

We Press On

Psalm 19:1-6
Philippians 3:7-14

“We press on.” This became the mission trip motto of Barb, one of the youth group sponsors at our previous church. Whenever a young person would complain about having to **work. so. hard.** she would reply, “We press on.” Her father had said it, and she found it useful in all kinds of settings. Mind you, that group did work hard—so hard that the leaders played a little game. We would all write down our initials plus the part of the day (for example “Tuesday afternoon”) on which we would first hear our hosts say, “Wow, your group really works!” and put our slips in a jar. When the first adult sponsor heard the magic words we'd open the jar. Whoever guessed closest got a free ice cream cone from the other sponsors.

That group specialized in re-shingling roofs. They did good work. We trained most of them when we built our own church buildings. But only the older youth were permitted up on the roof. So all the kids saw it as the cool place to be. In hotter climates (we went to the Mississippi coast two years in a row to aid in Hurricane Katrina recovery) the shingling crew got up wicked early, climbed up on the roof by 7:00, and quit for the day a little after lunch. Meanwhile, the younger kids, who'd started around 9:30, would work a couple more hours, painting a shed, pulling up carpet, or doing equally boring things. The later it got, the more they complained. And Barb would say, “We press on.”

Honestly, we can act like those younger youth on their mission trips. At least we're working. But as the work drags on, we can start to complain. As people trying to follow Christ, we get tired and, honestly, bored. We grow weary of doing good, of being nice, of trying to behave ethically, of trying to grow spiritually. And we complain. We need to cut it out. We need to press on. Perhaps it would help to remember why.

“Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord,” wrote the Apostle Paul. He had just finished listing his credentials. They were as extensive as any full professor's at a leading institution of higher learning, any champion athlete's. And yet he called them rubbish. He had learned that while work matters, it does not accomplish the one thing that matters most: the upward call of Christ Jesus. If the older youth thought themselves above the younger—or if the younger youth feared they were beneath the older—both were wrong. Relative elevation means nothing. Our work, while important, is not the point. We press on in order to gain the upward call of Christ Jesus. We press on toward having that faith in Him as Lord, that bonds us to Him forever.

A Jew, a Pharisee by training, Paul had seen his relationship with the Lord as depending on the “righteousness of the law”. If he could only become obedient enough, high and mighty enough, God's covenant with the Chosen People would compel God to reward Paul. As a righteous Jew he would receive the blessings of sons, land, prosperity, peace. In the attempt to prove his righteousness of the law, Paul had actually hunted Christians and turned them into the authorities for disturbing

the peace, a capital crime in the Roman Empire.

Paul took his act on the road. En route to outing Christians in the city of Damascus, he had a powerful experience of the presence of Jesus, whom he heard asking, "Why do you persecute me?" Struck blind, Paul heard the Lord instructing him to seek healing from a Christian. He obeyed, and instantly converted into a passionate believer in Jesus as the Messiah. This meant rethinking his convictions about works righteousness, as we see in Philippians 3:9, "...not having a righteousness of my own, based on the law, but that which is through faith in Christ." We do not create our own faith. It is one of the gifts of the Spirit. As New Testament scholar Homer Kent Jr. writes, "Faith is the very opposite of human works; it is the reception of God's work by those who acknowledge the futility of their own efforts to attain righteousness." Paul had experienced the truth of this in his own life.

Now Paul urges his readers to press on toward the goal of the upward call of God in Christ. Having received faith in Him, we press on through everything we experience to grow closer to Jesus. We want to grow closer to him in terms of our relationship with him. And we want to grow closer to him in terms of coming to behave more like him. Homer Kent again: "Having stated that his conversion...gave him the overwhelming desire to know Christ ever more fully, Paul then explains that his present life is ever a pursuit in this new direction." How might we pursue this new direction? How might we press on to the upward call of God in Christ Jesus?

One way is to commit ourselves to greater inclusiveness. Jesus repeatedly spoke and acted in ways that demonstrated his radical openness. He used no filters. He loved people of all skin colors, faith backgrounds, genders. My friend Beth is a pastor. She just accepted the call to serve at the 1st Presbyterian Church of Danville, Virginia. This makes the second church in a row for which she became its first female minister. While I do not believe a church ought to consider only male or female candidates, I do believe it pleases God when glass pulpits get broken. My previous congregation has called a Korean-American as its next pastor. I believe this pleases God. How might Central Presbyterian break down the mostly invisible filters that make us as monochromatic as we are?

This is World Communion Sunday. As we receive communion today let us ask God to show us how to open up our church. We can study it to death but never really take action. Consider this a call to action. According to the US Census Bureau, Terre Haute's population is about 18% non-white. Do you know a person of color whom you might invite to participate in our worship and ministry? A person whose gender confusion makes them feel unwelcome at any church? Before we shut things down in late March I was happy to see how welcoming we were to the two street people who were worshiping with us. I believe we can press on through the pandemic, the election and all the rest of it. And I believe one concrete way to do that would be to make the effort to open our circle to people who do not look like us. On this World Communion Sunday, let us press on toward that calling. Doing so will help us press on to the ultimate prize: a bonding relationship with God in Christ. We press on.