

March 21, 2010/Fifth Sunday in Lent/David L. Edwards

Letting Go and Pressing On

Philippians 3:4b-14

In this portion of his Philippian letter, Paul is talking about our life's journey in Christ. For him, the life of faith is full of movement and growth, change and maturing. There is a constant leaving behind and leaning forward. Paul's experience and knowledge of Jesus led him to reject all his previous spiritual and religious achievement. God's presence in Jesus gave Paul a whole new way of seeing things. What mattered now was not his own achievement or status, or anything other than an increasing openness to God, and living out of the grace of God's love. For Paul, that was the meaning of Jesus' life and death and resurrection -- God's love poured out for us, or as he says elsewhere, God's love poured into our hearts. We can now live by love, by grace, liberated from all preoccupation with ourselves.

First 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 sees the emptiness (vanity, as in Ecclesiastes 3) of his former life. He was on the wrong track, and he didn't even know it until he was blinded by the light of God in the risen presence of Jesus on the road to Damascus. Paul was completely in the service of the establishment, the status quo, the way things had always been. He had attached himself to certain religious forms and practices and institutions, and he was very successful within all of that. He became a zealous defender of the faith against heretics and dissenters, to the point of hunting down the followers of Jesus out of his loyalty to the religious establishment. Paul was the embodiment of religious self-righteousness. He was so caught up in his own rightness and the rightness of his religious institution and viewpoint that he was completely out of touch with the reality of the living God. It took getting knocked off his horse on the road that day for him to wake up to reality. Paul was now seeing that a life formed around achievements and status and power is an empty life. It is what he calls "confidence in the flesh". It is all rubbish, he says. (The literal meaning is stronger than that, something like a "pile of manure".) Compared to what he has experienced in Christ and this new path he is on, everything about that former life is worthless.

So Paul has seen the futility of trying to build up our self-esteem or prestige through attachments and achievements, through seeking the recognition and approval of others, or meeting the goals of institutional religion or of our culture, for that matter. Paul's strong words about his former life lead us to reflect on what happens to us spiritually when we become attached to forms and structures. Here at the Church of the Covenant we sometimes pride ourselves on not being "institutional" in the usual sense, of being focused on the spiritual life itself and what it means to live by the leading of God's spirit. Yet we too can become attached to the "idea" of being the Church of the Covenant. We can fall into the illusion that simply having this different form -- the inward and outward journeys, mission groups, call and gifts, and so forth -- is a kind of achievement we take pride in. The point is, for Paul and for us, that it is easy to become attached to the sense of our own righteousness, or rightness. This distracts us from the reality of the living God who calls us to the daily following of Jesus Christ, actually living the life of faith, and being ourselves part of this life-transforming process Paul is talking about.

Then Paul writes: *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.

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.

All that matters to Paul now is knowing the fullness of Jesus Christ. He isn't talking about head knowledge, or about understanding everything. He is talking about "knowing" in, as is said, the biblical sense. It is about being in a relationship with the living Christ and how that relationship brings forth our full humanity. Paul wants the kind of life Jesus lived to be his life as well, the life of complete faith in and faithfulness to God. He wants to embody the same love, compassion, servanthood, and peace. He knows he is not there yet. We have all felt that in our journey of faith. We sense that we are not where we want to be, that there are areas of our lives that still need more work, more cultivation and tending. We often turn that into a kind of moral perfectionism. We feel a constant dissatisfaction with who we are and what we are doing. However, that is not what Paul is talking about. He wants the fullness of the life of faith, the life rooted in God's grace and love, to manifest in his life. Yet it is not about "spiritual achievement," but a continuing and increasing openness of one's life to God's gracious love, and then living out of that love more and more. It is not about achieving something alien to us through super-human effort. It is about becoming our true selves, growing into our full humanity, just as Jesus was fully human.

Paul speaks of straining forward to what lies ahead and pressing on toward the goal. Spiritual effort is an essential ingredient in the life of faith. That is why the Church of the Covenant was envisioned as a community of persons committing themselves to their own spiritual lives in the inward and outward dimensions. The life of faith, of following Christ, does not just "happen"; it is a way of life we choose and to which we give ourselves daily. Yet we need to remember that it is not about achievement, about "becoming more spiritual". It is about our lives unfolding as true human beings. Paul is giving it all he's got because what he has glimpsed and already experienced in Jesus is worth all the effort he can give. I like what Zen Buddhism calls "effortless effort". That means we make every effort in the world to follow the spiritual path of Jesus, the life to which he calls us and which God gives us in and through him. But we make the effort as those who also know that we already have what we seek. God's love is already given. The goal that we press on toward, that we desire more than anything else, is to grow more and more into the fullness of this life we have begun to know in Jesus. It is an intense and deep desire to be human beings the way God created us to be, to live in the image of God, to love with the love of God, to be the instruments of God's redemptive love in the world. This is why Paul does not fall into despair about his former way of living, feeling that he was a failure. He is deeply excited about this new life, the new unfolding possibilities that lie before him.

All of this is not an instant thing. It is not conversion as some momentary spiritual experience that leaves us pretty much the way we were, except that now we become self-righteous about "being saved". That is the dominant popular view in Christianity. You "get saved" and then basically you just become certain that you are right and others are wrong, and not a whole lot changes about the way you live. How else do you account for churches that talk a lot about being saved, and at the same time promote militarism, nationalism, condemnation of those who are of a different sexual orientation, and the right to own guns? That's a very strange combination of values for those whose spiritual founder taught and lived precisely the opposite.

That is not how Paul saw it. Paul had experienced a "conversion," and it was on-going. There is no way you can glimpse life in the light of God's grace in Jesus and be the same old person. It puts you on a different path for the rest of your life, and the growth and change are on-going, not

momentary. It is a constant letting go and pressing forward. And, as Paul saw it, this on-going process of our becoming full human beings in Jesus Christ means that we share in the death and resurrection of Jesus. There is always a dying to the old, to the old self, and the old ways of seeing things. And as we go through those deaths, those lettings-go, we then experience the emergence of new life, the power of resurrection, the same power that raised Jesus from death and gave him to the world in a new way. Paul had understood that Jesus not only called us to do good things, but more importantly to become new people, a people reborn in God's love. Then whatever we do will carry with it God's power of new life. The outward journey of the things to which we give ourselves arise out of the inward journey of our becoming, more and more, people who are dying and rising with Christ.