

SERMON TITLE: "Pressing toward the Goal"
SERMON TEXT: Philippians 3:4b-16
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: March 13, 2016, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

Every year, Vacation Bible School has a theme. This year, our Surf Shack VBS will focus on stories in the Bible that take place on or around water. So, our decorations will feature things like beach balls, boats, and surfboards. Thinking about that reminded me of a newspaper story I saw some years ago. The picture showed a 14-year old girl riding a wave. If you looked closely, you could see that the girl had only one arm. The story explained that a shark had bitten off her other arm, but within just four months, she had already returned, not only to surfing, but even to competitive surfing. After what she'd experienced, you'd think that the girl might've been handicapped, or at least afraid, but she wasn't. With the help of her religious faith, the teenager had overcome her tragedy and was still dedicated to her passion. Her determination was proving to be an inspiration to surfers and others, as she pressed on toward her athletic and competitive goals.

When the Apostle Paul was writing his letter to the Philippians, he wasn't thinking about surfing with one arm. But he was thinking about reaching toward the prize. He was using an athletic metaphor of a race to depict the endurance and determination we Christians need in order to win the heavenly prize in Christ Jesus. Paul was giving us some advice about pressing toward the goal.

1—FORGETTING WHAT'S BEHIND

As Paul says in verse 13, the first step in pressing toward the goal is forgetting what's behind. Like any driving instructor would tell you, you shouldn't drive down the street staring into your rearview mirror. An occasional glance is important, yes, but our eyes should primarily be focused on what's ahead.

Paul knew from his own experience that some people might have trouble letting go of the past. This is especially true if there was a lot of glory back there. For Paul, that was the case. If anyone had any bragging rights, he did. Among the Jews, he was one of the shining stars. Born into the right family, educated in the right schools, proven with the right work experience, and faultless under the law, Paul was confident in his competitive advantage. If anyone could have been saved on his own merits, it would have been Paul. If Paul had been a girl today, he might have had a vest totally covered with Girl Scout merit badges. But Paul woke up one day and realized that it was his simple faith in Jesus Christ, rather than his own past accomplishments, that would win him the prize of salvation. Paul realized that his former successes were nothing more than rubbish in comparison to the righteousness that comes from Christ.

Most of us don't have as many accomplishments to remember as Paul did. But some of us still hold on to the past like it was something important. Even if our past was painful, we remember it and rehash it in our minds like it was today. Those old recordings play over and over again in our heads telling us that we are worthless, ugly, stupid, incompetent, or guilty. Our old experiences remind us regularly that we've been victims, that we'll get hurt again, that we shouldn't venture out. And so, we let the negative experiences of our past rule what we can or can't be now.

That isn't what God has called us to do! Just like Paul put his previous life behind him, so should we. Whether we have a long list of credits, or we're ashamed of our former days, it doesn't matter. Pressing toward the goal of Christ requires forgetting what's behind.

2—STRAINING TOWARD WHAT'S AHEAD

The second step in pressing toward the goal is straining toward what's ahead. In Philippians 3:14, Paul describes the goal ahead as the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. In verses nine through 11, Paul says that this goal involves being "found in Christ," and having a righteousness "that

comes through faith in Christ.” By sharing in Christ’s suffering and knowing the power of Christ’s resurrection, we too are able to press toward the goal of our own resurrection from the dead.

As Christians, our goal is the heavenly prize. Fortunately, though, we don’t have to run the race all by ourselves. Most of us in this congregation know that Marty Smith is a competitive runner, swimmer, and biker, and that she has competed in a number of Iron Woman competitions. That means Marty has spent thousands of hours working out by herself. But Marty has told me about the team of people who assist her whenever she’s doing one of her competitions. She couldn’t do the races without having a support system. Knowing how much encouragement and help is required for a person to participate well and win, Marty is starting a new business, in which she will be the coach. Marty will assist others to run, swim, and bike the races like she has.

In the spiritual race, Jesus is our coach and helper. Our confidence and ability come through God’s Son who has already done the work of salvation for us. The action required of us isn’t that we earn our own righteousness, but that we take direction from the one who has already arrived ahead of us. Together with Jesus, we are straining forward to what’s ahead.

3—HOLDING FAST TO WHAT WE’VE ALREADY ATTAINED

Verse 16 tells us that a third step in pressing toward the goal is holding fast to what we’ve already attained. Just because we’re depending on Jesus and his work of salvation doesn’t mean that we don’t have any responsibility. We do. Our responsibility is to keep learning and growing, to keep developing in our faith. You’ve heard the saying that “the time you stop growing is the time you start dying.” If we’re going to hold fast to what we’ve already attained, then we can’t ever be complacent about where we are. To stand still is to lose ground. It’s like inflation. Unless your savings and investments are earning interest at least at the rate of inflation, your money is actually losing value. We can’t just stick it in a mattress and forget it. We have to keep progressing just to keep up.

In verse 10, Paul says that he wants to know Christ. Have you noticed that the more you know, the more you realize how much you don't know? That's probably why Paul says in verse 12 that he hasn't reached the goal yet. The more perfect you are, the more you realize all your imperfections. But that's no reason to give up. Paul was on the path toward perfection, and he encouraged the Philippians to follow his example.

This notion of moving on toward perfection is an important idea for those of us in the Wesleyan tradition. John Wesley taught that it's good when persons are converted to Christ and born again. It's wonderful when someone repents of their sin and turns their life over to God. It's fantastic when someone receives Jesus as their Lord and Savior. But if you stop there, you'll slide right back into sin. Wesley taught that we have to make an intentional effort to live up to the salvation of Christ every day. We have to make use of the means of grace such as worship, Bible study, communion, and the fellowship of believers. We have to put our faith into practice by serving others with the spiritual gifts God has given us.

In order to hold on to what we've already attained, we must keep our eye on the heavenly prize and never stop reaching for it. I'm not saying that we have to be anxious all the time. Of course, we can relax in the loving mercy of God, but we can't rest too long on our spiritual laurels. We must always be pressing on toward the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

This past week I flew to Chicago for a conference with the United Methodist General Board of Pensions and Health Benefits. I go to those events because I'm the chair of our Rocky Mountain Conference board, and together, we try to make careful decisions regarding the health insurance and pension plans for our clergy and staff. Besides learning the latest about those particular topics, we also heard a presentation on internet security. The General Board wanted to assure us of the great care they take to keep all our financial accounts safe. They also talked about how we need to be careful in our churches and as individuals. One of the statistics they told us was that, in 2014, 99.9% of all successful

cyberattacks occurred because the computer operators had not updated their computer operating systems and program applications. Even though remedies, or patches, had been made available a full year or more prior to the attacks, the computer operators had failed—for at least an entire year—to take advantage of those solutions.

Our spiritual life is kind of like that. Sure, none of us wants to be worried all the time about our salvation and our spiritual security. And we shouldn't be. But we do need to stay current. We shouldn't let our faith lapse and fall behind or fall away. We shouldn't let spiritual enemies attack us because we've failed to keep up with our spiritual disciplines of Bible reading, prayer, worship attendance, and service in mission. We don't want to relax so much that we lose ground. We press toward the resurrection goal by holding fast to what we've already attained.

CONCLUSION

On Monday, I heard Peyton Manning's press conference in which he stated his intention to retire from football. After 18 years "fighting the good fight" in the NFL and after winning the Super Bowl with the Denver Broncos, Manning decided it was time. Even as Manning reminisced about his many good experiences and positive relationships in the game which he would greatly miss, he wasn't willing to think of this place in his life as the final victory. He said it this way: "I'm smart enough to know that those lessons [I've learned from football] can enrich who I am and where I go from here. I'm totally convinced that the end of my football career is just the beginning of something I haven't even discovered yet. Life is not shrinking for me. It's morphing into a whole new world of possibilities."

Just as Peyton Manning is taking this opportunity to expand his horizons, so we have an opportunity to move forward. We begin by forgetting whatever great accomplishments or shameful guilt lies behind. Then we strain forward to the resurrection of Christ that lies ahead. And we hold fast to what we've already attained. The prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus is out there waiting for us. Let's join the Apostle Paul in pressing toward the goal.