

“Keep Striving”

Very much in line with what the Apostle Paul wrote in the Lectionary Epistle Reading, Frederick Buechner said, “All the absurd little meetings, decisions, inner skirmishes that go to make up our days. It all adds up to very little, and yet it all adds up to very much. Our days are full of nonsense, and yet not, because it is precisely into the nonsense of our days that” **“God speaks to us words of great significance - not words that are written in the stars but words that are written into the raw stuff and nonsense of our days, which are not nonsense just because God speaks into the midst of them.”** “And the words that he says, to each of us differently, are ‘Be brave ... be merciful ... feed my lambs ... press on toward the goal.’” (Frederick Buechner Center’s blog with an excerpt from Buechner’s sermon “The Message in the Stars,” first published in [The Magnificent Defeat](#) and later in [Secrets in the Dark](#))

In the opening verses of our Scripture, Paul helped the Philippian Church and all Christians to understand the radical difference between his former life and his new life in Jesus Christ. He acknowledged those who belonged to his old life would have perceived him as having given up so very much. Yet, Paul made the point, his old life had taken him the wrong way! Referencing going the wrong way, Jeremy Troxler reminds us, “In a 1964 National Football League game, Minnesota Vikings defensive lineman Jim Marshall scooped up a fumble by a San Francisco 49ers receiver and saw daylight ahead of him: none of the opposing team’s red uniforms stood between him and the end zone, some 60 yards away. So he took off running, as fast as a big defensive lineman could go, churning in his purple helmet, purple pants and white jersey, dreams of a touchdown dancing in his head. He heard the crowd roaring around him. He saw his teammates running alongside him waving their arms on the sideline. He cruised the last few yards into the end zone and celebrated his touchdown by jubilantly tossing the football up into the stands.

Then a player on the other team walked up and gave him a hug. His eyes were opened. You see, Jim Marshall had just run to the wrong end zone, and scored two points for the guys in red. When you watch the television replay, you hear the announcer yelling, over and over, ‘He’s running the wrong way! Marshall is running the wrong way!’ The only person in the stadium who didn’t realize Jim Marshall was running the wrong way was Jim Marshall. Marshall was like the man driving down the highway whose wife called him on his cellphone to tell him to watch out, because she had heard on the news that there was a crazy person driving the wrong way down that same highway. The man replied, ‘You’re not kidding, honey – there’s not just one crazy person going the wrong way; I can see hundreds of them!’” (Jeremy Troxler: “Run for your life” preached Oct. 2, 2011, in Duke University Chapel.)

Specifically, Paul wrote in **verses 7-9a**, **“But all those things that I might count as profit I now reckon as loss for Christ’s sake. Not only those things; I reckon everything as complete loss for the sake of what is so much more valuable, the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have thrown everything away; I consider it all as mere garbage, so that I may gain Christ and be completely united with him.”** It was extraordinary for Paul to consider his whole life prior to his conversion to be “as mere garbage”. He not only wanted to “gain Christ” but to “be completely united with him.” Examining the loss of his former life, which was rather significant, Paul considered his “knowledge of Christ Jesus” to be “much more valuable”.

Let me suggest, having “knowledge of Christ Jesus” meant far more to Paul than merely having read or heard about a significant number of things Jesus said or did! The apostle was also referring to his close and personal relationship with the Crucified and Risen Jesus Christ. Remember, he met the Risen Christ in that earth shattering moment when Paul was on the road to Damascus to persecute Jewish Christians. **Along with the knowledge and relationship with God’s Son, Paul gained many gifts from God, including profound insight into Jesus’ Purpose.** The result of Paul’s understanding our Lord’s Purpose was his recognition God sent Jesus Christ to reveal and prove to each of us that we have been put Right with our Divine Parent by our Creator, even though we don’t deserve – haven’t earned God’s Forgiveness and Self-Giving Love.

Paul went on to write in **verse 9b**, **“I no longer have a righteousness of my own, the kind that is gained by obeying the Law. I now have the righteousness that is given through faith in Christ, the righteousness that comes from God and is based on faith.”** If we don’t faith in Jesus as having truthfully revealed God’s Forgiveness and Self-Giving Love, then our lives will not be changed by what our Divine Parent showed us through Jesus Christ, the Son of God. **So, much of what Jesus said and did was to enable us to be open to receiving that Gift of Faith!** Jesus

broke all of the taboos, which were rigidly demanded by the Pharisees and their allies. He associated with and even ate with the outcasts – those rejected by society – the “sinners” – the Samaritans, the pagans, those lawbreakers, the sick, and even the dead! Jesus reminded everyone of the ancient command to “love your neighbor as you love yourself.” Just in case someone doubted God could be so Forgiving and have such Self-Giving and Sacrificial Love for us, Jesus healed many people and even raised some from the dead! The ultimate proof of Jesus’ identity and authority, as well as, of God’s Self-Giving and Sacrificial Love was Jesus’ Death and Resurrection.

That is why Paul went on to write in **verses 10-11**, ***“All I want is to know Christ and to experience the power of his resurrection, to share in his sufferings and become like him in his death, in the hope that I myself will be raised from death to life.”*** Paul was not just referring to his having life after death. He was also speaking of his old life being death and his then New Life in Christ as being part of his citizenship in the Fulfilled Kingdom of God – the Eternal Life or Life in the Eternal. However, there are many obstacles to and difficulties with this New Life in Christ, at least from the old – the world’s point of view.

Focusing on how we can endure – live this New Life in Christ in the present and into the Fulfilled Kingdom of God was also important for the Apostle Paul. Considering this difficulty of living the New Life in Christ in this broken and corrupted world and what we need to do to endure to the end, Alyce M. McKenzie explained, “My dad was big on perseverance proverbs. ‘When the going gets tough, the tough get going,’ he would remind us. ‘Quitters never win and winners never quit.’ It made sense that he would emphasize persistence. The youngest of ten children of a rural North Carolina family in the Depression, he had to be persistent in order to work his way through school and into the world of newspaper journalism and, eventually, publishing. My dad wanted us to fulfill our potential and contribute to society. I appreciated his desire for his children to use their gifts, and I admired his accomplishments. But it would have been nice every now and then, growing up, to be able to quit something! I would not have been missed on the basketball team, for instance, and enrolling in calculus was a mistake from the very beginning.”

Concluding, McKenzie wrote, “Paul, in writing to the Philippians, was just as insistent as my dad that one can never give up but must press on.” (“Reflections on Keep On Keepin’ On! Perseverance and Philippians 3:4b-14” by Alyce M. McKenzie, September 30, 2014 on Edgy Exegesis)

Paul explained his personal example of perseverance in **verse 12b, 13b and 14**, ***“I keep striving to win the prize for which Christ Jesus has already won me to himself. ... the one thing I do, however, is to forget what is behind me and do my best to reach what is ahead. So I run straight toward the goal in order to win the prize, which is God’s call through Christ Jesus to the life above.”*** “Keep striving” is the task we are called to carry out in our daily living! **We are to strive “to share in his sufferings and become like him in his death,” as Paul had written in verse 10.** I suspect very few of us are eager to share in Jesus’ sufferings and to follow his example in his death! **Let me suggest a slightly different way of saying this – we are to strive to share in Jesus’ living God’s Self-Giving and Sacrificial Love towards all people as we seek to fulfill God’s Purpose for our lives.** That is part of our God Is Still Speaking emphasis.

Or, as Efrain Agosto writes, “Paul does not end his exhortation to new life in light of suffering without reminding his readers – and us – that achieving new knowledge and new life is an ongoing process. None of us have ‘arrived’ at our goals for life, but goals we must have.” Agosto concludes, “For Paul, the ultimate goal, which he calls the prize, is achieving ‘the heavenly call of God’ that he perceives is available to him through what Christ Jesus has accomplished (Philippians 3:14 NRSV)”. (“Philippians 3:4b-14: Pressing on Toward Higher Goals” 03/16/2013 11:08 pm ET by Efrain Agosto, Professor of New Testament Studies, New York Theological Seminary)

Yes, we are to strive to fulfill ***“God’s call through Christ Jesus to the life above.”*** The New Life in Jesus Christ includes “the life above.” Let’s faith in Jesus Christ and his revelation that God has put us right with our Divine Parent as an expression of God’s Self-Giving and Sacrificial Love! **Faith is not just believing but living our Trust in the Truth of God’s Gifts of Forgiveness and Making us Right with God because of the Self-Giving and Sacrificial Love of God for us, which was shown in the Life, Ministry, Suffering, Death, and Resurrection of God’s Son, Jesus the Christ.** Keep Striving! Amen.