

I Press On
Philippians 3:1-14
January 7, 2018

First United Methodist Church, Lindstrom

(This is a manuscript prepared for sermon delivery and may not represent actual words spoken.)

Not that I have already obtained this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.

Today is Epiphany Sunday. This is the Sunday when we generally observe the visit of the Wise Men. They followed a star to Jesus, and they worshiped Jesus. We looked at them during our Advent series. So today we will go with the New Year theme. This is a new year—emphasis on new.

With the new year comes a whole bunch of new year's resolutions. People resolve that a thing or two in their lives will be different. They look back. Then they look forward.

For example, I have been a member of Snap Fitness for many years. Yes...I have. I try to get there a minimum of three times a week. I usually do a couple two, three miles on the treadmill. The machine says I have gone two or three miles, but I have actually gone nowhere. I do get some ESPN watched. One thing I have noticed is Snap fitness is more crowded than usual in the month of January. There are people there I do not usually see. They are the ones who have resolved to get into better shape in the new year. By February the place is pretty much back to normal.

As a rule, I am not into the whole resolution thing. I did make one once when I was a kid. Some of you may remember Boone and Erickson of WCCO radio fame. They were inviting people to call in with their resolutions. I called in. I resolved that in the new year I would be better behaved towards my parents. Of course, they wondered if I had not been well-behaved in the past year. I told them I was not all that bad a kid, but I could always be better. For that resolution,

WCCO sent me a shiny silver dollar. I came out okay on that deal.

So we read from the book of Philippians. You have heard me talk about this book on more than one occasion...about how it is a very personal and warm letter. Paul wrote a lot about joy and rejoicing. He did not write to address any big problem affecting the Philippian Church. But he did have a word of caution for them.

In verse two of our text, Paul wrote, "Watch out for those dogs, those men who do evil, those mutilators of the flesh." Paul was talking about that group that seemed to dog him wherever he went. They were known as Judaizers. They were the ones who insisted that the Gentiles needed to add circumcision and strict adherence to the law to their faith in order to be saved. Accepting Jesus and obeying the law was the path to salvation, they said. Those folks put their confidence in the flesh and in their obedience. Paul simply warned the Philippians to watch out for them.

But then Paul said that if anyone did have reason to be confident in the flesh, it was him...Paul. Paul said he was circumcised on the eighth day. He was a Hebrew among Hebrews. He was a Pharisee. He persecuted Christians. When it came to legalistic righteousness, Paul said he was without fault. Quite the boast. When it came to strict obedience to the law, Paul seemed to claim perfection.

But then he met Jesus. Meeting Jesus changed everything. When Paul met Jesus, all that legalistic righteousness meant nothing. In fact, he considered it garbage. All he wanted was to know Jesus. To know Jesus. Making the decision to follow Jesus changed everything for Paul. It changes everything for us. Paul's new resolve was to take hold of Jesus. Our resolve is to take hold of Jesus. A couple quick points.

One...as we press on to take hold of Jesus, we forget what is behind...and we focus all our energy on what is ahead. Paul said, "...one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead...."

Now, forgetting in this context does not mean we rid ourselves of any memory of the past. Paul, in this text, brought up memories of the past. He talked about what he used to be like. He talked about what consumed his past life. I don't know about you, but I have memories I do not want to forget. Good memories. Of course, there are a few bad ones I wish I could forget...but they remain.

Here's the thing about some things from the past: they have the power to grab too much of our attention...and stand in the way of our progress. Consider Paul's past. He stood by while Stephen was stoned to death. He persecuted Christians. We read in the ninth chapter of Acts that he breathed murderous threats. He went on the road to bring followers of Jesus back to Jerusalem as prisoners. Then Paul met Jesus. And he did not let any of that past stuff weigh him down and stand in the way of his knowing Jesus and making Jesus known.

I've met folks...folks who claim to have a "past"...some folks who are still consumed enough by their past that they think they cannot be all that good a witness for Jesus...folks who still wonder if God could or how God could forgive them. Listen...we need to forget all that. This is a general principle, I think, and a good one. Do not allow undo attention to what is in the rearview mirror hinder our forward progress...or stand in the way of knowing Jesus and making Jesus known.

So, finally, we press on. Paul used one of his favorite metaphors...that of a race. We press on toward the finish line...toward the goal of winning the prize. The goal is knowing Jesus. The prize is the glory that awaits each of us.

Paul, who sometimes can come off as a bit arrogant, did not want to give his readers the impression that he had achieved this goal. He said, "Not that I have already obtained all this, or

have already been made perfect, but I press on...."

Let's not ever think that all is done...that we have arrived...whatever that means. None of us is perfect. Not a one of us. We need to give more than lip service to this truth. We are all sinners. And so we are always pressing on. There is so much more of Jesus to know...and so many people to whom we must make Jesus known.

How about we make this our goal...our resolve in the new year? Forgetting what lies behind.... We will not let anything that is behind us so absorb our attention that our progress is impeded. And we are going to press on to know Jesus and make Jesus known. Focus on Jesus who is always before us. It is all about him.

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