

Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church, 2nd Sunday of Lent, February 21, 2016

Forward Momentum: Imitating Paul

Dr. Kenneth Humphreys

February 21, 2016

Philippians 3:17-4:1

Last week I talked about our God of love. I said then that God is open to saving everyone --- that the door to salvation is wide open.

This is what Paul is saying to the church at Philippi in our reading from Philippians this morning --- but Paul is warning that this open door is not as wide open as to excuse any sort of lifestyle.

The doctrine of grace that Christ died on the cross to atone for our sins only goes so far. God's love extends to all of us but God in turn expects us to have the forward momentum to live a truly Christian life. Just as God shows his love for us, we are expected to show our love for others, to live up to Jesus' second great commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves.

At first glance, in our scripture reading Paul seems egotistical saying, *"Join together in following my example, brothers and sisters, and just as you have us as a model, keep your eyes on those who live as we do."*

Paul is not being egotistical. Rather he is drawing a contrast between the kind of life he leads and that of those whom Paul identifies as *"... enemies of the cross of Christ."*

Who exactly were or are these enemies? Paul doesn't specifically say but from his words it is obvious that he is referring to those who have no capacity for moderation or restraint in how they live their lives --- those who live immoral and gluttonous lives and apparently *"... used their so-called Christianity to justify themselves"*. (1).

Paul possibly was referring to the Gnostics, a group who *"... taught that gluttony and adultery and ... drunkenness were of no importance and that they affect only the body."* (1).

Some Gnostics also argued that a person who had not experienced everything that life had to offer, both good and bad, could not be called complete. They suggested

that it was a person's "... *duty to plumb the depths of sin just as much as to scale the heights of virtue.*" (1).

An interesting philosophy isn't it? Do what you want. Try anything and everything. It won't make any difference in the long run.

Unfortunately there are many people in this world who live their lives in this way and don't have the necessary forward momentum toward Christ and to salvation. They have a distorted picture of the doctrine of grace. They seem to think that Christ's grace encompassed all sin, that one could sin as much as he or she liked and not be concerned; it would not matter to the all forgiving love of God.

This attitude reminds me of the movie The Godfather, starring Marlon Brando. I am sure that some of you remember that great film. Vito Corleone, the godfather, commits every sort of sin imaginable --- robbery, violence, murder, and more, yet is devoted to his family and to his Roman Catholic upbringing. He was not at all repentant for his criminal acts. They were simply how he made his living. Well, it doesn't work that way. Corleone was unrepentant. In Paul's words, his "... *mind [was] set on earthly things.*"

A devotion in These Days said, in part, "*Imagine if we could cheer on one another to embody the power of the resurrection, to trust that death cannot conquer love, and roll away the stones that hinder us from fully living in the spirit of God's grace and love.*

"*As people of faith we practice the art of rejoicing in God's creation and living as Jesus taught. We ... carry this mysterious, unconditional love and relentless unending grace into a world of need.*" (2).

Paul reminds us that our citizenship is in heaven, not on earth. The hope of the coming Savior, the forward momentum to Easter Sunday, "... *transforms the earthly into the heavenly. The resurrection hope entails a radical change in the form of human existence. ... we stand at the fork in the road, and Paul's final appeal is to 'stand firm in the Lord.'* ... *It is, after all, 'in the Lord' where our lives are lifted as we share the resurrection hope. It is from this position that we are able to transcend 'earthly things.'*" (3).

Frederick Buechner (4) said that *“During Lent, Christians are supposed to ask one way or another what it means to be themselves.*

“If you had to bet every thing you have on whether there is a God or whether there isn’t, which side would get your money and why?”

“When you look at your face in the mirror, what do you see in it that you most like and what do you see in it that you most deplore?”

“If you had only one last message to leave to the handful of people who are most important to you, what would it be in twenty-five words or less?”

“Of all the things you have done with your life, which is the one you would most like to undo? Which is the one that makes you happiest to remember?”

“If this were the last day of your life, what would you do with it?”

“To hear yourself try to answer questions like these is to begin to hear something not only of who you are but of both what you are becoming and what you are failing to become. It can be a pretty depressing business all in all, but if sackcloth and ashes are the start of it, something like Easter may be at the end.”

Do you have forward momentum toward Easter?

Amen.

(1). William Barclay, *“The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians,”* rev. ed., Westminster John Knox press, Louisville, 1975.

(2). [These Days](#), November 9, 2014.

(3). Fred B. Craddock, et al, *“Preaching Through the Christian Year: Year C”*, Trinity Press International, Valley Forge, PA, 1994.

(4). Frederick Buechner, *“Listening to Your Life,”* meditation of February 26, Harper One, New York, 1992.

Note: Scripture quotations are from the New International Version of the Bible, 2011

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Liturgical color – purple

**This is the day the Lord has made.
let us rejoice and be glad in it.**

Announcements

One: The peace of Christ be with you.

Many: And also with you.

Call to Worship (Unison)

The psalmist sings,

One thing I asked of the Lord,

that I will seek after:

to live in the house of the Lord

all the days of my life,

to behold the beauty of the Lord,

and to inquire in God's temple.

Sisters and brothers, God is good,

and in love and mercy greets us here.

Let us worship God.

*Opening Hymn

"The God of Abraham Praise" #488

Opening Prayer

Loving God,
you save all who seek refuge in you.
Grant that we who know your salvation
may walk always in your light,
take courage in your faithfulness,
and rejoice in your astounding goodness to us.
Through Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we pray.
Amen.

Prayer Response Inside front cover of hymnal – In Unison

*Hear Our Prayer, O Lord, Hear Our Prayer, O Lord, Incline Thine ear to us, And grant us Thy peace. **Amen.***

Psalm of Praise Psalm 27, a Psalm of David (pew Bible pages 862-863).

Please read the even numbered verses responsively.

¹ The LORD is my light and my salvation—whom shall I fear?

The LORD is the stronghold of my life— of whom shall I be afraid?

² **When the wicked advance against me**

**to devour me, it is my enemies and my foes
who will stumble and fall.**

³ Though an army besiege me,

my heart will not fear; though war break out against me,
even then I will be confident.

⁴ **One thing I ask from the LORD, this only do I seek:**

**that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life,
to gaze on the beauty of the LORD and to seek him in his temple.**

⁵ For in the day of trouble he will keep me safe in his dwelling;

he will hide me in the shelter of his sacred tent

and set me high upon a rock.

**⁶ Then my head will be exalted above the enemies who surround me;
at his sacred tent I will sacrifice with shouts of joy;**

I will sing and make music to the LORD.

⁷ Hear my voice when I call, LORD;
be merciful to me and answer me.

⁸ My heart says of you, "Seek his face!"

Your face, LORD, I will seek.

⁹ Do not hide your face from me, do not turn your servant away in anger;
you have been my helper.

Do not reject me or forsake me, God my Savior.

**¹⁰ Though my father and mother forsake me,
the LORD will receive me.**

¹¹ Teach me your way, LORD; lead me in a straight path
because of my oppressors.

**¹² Do not turn me over to the desire of my foes,
for false witnesses rise up against me,
spouting malicious accusations.**

¹³ I remain confident of this:

I will see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living.

**¹⁴ Wait for the LORD; be strong and take heart
and wait for the LORD.**

Call to Confession

[spoken from the font]

The Lord is our light and our salvation;

whom shall we fear?

With humble hearts,

let us confess our sins before God and one another.

Prayer of Confession (Unison)

Merciful God,

**you have made us citizens of heaven,
but we confess that we have set our minds on
earthly things.**

**We have let our desire for security restrain our
commitment to serve the poor.**

**We have let our fear of danger curb our obligation
to love our enemies.**

**We have let our love of things dull our generosity
to the needy.**

**We have let our craving for public status prevent our
honesty about hidden sins.**

**Yet, you know the desires of our heart
and nothing is hidden from you.**

**By the power of the Holy Spirit,
conform our sin-weakened bodies to the glory of Christ,
that we may be the body of Christ for the world. Amen.**

Assurance of God's Pardon

[Water may be poured into the font, visibly and audibly.]

God, our light and our salvation,
does not forsake us or leave us with our sin.

In Christ we are forgiven
and offered the gift of healing repentance.

Thanks be to God!

*Gloria Patri

Childrens' Message

Prayer for Illumination

Lord,
open your Word by your Holy Spirit,
so that we, like Abraham,
may believe your promises to us. **Amen.**

Epistle Reading: Philippians 3:17-4:1 (pew Bible page 1826)

¹⁷ Join together in following my example, brothers and sisters, and just as you have us as a model, keep your eyes on those who live as we do. ¹⁸ For, as I have often told you before and now tell you again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. ¹⁹ Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things. ²⁰ But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, ²¹ who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.

¹Therefore, my brothers and sisters, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, dear friends!

The word of the Lord

Thanks be to God

*Congregational Hymn "In the Cross of Christ I Glory" #84

Sermon "**Forward Momentum: Imitating Paul**" Dr. Kenneth Humphreys

Choral Anthem "Jesus Lover of My Soul" (© 1981, 1984 2002 Sparrow Records. Arr. © 1980 Birdwing Music/Cherry Lane Music Publishing Co. Inc. / ASCAP. Used by Permission. CCLI License 11224027) (Track 25, CD 5)

*Confession of Faith Apostles Creed, Ecumenical version

**I believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.
I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended to the dead.
On the third day he rose again;
he ascended into heaven,
he is seated at the right hand of the Father,
and he will come again to judge the living and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic Church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting. AMEN.**

Tithes and Offerings

Christ has given his life for us.
Let us offer ourselves and our gifts to God.

*Doxology #592 – In Unison

Praise God from whom all blessings flow; Praise Him, all creatures here below; Praise Him above, ye heavenly host: Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen.

Prayers of the People and the Lord's Prayer (Responsive)

As the words "let us pray to the Lord" are said, please respond "**Lord, have mercy.**"

In peace let us pray to the Lord saying,

Lord have mercy.

For the church throughout the world,
that all who bear the name of Christ
may find true repentance for their sins
and walk in the ways of peace,
let us pray to the Lord.

Lord, have mercy.

For the nations of the world,
wherever there is poverty, war, or oppression of human spirit,
that all people may repent of the evil they do to one another,
let us pray to the Lord.

Lord, have mercy.

For the planet Earth, God's gift to humankind,
that we repent of selfish or thoughtless exploitation
and tend it with care so that all may share justly in its bounty,
let us pray to the Lord.

Lord, have mercy.

For the leaders of the nations,
that they may work for the common good of all people
and repent of arrogant nationalism,
let us pray to the Lord.

Lord, have mercy.

For our enemies,
that we may learn to love them with regard for God's compassion,
forgiving wrongs and seeking reconciliation,
let us pray to the Lord. **Lord, have mercy.**

For those who are sick or in trouble,
for the defenseless, the weak, and the poor,
that they may find help in their time of need,
and that the church may heed their cry,
let us pray to the Lord.

Lord, have mercy.

Loving God,
hear the prayers of your people for the sake of our world.
With our prayers, accept the dedication of our lives
that we may minister to the world in the name of Jesus,
who taught us to pray, **Our Father ... Amen.**

*Closing Hymn "Blest Be the Tie That Binds" #438

*Charge and Blessing

Sisters and brothers in Christ,
stand firm in the Lord.

The God of reconciliation bless you,
the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ keep you,
and the power of the Holy Spirit strengthen you
this day and forevermore.