Pressing On

By

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First Lesson | Psalm 19:1-14

The heavens are telling the glory of God, and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard; yet their voice goes out through all the earth and their words to the end of the world. In the heavens he has set a tent for the sun, which comes out like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy, and like a strong man runs its course with joy. Its rising is from the end of the heavens and its circuit to the end of them, and nothing is hid from its heat.
The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple;
the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is clear, enlightening the eyes;
the fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever; the ordinances of the Lord are true and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold;
sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb. Moreover, by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward. But who can detect one's own errors? Clear me from hidden faults. Keep back your servant also from the insolent; do not let them have dominion over me. Then I shall be blameless and innocent of great transgression. Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.

Second Lesson | Philippians 3:4b-14

...even though I, too, have reason for confidence in the flesh.

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 lay hold of that for which Christ has laid hold of me. Brothers and sisters, I do not consider that I have laid hold of it, but one thing I have laid hold of: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal, toward the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

Sermon

You're having a lovely time and then it happens, the dialogue shifts and what started as a conversation quickly evolved into a tennis match of sorts—with people volleying back and forth naming the things that set them apart. It's experiences: "You hiked the Appalachian Trail, well, when I was on the Pacific Crest." "If you like mountains, you should really see Patagonia." It's travails: "I was at the dentist." "I was having a root canal." "I was being attacked by a saber-tooth tiger." It's credentials. It's stuff. Often, it's harmless, just people caught up in their stories.

Comedian Brian Regan shared that his social fantasy is to be one of the handful of astronauts to have walked on the moon. "Imagine sitting back, quiet as the other guy keeps going, running their line and stories, and then." You lean forward and say, "I walked on the moon." Game over.

It's so delightfully human. First, in our need to connect, we find commonalities, and then, in our need to know our place, the comparison starts. An unfortunate test to see if I am worthy, if I belong. We've all been there as observers and as participants. We've all seen an exchange that takes a turn toward the ugly as someone draws a line, making sure someone else knows they don't quite have what it takes. It was something the Philippians knew all too well, and let's be honest, the world hasn't changed much in the past two thousand years.

Ellen Davis argues that one of the gifts of Scripture is its incarnational nature; it is both fully human and fully divine. It is the word of God, and it is the word of God embodied in human voice and form and experience. Here, in the letter to the Philippians, we have one of those incarnational texts. It is so very human, and it speaks to our very human condition.

Paul is writing to the church he loves, the church that has supported him, the church that gives generously and practices faithfully, the church he brags about to everyone else, and yet, it is also a church that is struggling to know if what they are doing is 'real' or 'enough,' if they can be counted among the faithful, among the disciples and the apostles, as followers of Jesus. Afraid that they somehow didn't meet the mark. Others had implied that they had fallen short because they weren't following the letter of the law. They believed these teachers.

In the verses that proceed, Paul condemns these false teachers and their false doctrine, and here our passage begins with Paul going toe to toe, laying out his own credentials. He has it all. He was born into the right family. He had the right education. He had the perfect job. He was blameless—and oh so humble.

But according to the measures of the day, he really was kind of perfect. According to those same teachers who would have the Philippians doubt their place, he could run circles around them. It behooves us to remember that one of the outcomes of all that righteousness was indeed the persecution of the church. But that's one for another sermon for another morning.

Paul doesn't stop with his credentials. He doesn't just say this to prove that he's better. He turns the argument. Biblical Scholar Fred Craddock describes Paul not dismissing his background but rather trying to explain that he is putting aside that life he knew and understood, in order to seek Christ. He is not dismissing the law, but rather arguing that he, that the Philippians, that we, are on a different path. For all the Philippians trying to find the right way to follow Christ, trying to prove their religiosity, their holiness, their worthiness; Paul is "abandoning such a search altogether, not having a righteousness of one's own but trusting solely in the grace of God."

Sometimes we throw the word righteousness around as an abstract theological term, but for Paul it was a deeply concrete and relational term. It meant to be in right standing before God, to be in right relationship with God. Yes, before Paul was in right relationship with the law- righteous as to the law. But now it's a different world. Here, Christ chooses to be in right relationship with Paul. Do you see the difference? Paul is righteous—able to stand before and beside the Almighty, not because of his work, but because of Jesus. His righteousness is done to him, not something he does himself.

For all those people who were happy to tell the Philippians that they were not good enough, Paul is reminding them that they are playing a different game altogether and they are already on the team. When others tried to draw a line in the sand, marking one side as Holy and the other as lost, Paul erases the line.

Now, don't get too comfortable. There's something nice about that line in the sand. A line in the sand means we know where we stand at any given moment; we can judge ourselves and each other. If we were trying to be righteous under the law, we could admit that we've already failed; we could walk away assured Jesus didn't need me anyway. Or we could concentrate on making sure we got every mark of the law just right.

But Paul points to the new reality in Jesus. Jesus takes away our frenetic need to measure up and, at the same time, takes away our ability to fade back, to hide away, to wash our hands, or think the unthinkable thought that we are not needed or that we are not good enough. Jesus takes away our ability to dismiss our own place in God's story by placing us in the center of it.

I don't know about you, but there are days and seasons when I kind of wish I wasn't in the middle of this story. Like the suffering, I could be done with all of the suffering.

Gordon Fee explains Paul's pivot here in verse 10, "Paul could throw himself into the present with a kind of holy abandon, full of rejoicing and thanksgiving, not because he enjoyed suffering, but because Christ's resurrection had given him a unique perspective on present suffering and as well as an empowering presence where [the experience] creates

a fellowship with Christ himself." By serving and living and working, we come to uniquely understand and know Jesus. To know—not on an intellectual level—but here. The way you only know someone after you've shared a life with them.

This is a parallel to other places in Paul's writing and was proclaimed as an ancient tenet of faith: "Caritas Christi urget nos"-- "for the love of Christ urges us onward;" because of Christ we cannot withdraw from the world.

Let's be clear, I know that I don't have Paul's tenacity, and as someone who avoids running at all costs, I hear his call for striving and racing and feel tired. For as often as we are 'one-upping' each other, just as often we are hoarding away the hurts and wounds, the heartaches, that make the idea of pressing onward feel impossible.

It would be easier if Paul gave us an out. Told us that you need to have the right bloodline or the right education or the right something to serve in God's kingdom. It would be nice to have an out when the news is so painful. When listening to the radio, more stories than not start with the warning, "If there are children in the room, you might want them to leave because of the subject matter." When the headlines are dominated by petty attacks and a tally of lives lost. I wish I had an excuse to step back.

But Paul says no. We strive, not because we've accomplished something but because we are searching, striving, stretching towards something. Paul isn't being trite or Pollyannish, but Paul is reminding us of what a race looks like.

I don't need to tell you; you know the race. You are running this race in a thousand different ways:

You have poured yourselves into work with refugees and sit here with the heartbreaking reality that the very people we welcomed and have befriended do not feel safe in our community.

You have built relationships and worked in places and with people that you love and who are now miles away and oceans apart, watching in horror as homes are destroyed and nations topple.

You have sat on floors and stacked books

and tried one more program in the fight for childhood literacy; you've done the same for housing insecurity and health services, and watch numbers inch forward and fall backward, and still show up the next year.

We make casseroles and gather food and put a little extra money in the hunger envelopes, and there are still hungry people, still children with stretched bellies and hollow eyes.

You have marched for peace, argued for justice, struggled to make sure no one has been forgotten, or a neighbor had what they needed. You have done that while facing your own battles, navigating your own personal injuries and illness. I know that your hearts break and your stomachs turn, and I, like you, would rather sit and weep than try to press on, but friends, beloved…

When Paul says that he is striving towards the goal. He doesn't use his normal Greek word for laurel or reward. He uses the Greek word Skopos. It's the only time it appears in Scripture, but the Greek word describes the finishing line—the post that runners kept their eyes on as they ran. It was the mark that Aristotle and Plato charged their students to strive for. It's what we run towards, not a prize we can claim. It's the challenge to strive forward, eyes on that mark, to press on; to return to food banks and after-school programs, to collect more cans, and to be at the airport to welcome a family, to find our voice again against wrongs, our eyes not looking back at what has been but looking ahead to the possibility and the promise.

We are in a race towards a promise, or as Courser explains, the invitation to "[participate] with Christ in the midst of the real-life suffering and struggles of human existence."

We wade into the suffering and the messy, because that's what Jesus did. Knowing that we are in a nation that is divided along 10,000 different fault lines, with families that are hurting, in a world that would believe it is better to attack than to help, we still choose to strive and stretch towards something different. We're going to pause and share a meal around a table. We are going to strive and stretch, reaching out for just a little bit of bread and a tiny bit of juice; not to mark ourselves as holy, but to remember that we are a part—that all of us—the good,

the bad, the annoying, the perfect, the lost, the enemy, the friend, the stranger—that we share this body, this sacred task, this pressing on towards what lies ahead. Our eyes lifted towards that skopos—that sign ahead with the promise that we do not race for the sake of suffering; we race in the light and the hope of the empty tomb and a world reborn; to that promise that Christ urges us toward.

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