one could truthfully accuse him of ever failing to follow Torah.

What Paul is telling the Philippians is that while he was still known as Saul of Tarsus, by every measurement that mattered in his society, he was on top; he had it all. He was the golden boy, the *enfant terrible*, the prodigy who was surely destined to follow his great teacher, Gamaliel, to the very top of the Jewish hierarchy, president of the Sanhedrin. But now, he writes, "whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ." Indeed, as proud as Paul might sound about his advantages of birth, zeal and rigor, English translations do not capture how low he now ranks what must have been of utmost importance to him before his encounter

## Pressing On

with the Risen Christ. In our NRSV, verse 8 says, “For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ...” Most English translations use the word “rubbish” or “garbage” here. The old King James Version comes closest to capturing the word Paul actually used: “I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung...” The Greek word is σκυβαλον and it was the most common, coarsest word in Greek for excrement. If Paul had been writing this during the Watergate era, perhaps he would have said, “All of those things that made me look good to people, next to Jesus, that’s just a bunch of [expletive deleted].” It’s almost hard to know how to get Paul’s point across without using inappropriate language or at least poor grammar. In casual conversation, I’ve been known to slip into the argot of the American South which includes an active use of the double negative as an emphatic. It ain’t no good English, but it makes the point. In a similar vein, Paul might say, “All that stuff about who my people were, how I was raised, how I did, that ain’t nothin’ compared to what I got from Jesus.”

It makes me wonder, when we look at how our society measures us, at what passes for status in this culture, could we say, “next to Jesus, that ain’t nothin’”? Paul’s society judged him by his pedigree. Ours judges by status and wealth. Are we ready to count such things as rubbish, in order that we may gain Christ? Economic forces are doing a pretty good job of reducing the value of our investments and homes. We don’t have any choice in the matter. But as followers of Christ, are we, like Paul, ready to say that those things do not ultimately matter? If we had a choice between holding on to earthly wealth and status and following Jesus more closely, which would we choose? Do we make our choices based on the received knowledge of the culture in which we were raised or do we subject everything to the critique of Christ? As Dr. William Long writes on this passage, “human systems of reckoning prestige are not the heart of the Gospel... Being in Christ carries with it its own values.”

That’s the choice Paul had to make. He could have gone on very comfortably and successfully operating under the dictates of the Law, the framework in which he had been raised. But the intrusion of Jesus into his life showed him that his meticulously careful observation of his culture’s norms fell short. He learned he could not earn his way into abundant life here on earth or into heaven when he died. Entrance into glory, into a joyous and fulfilled life and the presence of God, comes only through faith and as a gift of God; “not having a righteousness of (one’s) own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith.” Paul counted his previous status as loss because it kept him from seeing how to accept the true righteousness as a gift. He had to set all that aside, or have it stripped from him, before he could see his true dependence on God. Can we, in turn, see the losses that so concern us as reminders of who we are and whose we are and how dependent we are on God?

Paul goes so far as to say, “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death.” I don’t find here a return to his earlier musings about whether it would be better to go and be with the Lord rather than continuing an earthly struggle. Instead, I hear in these words a reflection of another familiar Pauline theme: that when we give up our old lives and live instead in Christ, we die to our old selves and are “raised to walk in newness of life.” It is why so many Christians have found baptism by immersion such a powerful image of the transition between life before and after the

## Pressing On

decision to follow in the way of Jesus; one is laid back as if in a watery grave and then lifted up to join those in the new life, a foreshadowing of the great resurrection to come. Rev. Bryan Findlayson writes, “When we identify with Christ in his crucifixion, our old life of separation from God, our state of loss, of sin and judgment, dies with him. When we identify with Christ in his resurrection, God's life-giving power enlivens us.” In fact, I would add that when we identify with Christ in his crucifixion and resurrection, we are freed from the fear of death and not just the fear of physical death. Paul had learned that what he thought constituted his identity – his heritage, his training, his piety – all of these were simply societal constructs. Even though he suffered what Kari Jo Verhulst calls “the death that comes when one is rendered a non-person” by giving up that identity, he found his true identity in Christ. Likewise, we need not worry about being stripped of those things that society says are our identity – our financial status, our place in society – because we, too, cannot be rendered non-persons in the eyes of God nor can we lose our place in God’s Beloved Community. Baptist theologian James Adair has written, “If we put too much value in possessions and personal achievement, our loss of everything might be too great to handle. On the other hand, if we put our trust in the God who inhabits the future, as Jürgen Moltmann says in his *Theology of Hope*, we have a formula that will allow us to live lives that are meaningful, authentic, and joyful.”

Now as I consider all of these things in light of my own life, as I think about turning my back on my accomplishments and the things in my life of which I’m proud, all those vain things that charm me most, as I think about being fearless about physical or societal death, frankly, I get a little weak in the knees. Man, this is tough! I can’t possibly measure up, be this faithful and courageous all the time. I’m no Paul, after all! Good old Paul. I’ve said it before and I’ll likely say it again, “me and Paul got a lot in common.” Look at what he says in verse 10 and following: “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. Not 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. Beloved, 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, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.” Do you hear that? Not, “I know Christ,” not “I’ve attained the resurrection,” not “I’ve got it made in the shade, so y’all do like me,” but “I want to know Christ... I do not consider that I have made it... I press on.” Even this close to the end of his journey, even after all the churches he’s started and the letters he’s written and the all the folks he’s turned on to the Good News of God’s love through Christ Jesus, Paul knows he’s still a long way from being the person God made him to be, still a long way from knowing God as he will when he knows as he is known, as he wrote to the Corinthians. To me, that means that Paul isn’t just up ahead of me on the trail, saying, “hurry up, catch up,” he’s right there next to me saying, “come on, let’s press on.” It makes it easier for me to see my own struggles and journey in Paul and to hear Paul’s witness speaking to me and urging me forward. And that’s another reason I love this letter.

“I press on,” Paul writes. In part because of one of those verses we didn’t read in chapter two, verse 16, where Paul writes, “I did not run in vain,” this pressing on is often linked to a metaphor of a marathon, something Meggie Lavelle could tell us a little about. Now, I’m no runner. I’ve never run a marathon and I seriously doubt that I ever will. But I’ve had a lot of friends over the years who were runners and, despite jokingly questioning their sanity for such endeavors, I’ve

## Pressing On

actually learned something from them. I've learned that marathon running is maybe even harder than it looks. That it involves a pretty fair amount of physical pain and discomfort as well as being a true test of mental fortitude as you push your body beyond what you think are its limits. I think Paul would agree that marathon running is a very apt metaphor for the Christian life. It's not easy to live at cross-purposes to the prevailing culture, which is what Jesus' teachings require us to do a good deal of the time. We don't get to live the Christian life in short spurts and then wait and rest before the next sprint. It's an every day, every minute, every encounter, every transaction kind of lifestyle. There is a cost to it and anyone who tells you otherwise isn't being honest. People will think you are crazy, people will think you are stupid, you will lose friends because you won't go along with everything they do, you will be passed over because you are not realistic about life. But if we keep our eyes on the prize, "the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus," it's all worth it.

Do you know that song, "Keep Your Eyes on the Prize"? Bruce Springsteen recorded it recently and most folks who know it know it as an anthem of the civil rights movement. You might be surprised, if you only know the title, to know that it was originally an old spiritual called "Keep Your Hand on the Plow." Maybe because many of its verses are about Paul and Silas, some folks were inspired to change the chorus to use those words from Paul to the Philippians about pressing on for the prize and the new name became better known. It's a song about perseverance and, long before it was adopted by the civil rights movement, it was a song about persevering in the Christian life: "I got my hand on the gospel plow/Won't take nothing for my journey now/Keep your eyes on the prize, Hold on." As I was considering what we should sing in this service that would help us reflect on this passage from Philippians, I looked up songs of perseverance in our Chalice Hymnal. I was intrigued but not really surprised at how many of those songs come to us from the Black Church tradition: "Woke Up This Morning (with my mind stayed on Jesus)", "Precious Lord, Take My Hand", "We Shall Overcome", "Lift Every Voice and Sing". Our African-American brothers and sisters know a little bit about persevering through difficult circumstances. It occurred to me, too, that there were a lot more of these songs in the various versions of the Baptist Hymnal that I grew up with. I almost copied one of them for us to sing this morning – I didn't because I couldn't bring myself to copying one more set of song sheets so soon after finishing the new Red Book, but it would have been perfect. How many of you remember the hymn "Higher Ground"? It could be right out of this part of Philippians. "I'm pressing on the upward way, New heights I'm gaining ev'ry day; Still praying as I onward bound, 'Lord plant my feet on higher ground.' Lord, lift me up and let me stand, By faith on heaven's table land, A higher plane than I have found; Lord plant my feet on higher ground." I started wondering as I thought of all those old songs that we don't sing so much anymore, have we lost the ability to talk and sing about persevering? Have things been so easy for us that we've forgotten that part of life, that part of faith? But then I thought, you know, some of those old songs are kind of grim. Maybe we've actually begun to learn one of Paul's other lessons in Philippians, to be glad and to rejoice, even in times of trouble. Maybe, instead of gritting our teeth and pressing on, we do better to talk about walking ahead in the light of God and graduating from walking to marching and from marching to singing and from singing to dancing and remembering always to pray.

And so, my sisters and my brothers, let us learn from our brother Paul to be prepared to set aside earthly things in favor of a fuller knowledge of Christ, to forget what lies behind and to eagerly

## Pressing On

dance forward to what lies ahead, not with grief for what we leave behind, because it ain't nothin', but with the joy that is to be found in the light of God, in the love of Christ and in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit and of God's Beloved Community. Amen.