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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
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Isaiah 5:1-7, Philippians 3:4b-14, Matthew 21:33-46  
Pressing On

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In this sermon, I continue our look at St. Paul's Epistle to the Philippians. It is a lovely letter, only four chapters long, but full of Christian wisdom and moved by evident affection for that church. By contrast, Paul's letter to the Corinthians is sterner stuff. Because St. Paul is so very troubled by the errors in the Corinthian church, for example, he refers to the people there as "children" -- beloved children, but children nonetheless.

<sup>14</sup>I do not write this to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children. (1 Corinthians 4:14, RSV)

Likewise, he refers to the Galatians as "little children" (e.g. Galatians 4:19). But again and again, he refers to the Philippians as "my beloved" or "my brothers and sisters."

Last week we considered St. Paul's teaching in Philippians 2. We noted that his appeal to them is a beautiful example of whole-hearted preaching of both Law and Gospel. Again, St. Paul addresses them as "beloved":

<sup>12</sup>Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; <sup>13</sup>for God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure. (Philippians 2:12-13, RSV)

Now, we move on to Philippians Chapter Three, to St. Paul's magnificent testimony to Christ and determination to walk in the same path as our Lord. St. Paul has already suffered much for Christ, but he does not intend to rest on his laurels, but rather to follow Christ with even more earnestness:

<sup>10</sup>I want to know Christ / and the power of his resurrection / and the sharing of his sufferings / by becoming like him in his death, <sup>11</sup>if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. <sup>12</sup>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. <sup>13</sup>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, <sup>14</sup>*I press on* toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 3:10-14, NRSV)

This, then, is a sermon called “Pressing On.”

## **USAFA**

That was a turn of phrase used by upper class cadets at the United States Air Force Academy back when I was a young man there. It was a phrase used to dismiss the cadet and let him continue on his path. The freshman cadet could be, let’s say, walking his straight path toward the academic buildings, shoes shined, uniform ironed, eyes focused straight ahead and downward, all in order. But any upper class cadet had the right to interrupt that cadet and quiz him on just about any matter. Perhaps it would be a matter of military knowledge. “Dooley<sup>1</sup>, who manufactures the F4 Phantom?” And the cadet would answer, “Sir, the F4 Phantom is manufactured by McDonald-Douglas. Sir!” Or the upperclassman could ask, “Dooley, who won last Saturday’s Michigan State/Notre Dame game?” And the freshman would answer, “Sir, this past Saturday’s Michigan State/Notre Dame game was won by Notre Dame, 29-0. Sir!” And if the upperclassman was satisfied, he would release the freshman with the dear words, “Press on!”

And that’s exactly what life seemed to be: it was a matter of pressing on. Life was not smooth, but a matter of continually working your way past obstacles. It was good training for a military man (there were no women at the military academies back then), and it is good training for the Christian life too.

According to St. Paul, to walk in the path of our Lord Jesus is a matter of “pressing on.” It is not an easy go. There are slippery places, where we could fall into error or heresy. There are tempting places, wanting to pull us downward like quicksand into sin. And we face an opponent along that path:

<sup>8</sup>Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour: (1 Peter 5:8, KJV)

So, our daily task is to press on “toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.” I want to seek clues from St. Paul about how to do this. But before getting to that, we need to put first things first and reckon with this happy thought: The One I pursue, pursues me!

## **THE ONE I PURSUE, PURSUES ME**

He whom I pursue, pursues me. Aye, he pursued me before I ever sought him. He pressed toward me and my salvation before ever I began to press toward him.

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<sup>1</sup> Years later, when I was studying New Testament Greek, it dawned on me that that Academy word “Dooley” was based on the Greek word “doulos,” which means “slave.” And that sounds about right.

<sup>10</sup>In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins...We love because he first loved us. (1 John 4, 10, 19, NRSV)

Roy Rogers and Dale Evans used to sing a Gospel song, as did many Christians in our youth, called "Love Lifted Me." It was about the divine initiative -- the way the Lord sought us and rescued us before we were ever worthy of any rescuing:

*I Was Sinking Deep in Sin  
Love Lifted Me*

1 I was sinking deep in sin,  
far from the peaceful shore,  
very deeply stained within,  
sinking to rise no more;  
but the master of the sea  
heard my despairing cry,  
from the waters lifted me,  
now safe am I.

*Refrain*

Love lifted me! Love lifted me!  
When nothing else could help, love lifted me.  
Love lifted me! Love lifted me!  
When nothing else could help, love lifted me.

When we were prodigal sons and daughters, our heavenly Father did not simply wait for us faithfully at home, but rather sent his only begotten Son into the far country, where we sat dissolute in our sins, where we had wasted our substance and were reduced to eating husks given to the pigs. He sent his only begotten Son to us in that far land and saved us, though it cost him his life:

<sup>37</sup>Finally he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.'

<sup>38</sup>But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.' <sup>39</sup>So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. (from today's Gospel Lesson, Matthew 21:37-39, NRSV)

And so it is that when St. Paul urges the Philippians to follow his example of pressing on after Jesus, he is not urging anything impossible for us. He is not requiring us to seek an elusive goal -- one that forever slips away from us. No, he is urging us to press toward the one who before we ever sought him was already pressing on toward us and will never forsake his pursuit of us.

## **FORGETTING WHAT LIES BEHIND**

Let's devote the remainder of this sermon to seeking instruction from St. Paul as to how we should press on toward Jesus.

First off, St. Paul says that in his own life, he "forgets what lies behind." And for him, what lies behind is a combination of extraordinary goodness and extraordinary regret.

He traces some of the goodness of his past in our passage. He speaks of his noble birth. He is not simply a Hebrew, but a "Hebrew of Hebrews," which means that neither he nor his parents were proselytes to Judaism, but born and bred in that faith. Then he speaks of, not the things he received, but the things he did:

...as to the law, a Pharisee; <sup>6</sup>as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless (Philippians 3 5-6, NRSV)

By human standards and by the standards of his family and ancient heritage, Paul had been a success. But he is not willing to let that tempt him into false pride or laziness. He means to set his accomplishments behind him.

Also important, he means to set behind him that one thing of which he is most ashamed: that he persecuted the Church:

For I am the least of the apostles, that am not meet to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. (1 Corinthians 15:9, KJV)

Likewise with us. Let us not imagine that any of our past sins are so awful as to disqualify us for the noble task that lies before us right now: of pressing ahead after Christ.

## **ATHLETE**

My other observation about how to press after Christ is to note the athletic imagery St. Paul uses:

...but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, <sup>14</sup>I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

It is easy to think of a race, to think of the athlete straining ahead, ignoring aches in the bones, weariness in the muscles, pain the lungs, the bystanders watching and cheering. He sets all that aside and presses on.

For he pursues a high prize. You and I pursue a high prize. We press on not for a crown of laurels or flowers or even for a crown of the purest gold. Compared to our heavenly prize, all other prizes are humble things:

Gold is mire, in comparison with that prize, precious stones are mere bricks in comparison with its beauty. (Chrysostom)

For we seek heaven and the everlasting companionship with our Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, to whom belongs the glory, now and forever. Amen.