

## PRESSING ON!

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UMC Geneva

The Apostle Paul wrote these words while under house arrest, guarded around the clock by Roman soldiers. Why? For disturbing the peace through his preaching! You'd think: What a downer! How depressing! Not so for Paul. His letter to the Philippians is known as the letter of joy because the words 'joy' and 'rejoicing' are so prevalent. You'd think: How discouraging! How emotionally and physically draining prison would be! To the contrary. Philippians exudes energy and action. In today's scripture reading, Paul's metaphor of the Christian life as a race is a case in point. I love the way one commentator speaks of Paul in this passage, saying, "Paul portrays himself in the least relaxed, most demanding posture he knows – as a runner in a race. His language is vivid, tense, repetitious using the words pressing, stretching, pushing, straining. In those words the lungs burn, the temples pound, the muscles ache, the heart pumps, the perspiration rolls." (1) You runners out there know exactly what this means!

Our focus today is on Paul's phrase, "I press on." Pressing On! To what? To the goal. The finish line. For what? A prize. "The prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus." And what exactly is that prize? Students of the Bible aren't quite sure. Is the prize the divine summons to heaven? Or the prize that will be given to those who've obeyed the call of God? Is Paul thinking of a prize winning ceremony at the end of the race? We're not sure. But what we are sure of is that Paul pictures himself – and us – running a race. A race whose goal is "knowing Christ" (3:8) and sharing in the "mind of Christ" (3:10) -of becoming more and more like Jesus. That's what Paul's all about. "I press on" – to know Christ and to be like him – taking on his mind and attitude of humility, engaging in lowly service of God and others.

So Paul's running a race – running for Christ. How is he running this race? He describes his manner of running by means of two participles (verb forms ending in 'ing'). And these two participles modify, or describe, the phrase "I press on." How does Paul press on? By forgetting and by straining! Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what's ahead. Two participles – "forgetting" and "straining" connected by a conjunction...the little word "and." Let's take a look at that little word "and." It's been pointed out that the little word "and" doesn't separate the actions of "forgetting" and "straining." No! It links them! In short,

forgetting what lies behind and straining forward are not separate things but one faith action.

Elton Trueblood, a Quaker Theologian of last century called “and” the holy conjunction, linking, for example, Christ’s humanity and divinity, roots and fruits, the inner life of devotion and the outer life of service, loving God and loving neighbor. (2) Last week I happened to run into a parishioner while standing in line at the Jewel Osco deli. Some pretty interesting things can happen during these chance encounters. Somehow we got into a discussion of faith and reason and how we can make too much of reason in our lives of faith to the neglect of other aspects such as emotion.

The late M. Scott Peck, a psychologist and best-selling author claimed the same. One could say he even took the notion of the holy conjunction “and” to new heights! In his book, *The Road Less Traveled & Beyond*, he pushes against an either/or approach in favor of a both/and approach. Pushing for faith and reason, reason and mystery, reason and emotion, reason and intuition, reason and revelation, reason and love. (3)

Thus we can envision a world where one can make a profit and be ethical in business, where children can be taught religion and science, where government can promote political order and social justice. In other words, a world where Black Lives Matter and so does Law & Order with justice. Where one can be politically conservative and advocate for social justice... liberal and promote individual, personal responsibility. In today’s world of Covid-19, political turmoil, angst, suffering and death, we’re having a lot of simplistic, binary, either/or thinking thrown at us when we should be acknowledging complexity and engage in the challenging, and more productive work, of both/and thinking and living.

Take Paul’s notion of “forgetting the past and straining toward the future.” Is Paul telling us to forget everything in the past? Of course not! For Paul, the central act of worship was all about remembering, about Holy Communion, about “do this in remembrance of me” as he wrote in 1 Cor. 11. Today...on World Communion Sunday, we will do just that as we remember Jesus’s life, death and resurrection while also remembering that we are remembering with Christians around the globe.

When Paul speaks of forgetting the past, he refers to aspects of his prior life: his persecution of the church, the pride he took in his status as a Rabbi and exemplary obedience to Torah/Law, as well as his many missionary accomplishments as an Apostle to the Gentiles.

And so I must ask. What things in your life...and mine...need forgetting. Past mistakes and regrets. Failures and sins? What accomplishments and positions of power and status that cause pride and boasting need forgetting as they hinder us from moving forward in our relationship with Christ and each other.

Let me conclude by sharing with you the words of Prof. Morna Hooker who says that whatever “Paul’s image of the Christian life as a race reminds us of...it reminds us that we can never rest on our laurels. This particular race – the Christian race – is not a competition in which only one person succeeds. It is possible for everyone who takes part to win and for everyone to receive a prize. The end is assured, not because of what we are able to do (though we must do our best!), but by virtue of the fact that it rests ultimately on the hold Christ has on us.”<sup>(4)</sup> Amen.

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- (1) Fred B. Craddock, *Philippians: Interpretation Commentaries*, John Knox Press, 1985.
- (2) *Homiletics Online*, January 6, 2019.
- (3) M. Scott Peck, *The Road Less Traveled and Beyond. Touchstone, 1998.*
- (4) Morna Hooker, *Philippians: New Interpreters Bible Commentary*, Abingdon, 2000.

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