

It can be frightening letting go of the past and reaching for the future.

I recently asked one of the young men in our church who skydives to describe the experience. He told me that the first few seconds were the feeling of a free-fall, but in just a short time you gathered your orientating and all of a sudden the feel of free-fall became a different experience. It only took a short moment from free falling to soaring.

Letting go of the past whether it is our comfortable sins and failures, or even our proud moments of accomplishments can be frightening. It is hard to let go and free fall, but I want to assure you that letting go of the past and reaching for God's future is but a short journey of free fall to soaring. My friends we were meant to soar.

So Paul writes "I do not consider myself as of taking hold of it, but this one thing I do; forgetting what is behind me I strain for what is ahead. I press on toward the goal of the prize, the heavenward call, the upward call in Christ Jesus our Lord."

It takes a church...it takes process.



¹Jeremy Troxler "Run for Your Life." Published in Faith and Leadership by Duke Divinity School. July 17, 2012.



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IT TAKES A CHURCH Process

Philippians 3:4-16

TRINITY PULPIT

It does not take much observation for us to realize that life is always changing. It becomes evident that moment you catch your reflection in the mirror and notice for the first time you are not as fit as you once were or when did that line in your face appear. When we are younger we become aware of our changing bodies when the shoes that fit last week do not fit any longer or the clothes that still had tags on them are already too small. However, it is not just our bodies that are changing our minds change as well. When we begin to learn to reflect on matters and have opinions or when we grow intellectually with knowledge and hopefully wisdom. Then of course, there is the sad process where our intellectual knowledge begins to diminish, and many of us note as we age that our thinking is not quite as quick or sharp as it use to be.

Change also comes to us culturally, socially and in community. Every generation looks back on its own history with the exclamation "I never thought I would see the day." Around us changes take place. I was commenting the other day, how only a decade ago, I was sitting in living rooms where now stands towering buildings and hundreds of apartments and retail offices. All around our church we see change in the landscape, population and cultural shifts. Our community is in process, it is in change.

The church is always changing. Sometimes it might not appear that it is changing, but it is changing. Every congregation, just like the individual, is in the process of change. The question always remains, as individuals and as a congregation, is the process of change simply the effects of time and seasons of life, or are we being transformed by the work of the Holy Spirit? We are in process, but just exactly what is that process? Is it intentional? Is it holy? Is it the work of Christ in our lives?

The Apostle Paul speaks of a process here in Philippians 3. The setting is Paul's continued

struggle with the circumcision party. There were those who were disputing Paul's message of grace and faith. There were those who insisted on the keeping of the Jewish laws as the way of righteousness. Instead, Paul called the people to a new understanding of grace and freedom in Christ. He has sent this letter repeating what he has taught. He begins this section by saying it is no trouble for me to repeat myself. In other words, there are certain convictions that need to be repeated. As many times as we have heard it there are some aspects of our faith that we need to hear over and over again. We need to be reminded that God has created us. We need to be reminded that God loves. We need to be reminded that God is forgiving. We need to remember that we will stand before God and give an account for this gift we call life. We need to remember that Christ calls us to a life of following him and loving God and loving others. We need to be reminded that we are called to live in community we call the church. There is something Paul says that I have no trouble repeating.

For Paul, it was to remind them that there were those who were calling them to live in the past. Paul has strong words for those who will not let go of the law and welcome the freedom of grace. He calls them dogs, those who do evil, mutilators of the flesh. Paul insists that those who are living by grace are already the circumcised. Paul is asserting that what it means to belong to God is to be the one who has confidence in Christ and not the flesh. Those in Christ are the true circumcised. That is, those who belong to the covenant people of God.

Paul then goes through a long list of why. If anyone has a reason to trust the flesh and the past... it was he. He is a Hebrew of Hebrews. He has done everything right and had the experience that anyone would want to count himself or herself as accepted by God. However, Paul says I count this as loss. Then in more strong language, he said it is all garbage in comparison to knowing Jesus. His past

is as nothing in knowing Jesus. It is as garbage, trash, nothing when it comes to being who God is calling him to be. What is Paul longing for? He is longing to know Christ. He is longing to be like Christ. He is longing to experience the resurrection power of Jesus.

Then Paul writes something very interesting. Paul writes “not that I have already obtained all of this or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. I do not consider myself, yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead. I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.”

Paul is saying when I look at my life I am in process. John Newton who wrote Amazing Grace was, as many of you know, once a slave trader. On his grave are these words:

John Newton, Clerk
Once an infidel and libertine,
A servant of slaves in Africa,
Was, by the rich mercy of our Lord and Savior,
Jesus Christ,
Preserved, restored, pardoned,
And appointed to preach the faith
He had long labored to destroy.

It is reported he once said to a friend “I am not what I should be or what I long to be, but thanks be to God I am not who I use to be.”

We are in process. As God’s children, as followers of Christ... we are on the way. We are along the way. We look upon our lives and we realize we are not what we want to be, we are not who we long to be. There is a desire within us to know more about Christ, to share in the life of Christ, to experience the power of Christ in our lives. We have not taken hold of it all. However, we also know we are not who we once were. We have made progress. In fact, just the plain fact we long for more is a sign of the work of the Holy Spirit. The fact that we get frustrated with our selves when it comes to our faith is a reminder that we are on our way. We are not who we want to be but thanks be to God we are not who we once were.

Paul reminds us there is a process that we are engaged in as followers of Jesus. We are on the way with Jesus.

Paul gives us a picture of this process. First, he reminds us that this process is a constant act of putting the past into the past. In Paul’s case, his past was filled with which one should be proud. Paul has been everything

he thought was needed to please God, but in contrast to knowing Jesus and to knowing the future Jesus has promised everything in the past is but rubbish. Even that which was a profit to him is counted as loss. This is an amazing statement. Paul is saying that our past good or bad, sinful or righteous is to be considered over. We put it behind us so that we might continue to advance forward.

It is easy for us to think of putting behind us the experiences of life we would rather forget. We would rather forget our disappointing moments. We would rather put behind us the hurts of others. We would like to forget those moments we made bad choices or when we failed, even when we tried the hardest. We desire to put into the past of God’s grace the sins that entangle us and raise their voices to accuse and shame us. Yes, all of this let us put into the past. Let us believe our God when God promises that our sins are cast into the deepest oceans, they are scattered from as far as the east is from the west, and they are forgiven and remembered no more. Let all of this be behind us.

Yet, that is not what Paul is encouraging us to do. Paul is encouraging us to put into the past our accomplishments as well. Not only the times we have accomplished something professionally, personally, or materially but especially spiritually. Yes, it is true that it is our past that has brought us to this point, but it is also our pasts that trap us in this present place. If we are going to be all Christ is calling us to be, we must put even that which is worth celebrating into the past.

Paul makes a choice. He chooses to let go of the past, so he might focus on the future. He writes it this way “I do not consider myself as having been made perfect.” This is a matter of perspective. I do not consider myself. When I look at my life, I can think of all God has done. We might say when I look at my life I can see all that I have done for the Kingdom of God. We can look at our lives and say, I can be proud of what I have done in the church. I am proud of the person I have become. Paul could have said all of this. When he thought back on his life he could have said I really had it all. I had the right pedigree, education, and passion for God and I lived a life that was pleasing to God. Yet, I consider that it is not enough. I forget it; I consider it as rubbish compared to what God is going to do.

This is the matter of the heart. To so desire to please God that we would let go of even that which we celebrate and that which is accomplished. Yet, this is what I do. Paul does not do it reluctantly. He lets it go and he moves forward with passion, energy and excitement. Look at his description. I strain toward for what is ahead. The

picture of a runner with every orientation of their body forward toward the finish line. They are leaning in, throwing themselves forward. There is energy. I press toward the goal to win the prize. There is passion. There is a heavenward call. There is excitement.

There are really two evils that the past brings to our lives. There is the evil of failures. This evil whispers to us you are done because you are unworthy. The other is the evil of accomplishment, which says you are done because you are worthy. Both are a lie. The plan for our lives is process. We forget the past and strive toward the future God has for us.

This past May, in the Tour of California Spanish Cyclist, Eloy Turuel made a crucial mistake. As the cyclist came toward what appeared to be the finish line Turuel made a mad dash in a Sprint for the finish line. He broke away from the pack and sprinted with great joy to the line. He raised his hands into the air. He pumped his fists and shouted as he rode to victory...or he thought. There was only one thing wrong with his celebration. There was still one more lap to go. Embarrassed and now being passed by the others he tried to gather himself and get back in the race. He finished but he finished 56th. There is not a winner’s jersey, flowers or kisses from two young women on the podium for 56th. There is simply the haunting feeling of what might have been.

Don’t finish too quickly.

Let me add something to this thought today and that is not only are we called to let go of the past and to strive toward the heavenward call, but also we are to do it with joy. I find it interesting that this passage begins with this exclamation “Finally brothers rejoice in the Lord! I don’t think Paul is telling us to endure this process, but to embrace it and celebrate it.

Jeremy Troxler includes in his sermon “Run for Your Life” this illustration:

In the book “Born to Run,” author Christopher McDougall argues that most of us have been running in the wrong way -- literally. We view running as merely a means to an end, like getting in shape or living longer, and when we run, we try to protect ourselves against injury and pain by padding our feet with the latest high-tech running shoes.

WE HAVE MADE PROGRESS. IN FACT, JUST THE PLAIN FACT WE LONG FOR MORE IS A SIGN OF THE WORK OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. THE FACT THAT WE GET FRUSTRATED WITH OUR SELVES WHEN IT COMES TO OUR FAITH IS A REMINDER THAT WE ARE ON OUR WAY. WE ARE NOT WHO WE WANT TO BE BUT THANKS BE TO GOD WE ARE NOT WHO WE ONCE WERE.

McDougall looks to the Tarahumara Indian tribe of Mexico to show us a different way. The Tarahumara have honed the ability to run hundreds of miles at a clip without rest or injury. Part of this, McDougall says, is because when the Tarahumara run, they wear only very simple sandals, and so from a young age they learn to run upright, on the front pads of their feet instead of on the arches or the heels, the way our shoes encourage us to run.

But beyond this, the Tarahumara run the way they do because they understand that running is a way of life. It is part of what it means to be human, and at the heart of how the human body evolved in the first place. Why else would so many crowds of human beings get the crazy idea to get together and run for 26 miles, unless they were made for it, unless it was somehow in their DNA? The Tarahumara understand intrinsically that the human body is born to run. They don’t view running as a chore, as a means to an end or as only a battle of willpower, but as a gift, as a worthy end in itself.¹

There is a scene in the book where a well-known track coach is watching two Tarahumara runners compete

in an ultra marathon of 100 miles through the mountains. The track coach is studying the runners, watching their technique, trying to figure out what makes them tick, and what lessons he can take back to his own track team. But what strikes the coach the most isn’t the Tarahumara’s technique; it is the joy with which they run. These Tarahumara runners race up one of the course’s most heartbreaking hills and they are still laughing, churning up the slope like kids playing in a leaf pile.

What makes the Tarahumara special is that they haven’t forgotten what it means to love the act of running itself.

My friends we were created for this race. We have been included in the greatest epic story of all time. God redeeming His creation to Himself in Christ Jesus. We are a part of it all. We are not created to live life in the doldrums of the past, but in the exciting present reaching for the joyous future. We are in process.

May I say that this is true for us as individuals and also as a congregation. As we look around us, we can quickly realize that the times are changing. What shall we do Trinity? Shall we say look what we have done? Shall we spend our energy in remembering or will we let it go and with energy, passion, excitement and joy reach for God’s future.