

Morrison Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church

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October 2, 2005
20th Sunday after Pentecost
Philippians 3:12-21
Pastor Randy Ott

First Lesson: Isaiah 5:1-7
Psalm of the Day: Psalm 118
Second Lesson: Philippians 3:12-21
Gospel: Matthew 21:33-43

Press On Towards the Goal

If you don't have anything that you are working toward—any kind of goal, any kind of ambition in life—life can become rather pointless. If you don't have anything that you are focused on, it can be kind of easy to drift into thinking “What's the point of it all?” You wake up, you go to work, you eat, you go to sleep, you wake up, you go to work, you eat, you go to sleep—there isn't any kind of focus to that. It can seem rather pointless.

Focusing on something, pressing on towards something at times really gives purpose to life and yet at the same time, if you are pressing on so hard and there is so much to overcome as you press on, you kind of feel like throwing your hands up and saying, “Boy, I don't even know where to start.” You feel overwhelmed at times if there is too much pressing down on you. That is why my office isn't organized in my house. You start out doing it and there are just too many stacks of stuff everywhere, so you get out and go do something else somewhere else.

I wonder if that isn't how the people that are cleaning up after these hurricanes feel. You look at all the destruction around you and you feel pressed in on every side by it and you wonder, “Where do you start? What do you do?” It looks like such a herculean task to get it all done that you will never get back to what you had or where you were or anything like that. I've got to imagine that they feel kind of pressed down.

In either one of these situations where it seems as though life has no meaning or purpose, or where life has dealt something to us that it feels like it is crushing us, the Holy Spirit gives us an answer through the words that Paul wrote to the Philippians. He reminds us of a great truth that can be learned over and over in this lifetime. He reminds us that we are citizens of heaven and that now we are just on a journey here, but that our citizenship and home really is in heaven. So God encourages us through the apostle Paul to press on towards the goal—to recognize that as we go through life, we have a definite purpose. That is to press on towards the goal. When we feel overwhelmed and overcome by all the things around us, God also reminds us to press on towards the goal. Sometimes all these things around us can become big distractions that are weighing us down. So God warns us and says to watch out for those distractions. He also urges us on as he tells us to focus on the prize and live as citizens of heaven.

As Paul was writing to the Philippians, if you remember, he was writing from jail. He writes from jail the most encouraging book of the Bible, I think. All the different times

that the word “joy” shows up in this book are just amazing to me. He writes to encourage people to keep finding joy in Christ even though the one that had first brought them the gospel is now in chains because of the gospel. He urges them to keep on celebrating what God has done for them.

Shortly before this he had talked about how God wants us to grow in our faith, how he wants us to live in our faith, how he wants us to reach unity and all those things that we looked at last week, and then he had some more things in there, but Paul said to them, “I haven’t achieved all of this. I am not completely perfect. I know that I am perfect in that Christ lived and died in my place.” Paul had said that, but in response to that, we want to live in a way that glorifies God and he says, “I don’t do that all the time. I get distracted at times.” And he says, “I know that some of you get distracted at times by the things of the world around you” or going back to those old comfortable things for them—their pagan way of life before they had known Christ.

They were told that Christ takes away all sins. That you are not condemned and now you are free in Christ. You are forgiven in Christ. And what is one of the temptations that a new Christian might have and even an older Christian at times might have? “If God is going to forgive me anyhow, I am going to go live it up and I am going to do this and that and then I will ask God to forgive me afterwards, and he will forgive me.”

The people Paul was writing to were being distracted by some of those thoughts. He says, “Watch out for those kinds of distractions. Keep pressing on towards the goal of heaven realizing that God has given you heaven, but live in response to heaven, not living in response to the things of this world.” The people in Philippi had come from the background of sexual sins and drunkenness as a part of their pagan religion, and it was easy for them to fall back into that—to fall back into those ways and then say, “God will forgive me even though I know it is wrong.” So Paul urges them to keep pressing on towards the goal. If you are mature in Christ, *take such a view of things...live up to what we have already attained*. You know this is right before God, so keep focusing on it and keep living toward it.

Distractions—there are often lots of distractions in our lives. There are going to be events in our lives that feel like we are being pressed down hard on every side as we deal with difficulties in this world. You don’t have to have a hurricane knock your house down to go through things that keep you up at night, do you? Whether it is things that you worry about in family life or relationships—there are all kinds of things that can be pressing in on us and at times we might be convinced that when the pressing gets too hard, maybe we should go and deal with it like other people deal with it. There are a lot of people in the world around us that deal with those kinds of pressures with drunkenness and sexual sins just like the Philippians did.

Paul reminds us to watch out for those kinds of distractions and those kinds of temptations. When you are going through life and there seems to be no purpose so you start dabbling in every last thing under the sun just to find out what the experience would be like, Paul says to watch out for that distraction as well. He says to live up to what you have attained. Those people that you see doing that and you think that they are having a great time, he reminds us that “*their god is their stomach*”. And when he

talks about *“their stomach”*, they spoke of the stomach as the seed of their desire—that these people are just feeding one desire after another and chasing one pleasure after another and saying that they are living it up and that all Christians are missing all the fun. He says, *“Their mind is on earthly things...their god is their stomach, and their glory is their shame.” “Their destiny is destruction”*. So watch out for the distraction that tempts you to think that the grass is greener by living as those who don’t know Christ, as opposed to living in the glory of knowing who our God is and what he has done for us. If we get distracted by thinking that we are missing out on those things or thinking that the answer to our lack of purpose or the answer to our pressures is alcohol and sex, then we are going to wander away from God’s truth. We are trying to find the answer when already the answer lives within us. The answer is the Holy Spirit who has told us that God loves us and God has taken away all of these sins and God is with us and God will meet all of our needs in Christ Jesus. And God says, “Don’t worry about what you are going to eat or drink or what you are going to wear, your heavenly Father knows you need these, but seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”

If we press on towards the goal with our eyes focused on Christ, we won’t get tripped up by the distractions. We won’t get tripped up and led away down a path that our God does not want us to go. The way that we keep from giving in to these distractions is living with our eyes focused on the prize, straining ahead towards the goal, living as citizens of heaven, recognizing that in this world we are just on a journey. It is a temporary thing. That is why God says in the Old Testament that Abraham, though he was one of the richest men in the world at that time, was not ashamed to live in a tent because he knew his true home was in heaven. That is what Hebrews tells us.

Think of how hard that is for us—how hard it is to live knowing that our greatest treasure isn’t this world and the things we can amass in this world. It isn’t retirement plans. It isn’t the toys, the extra rooms in a house, but the greatest thing that we have is that heaven is our home. To live focused on that from day to day to day is such a challenge for us because we are sinners. We get distracted all too often by the temptations around us. We get focused on living for the here and now. We don’t always have the faith of Abraham that recognizes a tent is just fine in this world because my true joy is in heaven.

As you look at your life and as I look at mine, we have got to be able to come up in our own minds with all kinds of examples where we have let the things of this world crowd out the truth that heaven is ours. Satan would be more than happy to come and beat us up with those times that we have failed God. He would be more than happy to come and tell us, “Your God can’t love you anymore because you have messed up. He has given you heaven and you have just chased after these other things and you know you weren’t supposed to. You know that that hurt God. You know that that killed Christ, and yet you did it anyhow. God doesn’t want you anymore.” That is what Satan wants us to believe.

That is why there is this one verse here in Philippians that I think is really important for you and I. Paul says, *“Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal”*. You and I can forget the times that we have failed God, not

because they are unimportant and not because they didn't hurt God and not because they didn't kill Christ—they did. But when the Spirit led you and I to believe that Jesus is our Savior—not just the Savior of the world, not just the Savior out there, but a Savior in here—God took away every last one of our sins. We don't have to look back at them to beat ourselves up with them. We can look back at them and learn from them and with God's help, work to do more things to God's glory in the future certainly. But we can forget about it as a weapon of the devil to beat us up over. God says you don't have to worry about that. As far as the east is from the west, he forgives our sins and remembers them no more.

So when we are tempted to despair because we are such terrible people and in our hearts we know it, God says, "But I love you and I have taken away your sins in Christ." Forget about those sins and now focus on the goal. Focus on heaven. And to keep you focused on that, you know how at times we want to chase after pleasures for our body? The Holy Spirit reminds us through Paul to focus on this other truth about heaven—that when we get to heaven, God, the Savior that we eagerly await from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, he is going to use that *power that enables him to bring everything under his control*. He is going to use that power and he is going to *transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body*. So what God is really saying is, "When you are getting distracted by all those pleasures for your body on this earth, don't focus on them. Focus on this glorified, perfect body that I am going to give you in heaven." What is that going to be? I don't know.

I had a pastor who was born without his right hand—just a stump at the wrist. He always told us that he was going to have two hands in heaven because there are no more effects of sin, so to him that glorified body meant that hand was going to be there that he never could use to pitch the softball to us with at recess time and things like that. It made sense to me. But all I know is that in heaven we aren't going to be looking at a mirror and thinking our earlobes are too big, or our nose is too wide, and all those stupid things we do here. The body we have in heaven is going to be the body we spend eternity in rejoicing with the angels and with all the believers of all time because we will be in the presence of God. That is going to do more for us than any toy we can amass and collect and use for a brief time in this world. That is going to do more for us than any high any drugs or alcohol can give us in this world. That is going to do more for us than the thrill of an illicit affair. That is why God tells us to focus on this—press on towards the goal. Focus on the prize. "Here are some great things I am going to give you. But know that it is yours even though you have stumbled and fallen, know that it is yours because I love you completely and absolutely in Jesus."