

Pressing On
Philippians 3:4b-14
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St. John United Methodist Church
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Which kind of person are you? Past? Present? Or future? In other words where do you spend a majority of your thinking time? Do you review events that happened in your past? Do you relive moments where others hurt you or criticized you? Do you think about the big achievements of your past? Are these thoughts the last in your conscious mind before you drift to sleep at night?

Are you a present-oriented person? Are you a Snoopy kind of person who lives for the moment? You don't worry so much about the past or the future. Or do you spend a decent amount of youth thinking time dreaming about the future?

The reality is that we need to live in all three realms. We must not forget the past because sometimes the key to a better future is locked up in our memories of the past. We likely all need to spend more time in the present moment. If there is an adjective that describes Americans today it would be distracted. We are forced into a life of multitasking that keeps our mind focused on the next thing. I used to think the present was a very thin line separating past from future. Now I realize that this thin line can be expanded. This happens when we determine to be open to the reality that is before us right now.

And we all live for the future. We plan for our children's education. We save for retirement and dream about what we will do. Let's be honest here. At this very moment some of us are not present to this sermon but are thinking about what we will do this afternoon! Sometimes our minds become captured to a future that is not very far away.

In our scripture for today Paul is in prison writing to the Christians in Philippi. Listen to his future-oriented words: "I press on;" "forgetting what lies behind;" "straining forward to what lies ahead;" "I press on toward the goal." (Philippians 3:12-14) This is clearly future-oriented language. The theme of General Conference last spring was "A Future with Hope," taken from Jeremiah 29. One thing we can be certain: God desires all people to have a future with hope. And Paul is encouraging us to keep that future in our mind's eye.

So, what then does it mean to press on? For one thing, it means *not valuing the heavenly prize in isolation from the life to which it calls us*. In other words we should not sit back knowing we have a place in heaven. Though Paul spoke of straining toward the prize, what that means is that in the meantime, he needed to love God, love his neighbor and do the work God has put before him. If he were to think only of the prize of eternal life, his actions might become calculating, and the love that should be motivating them lost. It's hard to really embrace our neighbor when we've got one hand waving toward God to be sure that God notices how "loving" we are being.

Have you caught yourself doing some good deed but hoping that someone would notice? Have you ever manipulated a situation so your good deed is seen by others? I have. I think we probably all have.

Secondly, pressing on means *practicing an open rather than a closed morality*. The terms “closed morality” and “open morality” were coined in the middle of the last century by Ernest F. Scott, writing in *The Interpreter’s Bible*. He said that a closed morality “is always looking for some place to stop,” while an open morality “sees that the ways of expressing a good life are endless in variety and infinite in scope.” To illustrate this, Scott pointed to the parable of the good Samaritan, where both the priest and the Levite declined to help the injured man because they did not see their moral obligation as extending that far. The Samaritan’s open morality, however, “led him to do an original and unprescribed service.”¹

Is your morality closed or open? Open morality doesn’t mean that we never fail to do the right thing, but it does mean that we remain humbly aware that we do sometimes fall short — or as Paul put it, “Not that I have already obtained this.” And with that awareness, we keep working at doing better — *pressing on* to do better.

One more thing pressing on means is *not giving up*. That’s a lesson that all of us in the church need to relearn from time to time. We live in an age when there are lots of options for people besides being participants in church life. Some churches deal with dwindling memberships or lack of children in Sunday school or the inability to field a youth group or fund a mission project. It’s easy to count the reasons why those conditions exist, and it’s even easy to say, “Well, that’s the way it is. We’ll just have to adjust and make the best of it.”

Somehow, we just can’t imagine Paul accepting any of that. Those statements and attitudes are the opposite of what pressing on is. They are, at best, mere sitting down.

In our present circumstances, pressing on should mean at least *trying things*: new programs, new strategies, new schedules, new packaging for the timeless gospel. Maybe most of them will fail to accomplish what we want, but something might work, and for that reason alone we should keep trying new approaches. What is certain is that doing nothing will get us nowhere.

Here’s my list of what it might mean for our church to press on, to try new things.

1. *What about making one of our morning worship services have a different musical style?* Currently all three are basically the same.
2. *What about videotaping the sermon for unchurched people to view and discuss in the home of one of our lay leaders?* No matter how welcoming we think we are there are people who will not come through the doors of this building. But they just might go to a home of a friend or neighbor.
3. *What about training our Disciple Bible study graduates to lead small adult Bible groups of their own?* The fact is that Christians become disciples when they immerse themselves in the Bible in small groups.
4. *What about initiating a discussion about new space?* What I am hearing is that we need space for our choirs to rehearse, parish nurse ministry, storage, and a place in the sanctuary where our band could keep their set up in place.

Perhaps we need a bit more freedom in our pressing on towards a future with hope. Failure needs to be redefined. It’s not about not succeeding in a new ministry. Failure is more about not trying new ministries. Last summer we tried a Wednesday service which did not get off the ground. It was not a failure. We simply tried something

¹ *The Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. 11. Nashville: Abingdon, 1955, 87-88.

and it did not have the right ingredients to work at that time. Maybe it would work next summer. Who knows if we aren't willing to try new things?

Tom Wolfe, in *The Right Stuff*, tells the story of the jet pilots who tested the early supersonic aircraft. Theirs was a life of heart-stopping risk, but also great excitement. The credo they lived by was "to push the outside of the envelope" — to fly higher and higher into the cold void between earth and space, pressing their planes ever faster, risking mental fatigue, flirting with unconsciousness from oxygen deprivation, until they crossed the threshold of the speed of sound. That's what Christianity ought to be like — ever learning, ever growing, not afraid to ask the tough questions, the questions that challenge faith.

In sports it is often tempting when your team is losing to give up. Here's an amazing story of a college football team who did not, even when there was only 2 seconds left in the game and they were losing by two points. On October 27, 2007, Trinity University was losing to Millsaps College in Jackson, Mississippi. When the ball was snapped with just two seconds left in the game, Trinity players headed down the field. After no fewer than 15 lateral passes, a Trinity player crossed the goal line to win the game for his team. Let's watch the video of this amazing play.

Video Clip

Now one lateral is considered a risky move in football — but 15? So extraordinary was this play that TIME magazine named it its 2007 Sports Moment of the Year. Yet, how risky was it, really? By the time of the first lateral pass, the clock had already run out. The Trinity University players had, literally, nothing to lose. With each ball handler, in turn, tossing the ball away to a teammate moments before being tackled, it was 15 separate risky decisions. Incredibly, the strategy (if it could be called that) paid off. Sometimes, you've got no choice but to keep pressing on.

Some of you are coping with terrible memories of a haunted past. Some are in a present situation that is straining your life energy and resources. Others are facing an uncertain future. Our national political and economic situation is unknown. In the midst of these realities the message for today from God's Word is to press on. Regardless of what has happened up to now, press on is the word. Keep moving forward. You can do it, because a holy and loving God holds you, those you love, and your future.