

Philippians 3:4(b) – 14

"Honoring the Past; Looking to the Future"

The Apostle Paul often uses illustrations in his letters that the men and women of his day could relate to, just as Jesus did in his teachings. Common illustrations that Paul used to communicate the truth about Christian life are: the military, as in put on the whole armor of God; architecture, as in you are God's temple; agriculture – whatsoever a man sows, that also shall he reap; and the athlete. In his letter to the Philippians, Paul presents to us someone in a race. Most people liken his example to someone running a foot race. However, in his day and given the culture that he lived in, I find it more likely that Paul was describing a chariot race.

The Greek chariot, used in the Olympic Games and other events, was really only a small platform with a wheel on each side. The driver had very little to hold on to as he raced around the course. He had to lean forward and strain every muscle in his body to maintain balance and control the horse. He would have been stretching, pressing all the way to the finish.

So in one of the most familiar passages of the New Testament, this is how Paul paints the picture of living the Christian life. Living a life of faith, for Paul, meant living a life of running, wrestling, striving, fighting for the prize of being with Christ in resurrection. Now before you think that I am preaching a sermon on works righteousness let me say that Paul always did this not for his own merit but as one who had abandoned all claim to merit. Paul says over and over that we cannot earn salvation – it is a gift, freely given by God. What he means is that just because we have been given the gift does not mean that we can quit striving to be more like Christ. Trusting in God's grace does not make us less active in our faith.

So at first glance, it seems that this passage is only about pursuing a goal that lies ahead.

In fact, the Greek “I press on” would be better translated as “I follow after”, like a hunter pursuing his prey. And the truth is that this passage has never held much interest for me because I don’t run, I don’t hunt and I’ve never driven a chariot! But in his words Paul also addresses our human tendency to look back. And everyone does that, don't we?

Earlier this week, I went to dinner with three friends from high school. We met to talk about the idea of planning a 40th reunion, which would take place next year. We were quite a group at Eastside High School back in the day – sharing secrets, going to the beach together, having sleepovers where we talked about cute boys and what we wanted to do with our lives. Three of the four of us were in Youth Group at church together. Some of us went to different colleges, some the same. We were in each other's weddings as we got married, cried with each other when two got divorced. Yet, as with all friendships, some of us have stayed in closer touch than others.

After a while, our attention turned to the list of our classmates. Each of us shared news about who we have personally kept in touch with. We talked about who we dated and who we admired and even the people that we didn’t particularly like who turned out to be so nice. We discovered that two of the "hot" guys in our class are now completely bald and that most of us are a good bit heavier. Out of 236 in our class, we know that seven have died.

It is always meaningful to share common memories with people who were or are important to you. Remembering our past is important because it helped shape who we have become or will become. And for this particular congregation, which has such a rich and long history, it is both important and meaningful to look back and be thankful for those saints who went before us and for the church family they have left us. It is always appropriate to honor our past. And to try to grow from what we have learned. But there are also times when the past can

be a stumbling block for us that keeps us from looking to the future. This is Paul's main reason for including his illustration.

That is why, before Paul talks about pressing on, he reminds us all that he doesn't look back. After all, any runner who looks back while running is most likely to stumble. And any chariot driver who is looking backwards will probably run over someone else. And with his words, "forgetting what lies behind" Paul gives us three important messages.

In Paul's case, I think that he meant that we must not glory in our past achievements or use them as an excuse for relaxation. That is why Paul takes the time to recount his history of being not only a Hebrew but a Pharisee of the tribe of Benjamin. He also tells us that he wasn't just privileged by birth but by his accomplishments as a zealous persecutor of the early church. But ultimately, he looks to the future and says that he willingly set aside all of his past accolades because they paled in comparison to the accomplishments of Christ on the Cross. So he honors his past and what it helped him become, but now he realizes that God is calling him to move forward as he shares the Good News and lives as a disciple of Christ!

One way to interpret his words is to say that Paul is warning against "resting on our laurels". Or that not looking back at our past accomplishments is, in a way, a sign of humility. The truth is that success can sometimes cause us to forget HOW we became successful in the first place.

Retired news anchor Tom Brokaw told a story about this. Shortly after being promoted to co-anchor of the "Today" show, he was wandering through Bloomingdale's in New York. At that time, the "Today" show was the pinnacle of sorts for Brokaw after years of work, first in Omaha then in Los Angeles and finally in Washington, and he was feeling rather good about himself.

As he shopped, he noticed a certain man that kept staring at him. Finally the man came toward him and Brokaw was sure that he was about to reap the first fruits of celebrity status. The man pointed his finger and said, “Tom Brokaw, right?” “Right” said Brokaw. “You used to do the morning news on KMTV in Omaha, right?” “That’s right,” said Brokaw, getting set for the compliments to follow. “I knew it the minute I spotted you,” the fellow said. Then he paused and asked, “So whatever happened to you?”

Yes, our past is important. But if we are to make disciples for Christ, we must look more towards the future. That is why I said that there are three important messages in this passage. The one I just discussed is a general message, meant for all Christians who are striving to live more like God intends us. And knowing where we came from helps us understand how to truly become ourselves as we become more like Jesus.

The second message however, can be seen more as a specific message. Written to 21st Century Christians striving to fulfill the Great Commission in times that are very different from Paul's. Maybe even a message just for Nazareth Presbyterian!

Friends, we are living in exciting times at Nazareth. When I was called to be the Interim minister here, I sensed that the Holy Spirit was working vibrantly to lead this congregation into a new phase in our history. It is something that you all seemed to be hungering for. And when I realized that this passage from Paul was one of the lectionary choices for today, it immediately spoke to me about the possibilities for fulfilling not only the Great Commission of Jesus Christ but our own Mission Statement: To worship and glorify God and to make disciples for Christ.

Now, to contradict my own words, I am going to look back just a little, but not too far back. Only about six weeks ago to the beautiful Installation Service held here in August. To me, the day was perfect. To have my family, my John Knox family, this Nazareth family, residents

from the Presbyterian Community where I served for 15 years, friends from the past and present, all gathered in one room is something that usually only happens at weddings and funerals! The choir was, as always, magnificent, as were Laura, Alicia and Dean. One of my very best friends preached a wonderful sermon about the Holy Ground opportunities that God sends our way and our need to be looking and listening to the call of the Spirit. Every person that participated in the service was just perfect in what they added.

But I am not exaggerating when I tell you that at least TEN people from different paths in my own life called and made the very same comments about that day. In a nutshell, here is what I heard. "I have never heard such strength, such conviction, such unity in the words of the Lord's Prayer, the Apostles' Creed and the singing of the hymns from any church I have been in. Like everyone really meant it!" Isn't that amazing? I think all of my friends were sensing the energy, the excitement and the hope that is going on right now. And we must give thanks to the Holy Spirit for the gifts that have been shared with this body of Christ in the past and today.

So reading these words to the Philippians as many times as I did to prepare this sermon, I realized that Paul is speaking to Nazareth and telling us how important it is to look forward. Paul is calling us to honor, to give thanks for and to even CHERISH our rich heritage but he is reminding us that the future is where we are headed. We are to Press On! And of course, this may mean letting go of some things that we don't want to let go of.

A very simple illustration comes to mind. If someone offers you a cookie and your hands are filled with books, you cannot accept the cookie until you put the books down. In the same way, God is offering us the opportunity to be a part of kingdom building today but we may have to set down, to let go of, some of the things we are holding on to from yesterday. We cannot just claim our wonderful past for kingdom building as fulfilling our call from God.

And then there is that third message. The message of grace that is given to each individual member of the body of Christ, not just in this church, but in the world. The gift of transformation that we all receive when we accept the grace that God offers us and then allow the Holy Spirit to work in our lives as that grace grows each day.

Paul's reminder to forget what lies behind is also a word that asks us NOT to dwell on the mistakes of our past. Every person, even every Christian, has the experience at one time or another of feeling like the sorriest person that has ever lived. And precisely because we know that Christ has bestowed such grace on us, we can soon find ourselves wallowing in guilt. How can God love and forgive ME is a common feeling when we have sinned. Paul's word reminds us that the normal Christian life contains victory over the PRINCIPLE of sin but that NO CHRISTIAN lives in CONTINUOUS victory over sin. Every day is a new challenge. The battle is never done for us on earth. The prize is never achieved in the earthly kingdom.

Now, while many of us cannot remember what we had for dinner last night, it seems that we all have trouble forgetting times when we have let someone we love or even ourselves down. But let me remind you that to forget does NOT mean to fail to remember. Methodist minister Warren Wiersbe says that to forget means to no longer be influenced by or affected by the mistakes of our past. He goes on to say, "We break the power of the past by living for the future. We cannot change the past, but we can change the MEANING of the past."

This makes Paul's words to forget what lies behind so important and so meaningful to me. If I am continually looking back at my wrongdoings I, too, will stumble or run over someone else and this will keep me from achieving my PERSONAL goal of living more like Christ every day.

And lest we think that we will never be able to let go of our personal regrets from the past, Paul reminds us of this promise. “Christ Jesus has made me his own.” By this Paul means that we can seek because we have been found; we can apprehend because we have been apprehended; we can know Christ because Christ knows us. The good news of the Gospel is that when Jesus the Christ died on the cross for Paul and you and me, ALL THAT WAS HIS BECAME OURS. The righteousness of Christ is made up of *his* own perfect personal obedience. And God KNOWS that we can never achieve that perfection so he bestowed it upon us with Christ’s death and resurrection.

So when we hold onto the hope that Christ has made us his own, we are reminded that when we know Christ, we are found in him. The righteousness of Christ is yours and mine. It covers our sins so that we do not have to look back. Because of the grace of God, Christ can empower me to forget, to press on and to become more like him.

So let us honor our past, and letting go of anything that might cause us to stumble, look forward to the future. The future of the kingdom God calls us to build today. But even more importantly, to the Heavenly Kingdom that we are destined for. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Rev. Julie Schaaf

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