

Pressing On
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Presbyterian Church in Sudbury

Introduction to the Morning Lesson

Today we encounter for the third time this September Paul's Letter to the Philippians and in my text this morning the apostle will talk about leaving things behind so he can press on toward the goal. He speaks of the goal as being "the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus."

When we think of leaving things behind and pressing on for Christ, most of us, I think, are very conscious of much in our lives that hinders. We realize that too often we have come up far short of what we hoped. We know our failings to meet even our own, minimal standards, let alone God's standards. We know where we've let down our families or friends; we recall illegitimate compromises in our jobs or school; we remember times when we just didn't try hard enough; we are reminded of high hopes for greater spiritual discipline with little result. We would like to leave such things behind and press on toward Christ. But a lot of the old ways still hang on to us.

In the text, Paul describes what lies behind him in somewhat different terms. He wants to leave behind his religious credentials which he terms as being "confident in the flesh" — and as a faithful Jew Paul had rather impressive religious credentials. So this passage is why some say that Christianity is not *a religion* but *a faith* in Jesus Christ. That is true and not true. Paul does hope to leave behind his religiosity because in and of itself it isn't what Christ called him to. But we need to be honest enough to admit that Christianity is a religion and practicing Christians are called to do religious kinds of things — pray, give, learn of God, worship, act in a moral manner, and so forth. All respectable religions encourage similar kinds of behavior though the particulars vary from religion to religion. Paul wants to get beyond religion to what he calls "the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus." Compared to this he's willing to say that his religious exercises are rubbish — the English translators of our Bible being overly polite because the original word means dung. All the religious stuff is dung compared to knowing Christ.

So we may come to this text aware that our own failings hinder us from pressing on toward Christ. Paul is aware that his own successes as a religious person hinder his pressing on. In either case, Paul tells us to forget what lies behind and press on toward the goal of the heavenly call in Christ. Let's read it in chapter 3.

Philippians 3.4b-14 (NRSV)

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised 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; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More 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 and 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. 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.

ONE: To know Christ

Paul said, “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection.” So let’s begin today by asking what it means to know Christ. There are some things it does *not* mean. It does not mean:

- knowing all the facts, theories, statistics, and stories about him, though all these are important;
- knowing all the right spiritual and scriptural principles, though they can be helpful;
- going to church or giving a lot of money and time, though these all have their place.

But what it does mean is to know Jesus Christ as a person, just like we know our friends or mothers and fathers or husbands and wives or daughters and sons. To know Christ is to know him as an actual, living, day-to-day person. To know Christ is to relate to him, talk with him, spend time with him, and follow him.

The scriptures emphasize this with their very choice of words. In both Old and New Testaments the word “to know” also is used to refer to sexual intercourse. Most of us have probably heard that before but failed to understand the startling significance of it. The same verb for the most intimate and powerful expression of human love also describes our relationship to Jesus Christ. To fully know Christ is to know him that meaningfully, that powerfully, that tangibly, that joyfully. In other words, pressing on toward Christ isn’t a vague, just-for-Sunday, wimpy kind of thing. To know Jesus Christ is to be connected to God in a real and powerful way.

This may be a hard idea to get a hold on, but perhaps an image from C. S. Lewis can help. In his novel *The Great Divorce*, Lewis describes a bus trip from Hell to Heaven. Passengers find that they can get on a bus in Hell. It doesn’t even cost anything. Think of it as the Hell to Heaven “T”. Then they ride to Heaven and discover they are free to stay, if they desire. But most take the bus back to Hell because they also discover they are ill prepared for Heaven.

In Lewis’ imagery, Heaven is so much more real and solid than the folks from hell. In Heaven’s bright, eternal sunshine, their bodies are almost transparent like vague, insubstantial shadows.¹ The grass, though lush and green and soft and beautiful for Heaven’s people, hurts the visitors’ feet. To their unreal, soft, insignificant bodies the grass feels hard and sharp like green slivers of glass.

Lewis expands the analogy in all kinds of fascinating ways to make a very clear point. The spiritual reality of God is not vague, shapeless, and unrelated to our senses. Spiritual reality is the most real, the most substantial, and the most sensible. Our earthly life is transitory. But it is only transitory to that which is more real, more permanent, and even more beautiful. Knowing Christ means pressing on to this heavenly reality.

¹ C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (New York: Macmillan, 1946) 27.

TWO: But what about today?

Now you may be thinking, *That's great, Bill, that's really great! But what about now? Heaven sounds wonderful but I'm not experiencing a lot of it right now. What about today?*

I agree. This is an important question. Can we really press on toward Christ amidst all the troubles of this world? War, hurricanes, unending deficits, bungling government, and a lot of personal troubles that are just as real if less universal. Can we experience more of Christ now or do we have to wait until we go to heaven?

Paul would argue that the fullest experience of renewal in Christ does come in heaven but he would also argue that we don't have to wait until we die to experience it. He would argue this, not because life was always rosy for Paul or because he followed Christ perfectly. He would argue it because, as he said, "Christ Jesus has made me his own." The translation should really be stronger. Paul is saying that Christ had captured him, had seized him.² In other words, our hope for renewal is not our faith in Christ but Christ's faith in us. Hear what Paul says again: "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."

In other words, we should not to be overwhelmed by our failings nor overly confident in our successes. We don't rely on what has or has not happened. We press on to what *can* happen in Christ. I read somewhere about an Olympic champion commenting on the one essential thing for winning. "The only way to win a race," he said, "is to forget all previous victories that would give you false pride and all former failures which would give you false fears. Each race is a new beginning. Pressing on to the finish tape is all that's important."

I think this is what we need to hear when we think of pressing on toward Christ. Sometimes life overwhelms us with trouble. Illness and suffering and loneliness and worry are no respecters of persons. They and a host of other struggles come to all. And sometimes we are overwhelmed by our own sinfulness. I know there are days when I just shake my head, wincing to myself about my failures and weaknesses and lack of faith and discipline. Maybe you have some days like that too.

That's when we need to hear again that we press on not because we always hold on well to Christ, but because Christ always and forever holds on to us.

Conclusion

My friends, we press on because God is always calling us in Christ to new beginnings with ourselves, our families and friends, our work, and our church. God calls us to new beginnings with the freedom to leave behind the past, both good and bad, and to press on unhindered.

A couple of weeks ago, a friend sent an email with a picture taken of a sign outside a church. This was one of those "reader board" kinds of signs that listed the evening activities at the church for each day of the week and the following Sunday's sermon title. The groups meeting at the church were:

- Monday: Alcoholics Anonymous
- Tuesday: Abused Spouses

² Walter Brueggemann, Charles B. Cousar, Beverly R. Gaventa, James D. Newsome, *Texts For Preaching, Year A* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1995) 512.

- Wednesday: Eating Disorders
- Thursday: Say No to Drugs
- Friday: Teen Suicide Watch
- Saturday: Soup Kitchen

And Sunday's sermon title? "America's Joyous Future"!

Well, I don't always know about America's future but I do know about yours and mine. Despite all the difficulties, suffering, and trouble, we can press on because "Christ Jesus has made us his own." Thanks be to God.