

October 2, 2005/Season after Pentecost/David L. Edwards

**Forgetting the Past, Leaning Toward the Future,
Living in the Present—The Journey of Faith**

Philippians 3:4b014

Fifty-one years ago on World Communion Sunday, the Church of the Covenant held its first official service of worship. Our anniversary offers us a time to remember and appreciate the past. More importantly, it is a time to get our spiritual bearings, to be aware of where we are right now in relationship to the vision of our faith community. That vision is of a community of persons who commit their lives to following Jesus Christ and to growing into the fullness the life of faith. We continue as a community that affirms commitment and spiritual discipline as essential for the deepening of our relationship with God—the inward journey of prayer and our own transformation. And we are a community that affirms the call of Christ to each of us to discover and use our God-given gifts to touch in life-giving ways our community of faith itself or the needs of the world, beginning with our own city—the outward journey of mission. In short, this church was founded upon the belief that Christianity is not a religion to be practiced but a life of faith to be lived. A life that is a channel for what God wants to do for us and this world.

Paul's words to the Christian community at Philippi can be a point of reflection for us today as we look at where we today.

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised 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; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church, as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

Paul has experienced new life because of Jesus Christ. He has experienced the flood of God's grace pouring into his life, making him aware that we live not by the law but by God's gracious, freely-given love. We cannot and need not earn God's love. Nothing we have been or done can separate us from that love. Here Paul lists his credentials as a religious person. No one has more to brag about than Paul when it comes to doing the right religious things and having the right religious pedigree. Yet, Paul now says that none of that matters a whit compared with what he knows now.

If we see the life of faith as obedience to particular religious laws or customs, we are always looking to some exterior measure that tells us if we are doing the right things, believing the right things, or being the right sorts of persons. This makes God into a distant, lofty judge sitting on a throne up in the sky, taking notes on how we are doing. This traps us in a religion of righteousness, fostering judgmentalism aimed at ourselves or others. It is, therefore, a religion of anxiety and fear. We never know for sure whether we are making God happy or not. We are always anxious and preoccupied with ourselves, whether or not we are good enough or right enough. It is the kind of religion Paul was into and in which he had been on the fast track to success.

Paul encountered the living Christ and everything got shook up. No longer is life a matter of rules and regulations. No longer is Paul's relationship with God one of terror and anxiety, or of self-righteousness. Paul has been called to a path, a

journey of fellowship with and following the living Christ. It is a life of Good News, the message of God's love that can awaken in us our true identities as God's people and empower us to live as God made us to live. It has nothing to do with obedience to the law. It has to do with experiencing a death and a resurrection, the death of the old, false person, and the birth, or rebirth, of the new, true person. This life of faith will no longer be about measuring ourselves against something external; it will have to do with dying and rising, with waking up from our sleep, with walking in the light of God's grace and love.

It is this life of faith we are after as a community--receiving God's gracious love in Christ and living out of that love, letting it shape our inward and outward life. The commitment, spiritual discipline, and outward mission we work on and work with is all for the purpose of staying rooted in that love and living out of that love. We are seeking the same kind of life Paul encountered and endeavored to live—a joyful life of response to God's grace, God's love in Jesus Christ. Paul's words about his past frame of living can help us to reflect today: Are there any ways that we still cling to the way of obedience to law, drifting back into externalism and the kind of pride and judgmentalism it fosters? Or are we on that new path, that journey in and with the living Christ, coming alive to our true selves and God's love expressing itself through us?

Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More 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 and 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. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

The whole framework of his life up to this point Paul tosses off as garbage (the Greek word is stronger than that!). Nothing can compare to what Paul has experienced in Christ. It is the life of faith as a journey of our own transformation, our deepening awareness of God's presence and leading. This journey has little to do with right beliefs or religious credentials of any kind and everything to do with living each day awake to God, alive to God's spirit, and sensitive to the living Christ as he instructs and calls us to follow him in the life of God's kingdom.

The vision of the Church of the Covenant is that every person might experience and grow in the fullness of what we call Christian life. In Christ we encounter and receive the fullness of God's love for us. We see what it means to be a true human being, the way God made us to live. In Christ, not only do we hear, see, and experience what God intends for us—the life of love—but we RECEIVE that life as a gracious gift.

It is the difference between life as deadening obedience, laced with spiritual uneasiness and anxiety, and life as the passionate seeking and discovering of what is really real. The commitment and discipline that are so important to this life of faith are for the purpose of pointing us toward and keeping us in touch with this kind of life. They are not ends in themselves. There is no spiritual merit in commitment or discipline. We should give up all talk of who is and who isn't committed or spiritually disciplined. That's falling back into a legalistic mentality. These things

are nothing to brag about and they don't earn us any points with anyone, especially God! If that's the way we look at commitment and spiritual discipline, then they, too, are garbage. They are only means, instruments, guides. They are not the shore of new life toward which we want to move, but only the raft that can help us get us there. And we must not confuse the raft for the shore, as is said in Zen Buddhism.

This does not make commitment and spiritual discipline less important; it makes them more important, but in a particular way. The life of faith and faithfulness does not really begin until we make a commitment to it, until we accept some means of keeping ourselves aligned in that direction, that is, spiritual disciplines or practices. And yet, both commitment and discipline need to arise out of our deep desire to live as full a life as possible. It is not commitment for commitment's sake, not discipline for discipline's sake, but a core devotion to searching out daily what it means to follow Christ, a passionate desire to open our lives fully to God and God's world, and to bring ourselves into harmony with God's love. Our practice of spiritual disciplines is not for the sake of being different from others or, God forbid, "better" than others. It is only for the goal of becoming more and more awake to God, more and more full of God's love, and clearer about what it is God has given each of us to do and be for the sake of the world. Commitment and spiritual discipline express our deep desire to, as Paul says, know Christ and the power of his resurrection.

Not 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. Beloved, 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, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

The spiritual life is not a state that we achieve, when we finally get it all together. It is a process, just as life itself is a process. The point is not to constantly measure our progress or whether we are achieving a goal. The point is to let ourselves be in this process of seeking God and following Christ. Paul says he presses on to make Christ his own because Christ has already made Paul his own. We are already where we seek to be. What a paradox! We already have what we seek; it is the gift of God in Christ. And yet we strive on to let this "being owned by Christ" unfold in all aspects of our lives.

This is important. We get obsessed with making spiritual progress, forgetting that we are already there. We already have what we seek. Christ has already made us his own. Our spiritual work is to let our-already-being-there unfold in our lives. On the other hand—and I don't fear any of this crowd is this way—we can say, "Oh, I'm already there. I already belong to Christ. So I don't really need to do anything. I've got it made!" Then we just sit around enjoying our state of bliss without doing the pressing-on work Paul is now talking about. Our faith, the receiving and trusting of God's grace in Christ, is meant to blossom in works, in a life of love. Otherwise, it's not faith.

Forgetting the past. Straining toward the future. Pressing on. On this day of our anniversary as a faith community, Paul says forget the past. We want to hang onto the past, be proud of it, even live in it. This community has a rich past. Missions of all sorts. Lives awakening to God's love and Christ's call. A beloved founding minister whose imprint of fifty years is indelible. However, Paul says forget it! Let go of it! We are to forget even the past that is rich and good and laudable. To

hang onto the past in any way is to be unfaithful to God in the present and the future. It is to miss what God is trying to do with us now, to say to us now, both individually and together.

Straining toward the future. Leaning toward the future. Toward what God wants to do through us. We can't be open to what God wants to do if we are turned around looking backward. Our life must be completely open, empty of everything that would keep us from being sensitive to God's presence and leading now toward the future. Much of what this community has done in the past has arisen from a willingness to take risks, to let go of security for the marvelous insecurity of faith, to trust that God will do something through us and will provide what is needed. This is always difficult, always a struggle. But it is the only way to truly be faithful, that is, to entrust our lives to God who has called us to some journey or another.

We forget the past and lean toward the future by living fully in the present moment. What is God saying to me now? What does God want to do with us now? What gifts and what callings are being born in me now? Where am I stuck? Where am I resistant? Where am I growing? What need in this community of faith or in this city or world is calling out for my response, to offer myself and my gifts? Asking ourselves such questions afresh, in this moment, will keep us faithful to the vision of the Church of the Covenant, a vision of being faithful in each moment to the life and the call of Jesus Christ, of awakening to our true life.