

past. Appreciating our past, being aware of what has been at the heart of the Church of the Covenant's life and work—this is memory in the right sense. However, Paul still says forget it! He means let go of it! We are not to cling even to the past that is rich and good and laudable. To hang onto the past in any way is to be unresponsive 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.

We can't be open to what God wants to do if we are always 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 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, for my life and my gifts? Asking ourselves such questions afresh 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.

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

Philippians 3:4b-14

Fifty-four years ago on World Communion Sunday, the Church of the Covenant held its first official service of worship as part of the Congregational Christian Church, later to become the United Church of Christ. Our anniversary offers us a time to remember and appreciate the past, but in a way that awakens us to faithful living in the present.

Today is also our recommitment Sunday, the most fitting way to observe our anniversary. Covenant and Community Members make their recommitments to an intentional life of discipleship to Jesus Christ for another year. It is hoped that these decisions we make are out of complete freedom and a clear sense of taking responsibility for our lives and lives of faith. Not out of obligation or desiring to have some kind of status or anything else. The vision of the Church of the Covenant is to be a community of persons who commit their lives to following Jesus Christ and to growing into the fullness of the life of faith. We recognize that commitment and spiritual discipline are essential for the deepening of our relationship with God—the inward journey of prayer and our own transformation. And we recognize the call of Christ to each of us to discover and use our God-given gifts to serve our community of faith itself or the needs of the world, beginning with our own city. That is the outward journey. This community of faith was founded upon the belief that Christianity not, first of all, about adhering to a religion, but living the life God created and calls us to live. Our truest nature is to be channels for what God wants to do through us for the world. Paul's words to the Christian community at Philippi are a fruitful point of reflection for us today as we look at our lives in this way.

Paul writes: *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 experienced new life because of Jesus Christ. He experienced the flood of God's grace pouring into his life. He became aware that we live not by law, that is, what WE do, 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. Paul lists his credentials as a religious person. No one had more to brag about than Paul when it came to doing the right religious things and having the right religious pedigree. When Paul says "in the flesh," he is talking about the realm of human pride and achievement, which in his view amounts to nothing of lasting importance. None of that matters a whit compared with what Paul knows now.

If we see the life of faith as obedience to religious laws, customs or practices, as "achieving something" spiritually, we will always be fretting about doing the right things, believing the right things, or being the right sorts of persons. God becomes a distant, lofty judge watching our every step. This traps us in a religion of righteousness, fostering judgmentalism toward ourselves or others. It breeds a life of anxiety, fear, and unrelieved guilt. 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 changed. No longer was life a matter of rules and regulations. No longer was Paul's relationship with God one of fear or of self-righteousness. Paul was called to a new 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 is not about measuring ourselves against something external; it has 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 seek as a community. The commitment, spiritual discipline, and outward mission we work with are for the purpose of staying rooted in the grace of God's love and growing in our capacity to live out of that love. Paul's words about his past frame of living can help us to reflect today: How might we still be clinging to the way of obedience to law, drifting back into externalism and the kind of pride, judgmentalism, and fear it fosters? In what ways are we experiencing and striving to be on that new path, coming alive to our true selves and God's love expressing itself through us?

Paul continues: *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 much 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 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 this new way of living. In Christ we encounter and receive the fullness of God's love for us. 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 something we already have, already are, but which has gotten buried beneath all kinds of what Paul calls garbage—false views of ourselves and life itself, illusions we have bought into that have been fed us by society or family or even the church.

It is the difference between life as deadening obedience, laced with spiritual uneasiness and anxiety, and life as the 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. 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 the new life toward which we want to move, but only the raft that can help us get us there. As is said in Buddhism, we must not confuse the raft for the shore.

This does not make commitment and spiritual discipline less important; it makes them more important, but in a particular way. The life of faith does not really begin until we make a commitment to it, until we take on spiritual practices that keep us aligned in that direction. 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 way of giving fuller attention to what it means to follow Christ, to open our lives more completely to God and God's world, and to let ourselves be brought into harmony with God's love. Our practice of spiritual disciplines is not for the sake of being different from others or, God forbid, thinking we are somehow "better" than others. It is only for the goal of becoming more and more awake to God, 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, as Paul says, to know Christ and the power of his resurrection within our own experience.

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 to let this "being owned by Christ" unfold in all aspects of our lives.

This is important because sometimes we become 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, 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 a life of love, in how we meet each experience of each day, each challenge that life offers us, and in the specific missions to which we feel ourselves called. The inward and the outward are part of one life of 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