

Called to More

Philippians 3:12-16
March 19, 2023

First Presbyterian Church
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An old *Peanuts* cartoon has Lucy standing in the outfield of Charlie Brown's baseball diamond. As a fly ball sails toward her, she remembers all the other times she's dropped the ball. You can guess what happens next: She drops this one, too. Then Lucy calls out to Charlie Brown saying: "I almost had it, but then my past got in my eyes!"

Like Lucy, we all have things we'd like to do in life – she'd like to finally be able to catch a fly ball. But, like Lucy, too often our past gets in your eyes. The goal we have is staring us right in the face and our past – all the baggage of life – blocks us from making any real progress, not to mention achieving it.

This is what the Apostle Paul is talking about in today's New Testament lesson. He's sitting in prison writing to the church in Philippi, looking back on his life – the goals he had, the progress he's made, the distance he has yet to go, and he wants to assure his fellow Christians that this is all part of life.

And not only that, but he wants to equip us to continue striving toward our goals, and our shared goal of seeing the fullness of Christ, if only a glimpse of it here on earth, as we maintain faith in what Paul calls "the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus."

Nobody knows what the "heavenly prize" will be like for those who keep the faith through the entirety of their lives – good times and bad. Oh, we have faith that we will be in heaven with Jesus and all the saints who have gone before. And we can imagine what that will be like, even Paul imagines what that will be like, saying elsewhere that in heaven we will have spiritual bodies that live forever, "buried in brokenness, but ... raised in glory; ... buried in weakness, but ... raised in strength." (1 Cor. 15:42-44)

We can imagine it. But the closest we can actually get to it here on earth is in overcoming our current difficulties, transforming our current circumstances, achieving our earthly goals. "I press on to make it my own," says Paul, "because Christ Jesus has made me his own."

What goals do you have that speak to your kinship with Jesus, as a child of God, a brother or sister in Christ? We're talking about those heartfelt goals that you know would have God smiling down upon you. Think about it. What would that be for you? Maybe it's getting over a particular disappointment or bitterness.

Maybe it's having a heart big enough to love your enemies, or finding the strength to live with constant pain, or working on your marriage, learning to live within your financial means, forgetting the past and finding joy in the present, even amid the difficulties of the day.

These are all noble goals, wonderful goals, and often elusive goals, which makes dealing with them particularly hard. We get tired, disappointed, beaten down. We become resigned to life as it is and give up on life as it could be.

And yet, our faith, our Lord and Savior does not live in the realm of life as it is here on earth, but rather life is it will be and is in heaven. Regardless of what your vision of heaven might be, keeping an eye on that vision is the only way to live a life of faith and blessing here on earth.

Paul's vision of heaven enabled him to overcome great struggles in life, because it was based on the fullness of Christ. Earlier in Philippians, Paul says, "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings" (3:10) Some see only the glory of the cross and reject the struggle and pain Jesus overcame. Paul is warning against that, assuring us that Christ shared in our humanity so that we can share in his glory, his triumph, both in the fullness of Christ in heaven and in the fullness of who we can be here on earth. It takes great faith to endure earthly suffering confident that we will share in Christ's glory, Christ's triumph.

It's like the preacher who was approached by Mormon missionaries trying to convert him to their faith. To test them he said, "Gentlemen, I have here a glass of poison. If you will drink this poison and remain alive, I will join your church, not only myself but my entire congregation." "If you won't drink this poison, well, then I'll conclude that you are false ministers of the Gospel, because surely your Lord won't let you perish." Realizing the bind they were in, the missionaries went off to think it through. Looking at the preacher, they came up with a solution. "Tell you what," they said. "We've got a plan. You drink the poison, and we'll raise you from the dead."

Regardless of what struggles you face and what goals are eluding you, keeping an eye on the fullness of Christ -the power of the resurrection- is the only way to become who you're called to be. You want to get over bitterness and disappointment, you want to learn to love your enemies or at least live in peace alongside them, do you want find the strength to live with pain, know the joy of having a true partner in life, be free from financial worries, move beyond what's holding you back, then set your sights on living into the fullness of Christ, as Paul did.

There are three key insights from Paul's experience that can help us make progress in life. First, let go of any attitudes that can distract you, upset you, or crush your spirit. For Paul, this meant tossing out his old worldview when it came to religion and society. When he first encountered the Risen Lord, Paul was a Pharisee persecuting Christians. Just think if he had clung to that way of life.

All that he accomplished as the Apostle to the Gentiles, all the churches he planted and nurtured, all the people whose lives he changed for the better – none of this would have happened if Paul wasn't willing to reconsider his point of view, embrace a new way of being.

What's your point of view when it comes to that goal or desire that keeps nagging at you, like if only I could get there in life, I could breathe a little easier? Paul had to be willing to lay it all on the line and entirely reinvent himself. And that's not easy. But as we'll see, it is possible as a person of faith.

The second thing we see from Paul is that making progress takes time. "Not that I have ... already reached the goal," says Paul, "but I press on to make it my own...." Paul is saying this from prison! Nothing is going to stop him from moving forward toward what he knows is possible, and in Christ, what he knows is certain. How often do we give up when faced with a little adversity?

And yet, if your goal would lead you closer to the people you love, closer to the life you know you're meant to live, closer to the dream God has planted in your heart, then you know you can't give up on it, and you know that God will never give up on you. Having adopted a new worldview based on our faith in Christ, we press on toward the goal.

The third thing we see in Paul is that nobody is able to persevere in life all on their own. If we're going to become the person God created us to be, we have to rely on those whom God has put in our lives. As Paul says, "Let those of us then who are mature be of the same mind; and if you think differently about anything, this too God will reveal to you. Only let us hold fast to what we have attained."

Let us hold fast to what we have attained. You've come too far in life to give up now. And there are people here to support you in achieving your goals, striving to do better. Don't give up on yourself and they will not give up on you.

The bottom line is, we are called to more than what we have, and more than meets the eye, more than we think is possible. And if we just let go of the thoughts and attitudes that are holding us back, move forward in whatever way we can, and turn to one another -and God- for support and encouragement, then we will become our best selves, and in the fullness of Christ, we will attain our heavenly reward. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

God of grace, we come to this house of worship and place of prayer with thanksgiving. We come into your presence with gratitude, O God, that you hear our prayers. Help us when we struggle to carry the cross of Christ faithfully this Lenten season.

For those who walk a path that is rocky, with instability in their homes or jobs, we ask for your calming presence. For those who cannot find their way in the fog of grief and loss, we ask for the light of the Lord to guide them on the journey. For those who are ill or providing care for them, we ask for the peaceful serenity of the Holy Spirit. For those who feel abandoned because they have taken a stand for what is right, we ask for the assurance of your love.

We know that to carry the cross is a commitment to a way of life; we try to carry the cross faithfully. But sometimes we falter. Help us in our travels that we might walk steadfast and sure to Jerusalem – and beyond, in the assurance of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, who taught to pray together, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.**