

“Still Straining Forward – Not Made it Yet”

October 4 2020

Hamilton Presbyterian Church

The Prayer for Understanding:

The Witness of the Scripture:

The Epistle: Philippians 3:10-14

The Sermon:

Still straining forward — Not made it yet.

That’s Paul writing to the Christians in Philippi and what he writes lifts up a factoid of faith. Faith can do only one of two things: it can either grown or diminish.

But you’ll say to me: “Whoops Jack, you got it wrong. You forgot the third option: Faith can go for years and years, just sitting there, staying precisely the same.”

But I’m prepared to argue that if faith is not growing, like a muscle, it atrophies. Gradually, it become less effective, not quite as vigorous. Of course, I hardly notice it, but bit by bit, my faith muscles can’t lift as much, work as hard, be as flexible. Lacking nourishment, they begin to tighten up, their full range of movement is lost. In time, they can’t do much at all.

Oh sure, you can still do bible talk, sing the hymns, pray the prayers, but the fire is gone.

I have a couple of bad kneecaps, atrophy is not their problem, but as you well know, I do not climb stairs well. In days of yore, if a hospital visit involved a church member on the fourth floor, I’d take the stairs. Ha! No more of that!

II.

Today’s scripture passage, like last week, is from Paul’s letter to the church in Philippi. It’s a dynamic letter: full of the most active verbs the Greek language has to offer. What I call “the energy index” in Philippians is surprisingly high.

In Chapter 2, Paul makes a claim about the Christian life:

“Work out your salvation with fear and trembling,
because God is always (*always!*) at work in you....”

The Greek word for “work” used here is an energy word. It’s like the guys feel yesterday after mowing the church lawn, or the dumpster squad felt last Saturday at the end of a dumpster almost.

I think we’re ready for today’s passage, where Paul continues with this theme:
Philippians 3:10-14

III.

So for Paul, being a Christian is not a finished project like achieving a high school diploma. It is a race in progress: active, vigorous, strenuous, focused, with a destination not to be gained in this life.

And yet, this destination is potent and powerful; the reality of the goal, of pressing on toward it, is life transforming.

Paul says he began this race when he was grasped by Jesus Christ. The Greek verb which Paul uses is *katalambano*, which has the particular meaning of being seized or caught, almost by surprise.

I remember reading of an elementary school crossing guard who saved five children at a school crossing by snatching them away from an on-coming car, pulling them to herself and taking on the impact of the car.

Literally, these children were seized and saved. If this had been a story in the New Testament daily news, the Greek word would have been *katalambano*.

That’s the effect of Jesus, Paul says: grasped by Christ - seized and saved - and so the great race of faith he is now running began.

IV.

Paul admits the race is tough slog. This journey we call the Christian pilgrimage is not an easy gait down a smooth path. He confesses how he must personally keep striving and pressing on.

I love the way Clarence Jordan translates the passage in his Cotton Patch version:

“But I keep on struggling, trying to catch on to why Christ Jesus caught hold of me. Brothers and sisters, I don't think I've caught on even yet, but with this one thing in mind, forgetting everything that lies behind and concentrating on what lies ahead, I push on with all I have toward the prize of God's invitation to the high road in Jesus Christ.”

V.

So here's what we have from Paul. It's not so much an accomplishment, this being a Christian, as it is a process, a dynamic movement toward a goal. In Greek marathons, the prize was placed upon the goal line to provide incentive for that last push any runner needs to make to win the race.

And that is what brings us to the Table around which we will shortly gather. It is, of course, all well and good to talk about the race, and even to want to run it, to trade stories about some of relays we've been in, but that's what golfers would call the "Nineteenth Hole."

When we come to this Table we are welcomed by the One who asks us to work for peace and wholeness in the midst of the world. It is clearly God's intention that all people who dwell on this earth might sit together at this table in peace and partnership, and find nourishment for the race before us.

Let me end with more of Eugene Peterson, and this also from chapter 3:

⁷ The very credentials these people are waving around as something special, I'm tearing up and throwing out in the trash - along with everything else I used to take credit for.

⁸ And why? Because of Christ. Yes, all the things I once thought were so important to me are gone from my life.

¹⁰ I gave up all that inferior stuff so I could know Christ personally, experience his resurrection power, be a partner in his suffering, and go all the way with him to death itself.

¹³ I'm not saying that I have this all together, that I have made it. But I am on my way, reaching out for Christ, who has so wondrously reached out for me.

Friends, don't get me wrong: by no means do I count myself an expert in all of this, but I've got my eye on the goal, where God is beckoning us onward - to Jesus. I'm off and running, and I'm not turning back.

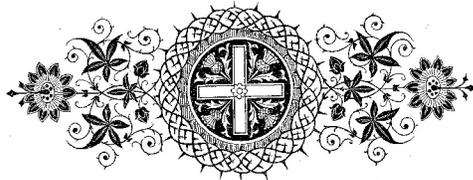
Here is the very best news I can give you: if you do not necessarily feel like a spiritual giant, that's OK. We know God is working in all of us.

¹⁰ I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

¹² 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.

¹³ 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, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. ^{15a} Let those of us then, who are mature, be of the same mind.

New Revised Standard Version



¹⁰⁻¹¹ I gave up all that inferior stuff so I could know Christ personally, experience his resurrection power, be a partner in his suffering, and go all the way with him to death itself. If there was any way to get in on the resurrection from the dead, I wanted to do it.

¹²⁻¹⁴ I'm not saying that I have this all together, that I have it made. But I am well on my way, reaching out for Christ, who has so wondrously reached out for me. Friends, don't get me wrong: By no means do I count myself an expert in all of this, but I've got my eye on the goal, where God is beckoning us onward—to Jesus. I'm off and running, and I'm not turning back. ^{15a} So let's keep focused on that goal....

The Message