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Oct

The Heavenly Call

Pressing On

NINETEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, YEAR A

For Paul, faith is a deeply embodied journey that calls us into the present, embodied reality of loving and living with God, self, neighbor, and all creation. We press on together here and now by the grace through which Christ saves us.

REFERENCES

Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20

Psalm 19

Philippians 3:4b-14

Matthew 21:33-46

COLORS

Green

Preaching Notes

Focus Text: **Philippians 3:4b-14**

In October 2008, United Methodist representatives from across Indiana gathered to vote on whether the two conferences would remain separate or merge into a single new conference. This is a common occurrence throughout our denomination, and there are many reasons it has happened and will continue to happen. Some of the reasons are self-preservation and institutional survival. Some of the reasons are about shared vision and mission. “The face of unity,” some posited; “an attempt to circle the wagons,” others declared. All the above, it could be argued, and more.

I bring up this historic moment not to pass judgment on the act itself, but to consider a minor detail of the moment. The joint conference gathering that October was held at the State Fairgrounds in Indianapolis, in the Toyota Pavilion. Now, you may not know what the Toyota Pavilion is at the Indiana Fairgrounds. It is the sheep barn. Someone told me it is the only public building in Indiana dedicated entirely to sheep. And there we met to form a new conference. It was there we met to press on toward the goal of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus, the Great Shepherd of the sheep.

That'll preach, as they say. But what does it have to do with this text from the letter to the Philippians? Paul gives a history lesson, then sets that history aside in favor of the mission of the church. Okay, granted it reads like a humble brag. Paul, who was big on humility in his writing, manages to sneak in some considerable self-referential information that sounds like one-upmanship. The familiar "I'm better than you, so you should listen to me." More than that, he actually says, "Do what I do." "Join in imitating me," he says a couple of verses past the reading for this week.

This sort of thing has turned people off of Paul for a long time. And it is hard not to see their point. But look a little deeper. After his catalogue of suffering and attributes (which are, surprisingly, in the same list), he says it doesn't really matter. Moreover, he says he considers all that stuff garbage. The Greek word is *skubala*, translated as *rubbish*, *garbage*, or *dung*. It's a strong word, offensive in some circles. That's how he feels about his own resume—at least compared to knowing Jesus, compared to the call to share the gospel, to widen the circle, to embrace the hope and encourage others to embrace with him.

What Paul knows is that when it comes to all of that, to ... well, let's just say it ... evangelism. Another strong word, offensive in some circles. But when it comes to evangelism, all we have is our stories. All we have is the witness of our lives. Paul isn't ashamed to use what he has to tell of the relationship he has with the Risen Christ. He is ready to lay his life down as a witness to the power of the redeeming spirit of Jesus—not to use it as a way to increase his own glory, climb some social ladder, or enrich himself. He chooses to let his story be an invitation for another to hear, embrace, move closer, and know the one who gives Paul his strength and purpose.

The best thing about Paul's story, he would no doubt point out, is not his history, but his future; not who he has been, but who he is becoming. The invitation is to come along for the journey of discipleship. The invitation is not "look at me," but "walk with me as we look to Christ." "We're pressing on," Paul argues. But pressing on toward what? What does Paul call us to do or be? Pressing on toward the goal of the heavenly prize means what, exactly?

Well, we think it is obvious, isn't it? It's about getting to heaven, about lounging on a cloud with halo and harp, about basking in the presence of the Lamb on the throne, or however we might envision that realm. Indeed, Paul talks about leaving to be with Jesus in other passages. That escape into a place where kingdom rules apply sounds enticing in today's world. Yet it seems unlikely that Paul is arguing here for an escapist mentality. Rather, for Paul, the prize is *righteousness*, and righteousness is not a strict adherence to rules and laws, but an embodiment of God's mercy and justice.

Embodiment is an important concept. It is how we live. It is the actions we take, the positions we hold, and the values we embrace. We are, in other words, called to become like Christ. When Paul rails against "flesh," he doesn't mean bodies. What we do with our bodies matters a lot to him. And we can express our faith through our bodies, our words, and our inner being. "Flesh" represents anything that gets in the way of embodying faith in a Christlike way. Flesh is self-centered as opposed to other-centered. Flesh prioritizes empire – status quo – nation over the kingdom of God.

When we press on, we press on through many avenues. We press on through spiritual disciplines. We press on through acts of mercy. We press on through justice work and world-transforming efforts that bring wholeness to all people. We press on to build community, not just to take care of ourselves. Through his story, Paul issues an invitation to partner with the Spirit in working toward the vision that Jesus the Christ gave to us. That heavenly prize is—as we regularly pray —the kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven. Press on.

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