

Text: Philippians 3:12-13 Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal: but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. . . .this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead.”

THE VALUE OF PRESSING ON

In the mid 1960's, in addition to my academic work, I was a human relations trainer for the Kansas City, Missouri police department. One Friday I had just finished a week-long training program for police supervisors when I was called about ten pm to be told that a car would pick me up to observe a small riot near the downtown area of the city. I am not sure what the Chief expected me to do about the riot; Perhaps lecture to them and bore the rioters into submission. In any case there were only about fifty active participants, doing a little shooting and a lot of yelling. All of the people involved were African-American. One of my trainees, a senior field sergeant, hollered to me, “professor, this is real human relations. We should give all of these (you may fill in your own language) guns and let them shoot each other.” So much for a week's worth of training. It was a useful lesson for me on the value of pressing on. The same battle is still going on. Pressing on is the necessary strategy for most social progress.

Paul tells us that pressing on defines two other actions that we must take: Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead. Let us spend a few minutes looking at what those actions mean.

Given his background and the Jewish and Roman context of his life, **forgetting what lies behind** was a very radical action. In fact, it was an open declaration of separatism from the established religion. The Jewish faith was one of highly institutionalized rituals, laws and rules. “I regard them as rubbish” Paul declares. He goes on to say “. . .not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ. . .” Paul, in one mighty passage, is really reinterpreting the writings of what we call the Old Testament, in a profoundly different way, a Christ Jesus way.

Our very notion of God is changed. The O.T. God is often one of exclusion (Israel is His people); one of retribution (Then the Lord sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. Numbers 21:6) and war (The Lord listened to Israel's plea and gave the Canaanites over to them. They completely destroyed them and their towns. Numbers 21, verse 3) There is a hint of this change noted in the O.T. reading for today. “Thus, says the Lord, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, who brings out chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick.” This is a reminder to us still that while war may sometimes be just, it can never be moral. So, the N.T. has transformed humankind's view of God from one of just deserts to one of love and compassion.

Paul also put this forgetting on a personal level. His position of prosecutor, his education and loyalties – all these were part of the luggage that had to be left behind. We all have luggage that needs to be left behind if we are to follow Jesus with an honest walk. Some of that luggage is sin, which Jesus took away, some is simply part of the two great “e”s, environment and ego which get in the way of allowing our new life in Christ to flower. It is interesting that in both religious and civic culture the more freedom one has, the greater one's responsibility becomes.

Paul tells us that one of those responsibilities is **“straining forward to what lies ahead.”**

Paul certainly knew about the bad things that lay ahead for Christians. He was the perpetrator of the “bad stuff.” Persecution, hardships, conflict – all of these evils were to be felt by Christians. It is tempting to say that the evils we see assailing people is human nature itself. We are frequently dismayed by the news of the day. Of course, the fact that it is the bad news that gets reported IS the good news. For every bad act, there are millions of good acts. Good acts are the norm. As we strain forward, it is comforting to note that most of us, most of the time, do good things. Paul stayed focused on the goal of union with Christ, he attended to the conflicts in the early church, but he did not allow himself to be overwhelmed by them.

We can cope with change, that is the message of Paul’s life and writings. We like to think of God as unchanging – but His creation is not unchanging. We may cheer some change and lament others. As long as free will exists change will occur, even in our churches and in many aspects of our faith. I like Paul’s notion of “straining forward.” Accepting change, participating in change, is not easy, it is often a strain. But, with God’s help, we can always cope. Paul reminds us that the goal is the “heavenly call of God,” and we can make that goal our own, because Jesus has first made us his own. Amen