

“Press On Toward the Goal”

Philippians 3:12-14

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A family was preparing to leave on their first camping trip together. The father was especially excited. He made a special camp box, a mobile kitchen that contained room for everything needed for the trip: frying pan, pots, place settings for four, coffee pot, cups, camping stove, lantern, fuel, a collapsible water carrier, all kinds of utensils, matches, soap, towels -- everything! He wanted to make sure they didn't forget anything for their outdoor meals. He checked and rechecked the box, making sure everyone packed it as instructed. They were ready! They loaded up the van with tents, sleeping bags, food, and kids, checked the map, got gas and headed out on their journey into the unknown. They arrived at the campsite unloaded the gear and realized...they forgot the box!

Life is not an easy journey: sometimes it is enjoyable, but it is also demanding. We have all gotten so distracted and lost by many other things that we have forgotten what was essential in life. In the same way, we easily forget what the essence of the Christian life is. What is the goal of our Christian faith on this earth? Today's Scripture reading shows us a deep confession of the Apostle Paul's personal faith and mission statement. If you had your own personal faith statement, what would it be? Let's take an opportunity to look carefully at the Apostle Paul's goal of Christian life.

As we know, the Apostle Paul planted many churches such as the Corinthians, the Romans, the Ephesians and the Philippians. The epistles that Paul wrote to each congregation became an important part of the New Testament. Obviously, there is no perfect example of church on this earth. A seminary professor in Pastoral care taught me that every church has its own problems and struggles either big or small. Every loving congregation has similar dynamics of family or married life. Even this church in Philips was having a problem between Jewish Christians and gentile Christians. The issue was the law of a Moses: how far and much we should keep the law (for example, circumcision) in order to be a perfect Christian. It was an argument and debate like those groups who are the legalists and the antinomians. Paul, as the founder of that church, was asked to give them a right answer. What would be your suggestion for them if you were supposed to give them advice?

In a sense, we also want to be perfect in our jobs, relationships and in our responsibilities. In Paul's times, the Greek philosophy was dominant over Paul's mind and the Israelites. In the Greek culture at that time, there were two types of perfection: The first one was in a wedding and the other is - in the same sense of completion - death. The ancients were very serious about the goodness of other-relatedness. If a young woman died before marriage, she would be laid out for burial in full bridal attire. She became the bride of Hades, god of the underworld. No one should be denied the human perfection of relation to another, even if the partner is dismissed by the god of death. The Greeks believed that perfection would be complete with a union with a loved one. Paul recognizes that his life has not yet been made complete with union of Christ, but he urges us to "press on towards the goal" (as verse 14 reminds us!) by union with Christ!

There is an interesting point on the meaning of the expression to "press on towards the goal." It means in the Bible that this is not a fun and curious 'journey of discovery', but it means a "race" or "battle." At that time, the Marathon was a popular sport among people. A Marathon is not a single "running" event, but it is a competition. Paul keeps his eyes on the "prize"-- Christ. Paul doesn't mean treadmill running for a healthy diet, but he runs with all his heart and body to be a winner which means to gain Christ - the desire to be in union with Christ. In the Apostle Paul's image of a race, he is racing with Jesus Christ, so in this context, he is not running to go ahead of Jesus to catch him. Other Bible commentary shows that "Press on" is associated with "the hunting of the animals" with perseverance, not as a single person's running. Probably, Paul might imagine that he would run to catch Jesus Christ and Jesus Christ would come to find him. His desire was to be like Jesus in his faith like a relationship between a bride and bridegroom.

Have you ever run a marathon or even half-marathon? Earlier in my life, a four mile running was the longest amount of miles that I ran straight when I was in college. A couple years ago, my wife wanted to buy a treadmill for her running; it has been sitting and sleeping there for a more than year! I asked a question to a professional runner about difficulties with her running. She told me that injuries, weight gain and loss of motivation always try to beat her and make her tempted to stop. If we compare our life to a race like a Marathon, what is our motivation to keep running without stopping?

Paul was always passionate and positive about his goal that he was pressing on. It is Jesus Christ. He didn't believe that we can be perfect either by keeping the law nor by our own way. He has conviction that perfection comes from the cross of Christ and the hope that he will see him face to face when he goes to

heaven some day. According to his confession, our life is a journey to find the goal and to run towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. Living the Christian life doesn't lie in enhancing moral maturity by doing good things, but to know Christ Jesus as our Savior, God for our "ultimate interest" and goal in life. What Paul wanted his congregation to do was become imitators of him to follow Jesus Christ as their God. The sudden death of Chris Boyd was an enormous shock to all of us. We are still mourning over the loss of his life.

Last week before he passed away, I heard that he was ready to be a member of our church. The week before Wednesday, he told me that he liked my sermon because he found Jesus Christ mentioned 4-5 times in my sermon. At first, I was surprised to hear that number (I need to talk about more about Jesus in each of my sermons!!), but I was so glad that his faith was driven to Christ. I heard that he was 'running', 'exploring' and 'searching' for Jesus Christ for a long time, not he is gone, but I am sure that he was found in Jesus Christ and accepted well in Jesus Christ's everlasting arms. Our goal as Christians is not to do good things only, but become imitators of Jesus Christ. Our faith and life should be driven to Christ.

How will we be 'Christ driven' in faith in our life? Paul emphasizes the role of Jesus Christ to reconcile the Jewish Christian group and the non-Jewish Christian group into unity. Paul's desire to live in conformity to Christ expresses his conviction that God was in Christ doing the work of reconciling. The sharing of that life includes the vision of resurrection and hope. So, In Christ, any power or standard like ethnicity, age, wealth, education, social status, and especially gender are secondary not as a primary goal. They are no longer influencing their power to us. Everyone is welcome and acceptable in Jesus Christ.

The Christian life is a new invitation for us to join this race. As Jesus Christ "came down" to us, we are called to "run to him." There will be suffering, frustrations, and crisis in our middle of race like a race of Marathon. Every time we face injuries, despair, and lack of motivation for this race, we need to be focused on our goal towards Christ Jesus, our hope. Our church has been running for almost fifty years, but we don't think we have arrived at our final destination. Paul gave great advice to the Philippians, saying "forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead." Pastor Kelly passed the 'baton' to me in this 'relay race.' We have more miles to run together.

I just want to remind you that we are on a long running race. Save your strength and passion for the entire race. A professional runner advises us that "Don't start too fast or you'll wear out before the end" at the beginning of your

race. While you run the race, you may lose motivation and faith because of doubt and despair. But do not give up the race! God will be cheering for us as God sent His only son to us. Jesus Christ will wait for you and me to “catch you up” to Him. While we run our race, if we start boldly and run to him, Jesus will give us the strength to continue and reach the finish line.