

Eric Dupee

10/4/20, Philippians 3:4b-14

“It’s Not About Us”

This one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

This morning I want to focus on these words from our text. “Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on.” Being consumed by my move from Connecticut to York this past week has given me a whole new perspective on those words.

Moving from one place to another requires leaving things behind. I weeded out a lot of books and left dozens behind. The hardest thing to leave is people we care about, but I grow attached to my books. It takes me forever to read, because I underline and write notes in the margins. Books come and go, but when I part with one, I don’t just leave behind an object. I leave behind a conversation partner. Many of them helped form me as a human being.

In Connecticut, I had a pile of pants at the back of my closet that I hadn’t worn for four years. I was determined to loose the two inches off my waist to be able to fit into them again. I left those pants behind, not because I’ve given up on the dream of dropping the weight, but because I recognize the styles will probably change by the time I get there.

Even harder than leaving behind books and clothes is leaving behind relationships with people. I’ve realized I’m not good at saying goodbye. In my final conversations with folk at my previous church, I kept saying things like “I hope our paths cross again” or “If you ever come to Maine, stop and see me. I’m only a mile off the highway.”

I finally had a conversation with one gentleman. I told him I hoped we would meet again. He looked me in the eye and gracefully said, “Have a good life.” I realized right away, that was the right thing to say. The odds are we won’t see each other again.

When you move, you leave people you love. You leave your routines. You leave familiar surroundings. You leave a way of life. It’s in this context I hear Paul’s words. “Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on.”

Paul named what he left behind in order to follow Jesus. He had status. He was a Hebrew born of Hebrews. He didn’t just obey the religious laws. He was a Pharisee. He

was an expert in the law. He wasn't just enthusiastic about his Hebrew religion. He went as far as persecuting the Christians. Not only did he consider himself a righteous person according to the law, he claimed to be blameless.

Paul gave up all that status in order to follow Jesus, because that relationship was the most important thing to him. Paul decided he could give up his old life, because what he would gain in following Christ. He said, "For [Christ's] sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ."

I see this as the paradigm for the Christian life. We're people who look forward. We don't focus on the past. We strain forward, to know Christ better, to embody his love, and to actually become like him. Paul said, "This one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus."

There's a story in the Old Testament (Genesis 19) about God destroying the city of Sodom. Abraham's nephew, Lot, lived in that city. God agreed to spare Lot and his family. Having been warned by angels, Lot's family fled the city. As they were running from the flames and destruction, Lot's wife looked back. For extra credit, do you know what happened to her? She turned into a pillar of salt.

See, you can't move forward while you're looking back. If you look back, you become immobilized. In a sense, you cease to be a living, breathing creature. Paul wrote, "Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal."

Now, I know many of us have been straining as a result of the pandemic. Rev. Estelle, Pastor Dan, Wendell, and so many of you have done an incredible job leading this community through it. Many of you have been going above and beyond, putting in time, attending constant meetings, making decisions, and figuring out stuff.

I don't want to minimize any of that. We get tired. We need rest. Sometimes life pulls us in multiple directions at the same time. I promise that, on another Sunday, I'll preach a sermon about the need to slow down and say "no" to invitations. In my book, "No" is a complete sentence. Saying "no" doesn't require a long justification.

Having said that, we don't expect anything to be easy. We don't shy away from struggle. We stand in a long line of people of faith who have struggled. The year 2020 is

the 400th anniversary of the Pilgrims landing on Plymouth Rock. Talk about people who “strained forward” and “pressed toward the goal.” Half of them died the first winter. They wanted a life-giving relationship with Christ and they were willing to press toward that goal.

So, now I have a house full of boxes. It will take me a while to get organized and settled in. When I was in Connecticut, Rev. Estelle was giving me a virtual tour of the parsonage using her cell phone. As she was walking me through it, there was a point when she said, “God bless you for coming here...sight unseen.”

It’s true. I had a good life in Connecticut. I loved my job. I loved the people there. I’m not erasing the past from my mind. I don’t think that’s what Paul meant when he said, “forgetting what lies behind.” I think what he meant was – don’t live in the past. Don’t allow your connection with the past to prevent you from moving forward...from experiencing the new thing God has in store for you.

So, I’m straining forward. I’m anticipating and expecting that, God willing, we will discover together what it means to be Jesus’ disciples in this crazy time. Will you strain forward? I think, as difficult as it is to deal with a pandemic, this is the church’s time to shine. Jesus didn’t shy away from a struggle. We don’t either. We figure out a way to care for people. We meet needs. I’m thrilled you figured out a way to safely sell pumpkins, providing a little normalcy to the community and supporting the Navaho at the same time.

In my church office in Connecticut, I had a framed award for preaching I won in 2008. I never got around to hanging it on the wall. I’m not sure what I’m going to do with it now. It was a neat moment when I received it, but I don’t really think about it. I’m too busy stressing about the sermon I have to deliver the next Sunday. It doesn’t matter that I won some award in 2008. This is 2020. I’m straining forward to be a better preacher and a better pastor tomorrow.

In every church I’ve served, there have been people who remember what their church was like in the 1960’s or 1970’s. There’s this hope that membership and attendance will get back to what it was in those glory days. Maybe you have an image of the church you attended at one time and you’re tempted to wish for that again.

I want to invite you to look forward with me. I think we live in a fascinating time to be the church. I think the world needs vital communities of faith as much as it ever did. As

we start off on this new venture together, I want to suggest this isn't so much about how you and I relate. It's not about us. It's about our discipleship of Jesus Christ.

If we can live like him, and offer our lives like him, we will experience resurrection like him. That makes the struggling, and the striving, and the pressing forward all worthwhile.