

The Joy of Being Church 4: *Joy in Remembering the Future*

By
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from the pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church

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Psalm 138

Of David. I give you thanks, O LORD, with my whole heart; before the gods I sing your praise; I bow down towards your holy temple and give thanks to your name for your steadfast love and your faithfulness; for you have exalted your name and your word above everything. On the day I called, you answered me, you increased my strength of soul.

All the kings of the earth shall praise you, O LORD, for they have heard the words of your mouth. They shall sing of the ways of the LORD, for great is the glory of the LORD. For though the LORD is high, he regards the lowly; but the haughty he perceives from far away.

Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you preserve me against the wrath of my enemies; you stretch out your hand, and your right hand delivers me. The LORD will fulfil his purpose for me; your steadfast love, O LORD, endures forever. Do not forsake the work of your hands.

Philippians 3:4b-14

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: ⁵circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

⁷Yet whatever gains I had; these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. ⁸More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith.

¹⁰I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, ¹¹if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. ¹²Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.

¹³Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

Admittedly, this is a strange launching pad for a sermon during an anniversary year: *Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead...* In my annotated study Bible, the heading of this section is “A Warning”. In our pew Bibles, it says “Breaking with the Past.” Next weekend we have over thirty former pastors, their family members, Lily Residents, and staff who are coming for the big Anniversary weekend, as well as out of town members and friends. You will have a chance to see and catch up with them at Saturday’s events and at the reception after worship. So, next Sunday when three generations of the Watermulder family and former Pastors are walking around campus, let’s keep it between us that today I preached a sermon about the church’s radical need to break completely with the past!

What we have here in this Letter to the Philippian congregation, is Paul describing his religious past as *rubbish*. The translators have cleaned up that word rubbish, by the way. The original Greek denotes animal poop on a hot day. What exactly is Paul talking about?

You remember that the early church struggled with creating a community of newly converted Gentiles, and long observant Jews who came to believe that Jesus is the Messiah. The Philippians likely had Jewish Christians in their congregation who wanted to preserve some of their heritage – like circumcising baby boys at eight days old; maintaining strict dietary laws about what folks could and could not eat. However, others with an eye toward evangelism would argue, converted Gentiles should not have to become Jewish in order to be Christian. In our reading, Paul is saying, you can’t even compete with how Jewish I was:

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a member of the people of Israel,
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as to the law, a Pharisee;*

⁶*as to zeal, a persecutor of the church;
as to righteousness under the law, blameless.*

I now count all of that as loss because of Christ, he tells the church at Philippi. Follow my example and let go of the past; give in to the present and future power of Christ. Let go of anything and everything that keeps you from participating in Christ's resurrection power at work in you and in the world. Press on, strain forward, stretch out, and give your all to Christ who has grabbed hold of you, even if it means letting go of the things you have valued most.

My friend Jill Duffield has noted that the incredible thing about Paul's testimony is that he's not giving up bad things, harmful things, shameful things, except his earlier persecution of the church perhaps. He's giving up things that have been priceless to him but, compared to Christ he now views them as worthless. Because if we cling to the past with a tight grip there is no way we can open our hands to grab hold of what God is placing before us now, much less where God is leading us as we move toward God's promised day.¹ Enjoy the archival display in the Art Gallery, but do not forget that the little ones in the nursery and toddler room for they are Bryn Mawr's future.

The church we currently serve has carried forward many of this congregation's core Christian values from generation to generation: meaningful worship, Christian education for all ages, care for one another and compassion for our neighbors in need, acts of service in this wider community and in the world. Read the history and the sense of mission of this Christian community has been passed down from generation to generation indeed. But the church we serve now also carries the gospel into a world and a culture that did not exist twenty, fifty, much less a hundred and fifty years ago. Further, some of what we find looking back requires we leave it behind in order to be faithful today and in the days to come.

¹ Jill Duffield's "Giving Up and Gaining Christ," 10/21/12, Shandon Presbyterian, helped shape the biblical interpretation of this sermon during an anniversary year.

I have an older friend who is a member of Trinity Presbyterian Church in Atlanta. Eldon Park passed through this congregation for two years after World War Two when he was home from the war. He taught Naval Science at Villanova and made this congregation his church home. As a young adult and veteran, he loved church music and was looking for mentors in faith and practice. He found what he was looking for here. Bryn Mawr was not his church home for long, but he has shared with me how important and formative those church years were for him and how he remembers them still with great affection. So much so, that since 1958 he has saved – not one, but two copies - of an article published in a magazine called *Presbyterian Life*.

He sent them to me to add to our archives. The title of the seven-page spread is called, “A Witness to Suburbia.” The goal of this piece was obviously to single out one mainline Presbyterian Church to dispel a myth in the larger Presbyterian denomination that affluent, suburban churches were disengaged from critical issues of mission among those in need. On the one hand, it’s a lovely tribute to Bryn Mawr; its byline reads, “Through their church, 2,800 Presbyterians in Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania, are aware of the needs of their neighbors in the Philadelphia area and on the other side of the earth. On the other hand, it pictures a time when the church was not always welcoming of diversity, of women in leadership, a time when descriptions of the church’s neighbors use pejorative language that shivers in today’s hearing with disrespect.

It pictures a proud history – when the church boasted of membership that included the presidents of Temple University, Drexel, Rutgers, the heads of the Haverford School and Shipley. But it also quotes a man who grew up in the church saying its prominent Elders, men like the presidents of the Pennsylvania Railroad and the Baldwin Locomotive Company, and I quote: “Were hardly to be trifled with.” It describes an earlier era of evangelism facing a reputation that speaks of church members as “needing enough money to run with that crowd, all wealthy families and the Hunt Club set;” amid the Mainline “which enjoyed the

widespread impression that links this area with Park Avenue, Nob Hill and Westchester as bastions of wealth and privilege.”

The article profiles how the church of the 1950’s, under the remarkable leadership of Dr. Rex Clements, tried to dispel that myth, be more inclusive of folks it said, for example, who went to state colleges and not just the Ivy Leagues. And in a cringe worthy section on its outreach ministry among juvenile delinquents it records the church serving in the most “sordid sections of Philadelphia.” Language of prejudice and contempt we must leave behind.² For my older Atlanta friend, returned from the war and establishing his career, his association with Bryn Mawr was absolutely life-giving. However, just like Paul looking back on his faithful Jewish heritage, that extraordinary church of the 1950’s represents much we count as a past that had to be left behind. The same could be said of each succeeding generation.

The good news is Paul doesn’t just tell us let the past go, he gives us an image for how we are to go forward, and it is a strong image, an athletic metaphor, an encouraging vision. ¹³*Beloved, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead,* ¹⁴*I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. Straining forward and pressing on toward the goal* is a way of saying, our work in Christ is like a race. In Roman culture, the circus, in large amphitheaters was the most popular form of entertainment. These verses describe the charioteer, intent on the race, his eyes fixed forward. The prize stood on a stand next to an empty throne of a pagan god. The rider not daring to look behind, lest the slightest pressure on the reins wrapped around the body of the horse, would produce a false move, and cause him to lose the race, or possibly his life.³

² James Hoffman, Presbyterian Life, March 22, 1958.

³ David Williams, Paul’s Metaphors, quoted by Alyce McKenzie, Patheos, 10/4/14.

Like the charioteer: *Forget what lies behind*, says Paul, *and strain forward to what lies ahead...* Paul knew that dwelling on the past and its achievements could bring complacency, and that dwelling on the past and its failures could make them despondent. He knew the Christian race is not yet finished. And our work is not yet done. In a few minutes we will celebrate the reception of eighteen new members. I cannot think of a better example of what Paul is talking about when he encourages us to press on toward the future. Every time we receive new members into the communion of this church, I am fond of saying: Thank God for making of this old, historic congregation, a new church today. Of course, these new friends have been drawn to many long-cherished aspects of our faith and practice: our worship, music and sense of mission, our programs of Christian formation and nurture, our bold wrestling with contemporary social ills, and bringing our faith to bear upon issues like racism, so-called Christian Nationalism, poverty, hunger, injustice, and violence. But each of these new members also brings new spiritual gifts, new energy for service, both unique needs and unique talents, the call of Christ laid upon their hearts. Indeed, they help us all to *strain forward to what lies ahead*.

From 1886 to 1968 Karl Barth, the great theologian of the last century, lived through two World Wars, the Depression, the Holocaust, and the Cold War of a tenuous, uneasy peace. Each decade of his life brought the kind of explosive violence we have seen this weekend rain down on Israel and Palestine. Barth worked hard at making the faith relevant during a life that witnessed hundreds of thousands violent deaths, political corruption, and uneasy alliances. He said of the need for the church to press forward: “To begin again with God means seeing that we cannot go on as we are. To build again with God means we cannot go running or creeping on the old groove, in the old, bad, accustomed routine. It means looking to see if God’s light and power are not visible, and they are often closer than we think. It means waiting – not in the void, but for God’s redemption, for the bars of our prison to burst open suddenly.” Barth concluded, “Jesus has summoned God’s kingdom into real life as the surest and most real of all things.”

Friends, our church has a distinguished and interesting past, no doubt. thank God our faithfulness is found not in looking back, but remembering our call to the future, of *straining forward to what lies ahead*, ¹⁴*we press on toward the goal for the prize of the call of God in Christ Jesus.*

AMEN.