

Press On

Psalm 139: 1-18, Philippians 3: 4b-16

Dr. George R. Sinclair Jr.

Abraham Lincoln was not a Presbyterian but he occasionally attended Presbyterian services. After worship one Sunday, a brave soul asked the President about the sermon: “How was it? Was it a good sermon, Mr. President?”

“Yes, it was a good sermon,” Lincoln said.

“So you liked it, Mr. President?”

“Yes, it was a good sermon,” Lincoln mused. “The logic was clear; the voice hearty—it was a good sermon.”

“So,” the inquisitor persisted, “you liked the sermon?”

“Well, if the truth be known,” Lincoln replied, “it wasn’t a very good sermon.”

“And why is that, Mr. President?”

“Because,” Lincoln cautioned, “the preacher didn’t ask us to do any great thing.”

On this last Sunday as your pastor, I want to ask you to do one great thing: “Press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.” The words are not mine; they are borrowed from Paul: “Press on.”

At the time Paul wrote the Philippians, he was either awaiting trial in a Roman prison or was on his way there. Clearly, Paul writes as if prison if not death itself were only a matter of time. That said, the immediate prompt for his letter was a gift Paul had received from the Philippians. Paul had founded the church at Philippi. Philippi was a major city in northern Greece and a Roman colony located on the Via Egnatia, the Roman road linking the empire East and West. The letter, delivered by Epaphroditus, a dear friend and co-worker who had become seriously ill while with Paul, is a letter of keen appreciation for a church Paul deeply loved. The letter is also a letter of encouragement framed by Paul’s uncertain future and by internal and external opposition confronting the Philippians. Paul writes to thank the Philippians and to encourage them.

“Press on. . .”

I considered bringing a box of Kleenex this morning, but decided not to—I want this to be a Sunday of rejoicing. After thirty-nine years of preaching, the last fifteen with you, I’m feeling nostalgic. And it’s far more than preaching that fuels my sentiment; more than baptisms and weddings and funerals; more than intimate hospital visits and emergencies—it’s the relationships and ministries we have enjoyed. I am grateful for those. I give thanks for you, for all of the many ways you have been a gift to me and my family. Thank you for taking us in. I also give thanks for the witness of this church; for its enduring example of urban ministry and global mission. Those commitments drew me here. I have also relished our times together in study—not just Bible study but conversation about a host of topics that have helped us witness to the Good News of Jesus Christ. I’m looking forward to sharing those memories over lunch in a few moments, which is very kind of you, but with this last sermon, I want to focus on the future. And I want to do so by asking you to do one great thing: “Press on.” Press on to be the church God is shaping you to be.

Paul realized that “pressing on” was closely attached to “forgetting.” “Pressing on” was also closely attached to letting go of “gains.” In Paul’s case, gains were measured by his religious pedigree: “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.” Pedigree is not something to be passed over lightly no more so than reputation or

tradition. Government Street Presbyterian Church scores high on all three and rightly cherishes its proud heritage, but the future requires more than repeating the past.

Paul was not dismissing his Jewish pedigree much less his accomplishments when he says that he regarded them “loss,” as “rubbish” even. His point was that those things paled in comparison to “knowing Christ Jesus.” Paul’s greatest discovery or the disclosure that revolutionized him was the free, unmerited grace of God. That’s what moved Paul; that’s what consumed him: God’s wondrous love, love based not on what Paul accomplished or achieved or earned, but simply and purely because God is love. “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings. . . .” That was Paul’s purpose, his reason for being “if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.” Resurrection is future oriented. Yes, God’s love changes us here and now. Yes, God’s mercy is new every morning. God’s love makes all things new. But notice what Paul writes concerning the resurrection: “Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal. . . .”

God’s grace made Paul new. God’s grace lifted the burden of the law; the weight of sin; the need to be perfect. Grace set Paul free from the need to be or to become acceptable—he was accepted—nevertheless he was pulled forward by the resurrection: “I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.”

The victory won in Christ’s resurrection, never lets us rest on our laurels. We are works in progress which is why Paul was so willing to let go of the past. Here’s how he put it: “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.” “I press on.” Despite his uncertain future and despite opposition confronting the church, Paul rejoiced in the present and pressed on to the future. The resurrection of Christ pulled Paul forward to the future God was creating.

At a conference for churches, a preacher stepped to the pulpit with a large, empty jar and a box. Pointing to the jar, the preacher said, “You see that it’s empty; watch now as I fill it up.” The preacher reached into the box and one by one placed rocks in the jar until it was filled to the top. He then asked the audience “Is the jar full?”

Someone answered, “Yeah, I can see; it’s full of big rocks.”

The preacher said, “Yes, the jar is full of big rocks, but it’s not full.” The preacher reached back into his box and began dropping pebbles into the jar filling in the spaces between the big rocks. “Is the jar full now?”

“Yes,” someone from the back shouted. “It’s full.”

The preacher said, “Yeah, the jar is full of big rocks and pebbles, but it’s not full.” Once more, the preacher reached into his box and this time poured sand into the jar filling the spaces between the rocks and pebbles. “How about now,” he asked, “is it full?”

By now, folks were catching on, “No, not really,” someone said.

The preacher said, “You right. You’re absolutely right.” Once more, reaching into his box, the speaker took a pitcher of water and poured it into the jar. “How about now. Is the jar full now?”

Everyone agreed, “The jar’s full.”

“What’s my point?” the preacher asked “What’s the point of this illustration?”

Someone toward the back piped up, “When you think something is full, look again, there’s always room for more.”

The preacher smiled and replied, “No, that’s not the point. This is the point: if you don’t put in the big stuff first, you’ll never get it in. The small stuff will always crowd it out.”

Just this week someone said to me, “Don’t sweat the small stuff, it’s all small stuff.” And that’s true enough. Here’s my take: all of us and churches especially, sweat small stuff. I suppose we gravitate to small stuff because wrapping our arms around things like paint colors and pew cushions and which songs we will or won’t sing comes easily enough; it’s the big stuff, the heavy lifting we avoid. And maybe we avoid heavy lifting because we like the illusion of control or being right or thinking we’re right or that our way is the only way and small stuff allows us that pleasure. The problem is we never get around to the big stuff—the great things of God that actually matter—small stuff blocks our way.

Let me ask one great thing of you: “Press on toward the goal of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.” Forget the small stuff and press on. Let go of the past. Reach for the stars; dream large dreams. Don’t limit what God will do because time and energy are consumed by small stuff. Think BIG. And by BIG I mean dream God’s dream of a world where no one is excluded from the heavenly feast. Reach out to the last, the least, the lost. Be sent to those who are captive that they too may know “the glorious liberty” of being children of God. Let go of those things which may bring comfort in the short-term but fail the test of God’s time. Be willing to fail. Be willing to try things you’ve never tried—some will work, some won’t. Don’t be tied to the past. Press on toward the future God is creating. God will provide. God has provided. Christ is risen and goes before us calling us ever upward. “Press on toward the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.” Press on.

God bless you and keep you. You are a blessing. Press on to the future God is creating for you and the world he has wondrously made and is redeeming in Christ Jesus our Lord. Press on. Amen.