

“Pressing On” Lent 5 Mar 21

Rev. Rebecca Kiser

Thursday evening, the Session had the privilege of meeting our young people who've been taking Confirmation classes with me the past couple months. I was so proud of them as they each came before the Session and spoke. Having worked with them as a group, it was fascinating to see each of their unique personalities as they came in one by one. I found myself wondering, as they were there individually, just what God was doing in their lives, what plans God had for each of them, how things would unfold in life for them, what was ahead for them, what they would bring to the church at large....those kinds of ponderings. We have a gifted and intelligent group of young people coming along who are eager to be of service to Christ and the church. They are a great gift to us – and a responsibility. They were all rather humble before the Session – I had to kinda prompt them to tell about their sports and choirs and various other things that fill their lives now, and give us an idea of who they are.

I remember being that age – we all probably do. I was a baby-boomer child of the suburbs, houses upon houses, huge malls, huge supermarkets, doing Drivers Ed on the brand new Capital Beltway, 495, that new breed of 6-lane superhighway making it to the east coast. Now it's considered pretty much of a parking lot at rush hours, and people avoid it if at all possible....My parents avoided it even then, but it was the new things for my peers, and we were comfortable with the style of driving; much like the young folks today know the new tech stuff so much more easily than we older generation folks learn it. The confirmation class teased me about, “Don't you know much about Facebook, Pastor Becky?” I'm learning – but it's not second nature to me as it seems to be with them. New era, new ways, new discoveries – these will shape their lives and futures as they take the church and the Gospel on into the next generation.

Lots of the young folks do sports, as many of us did and still do. Paul does a sports analogy in this passage – pressing on towards the goal is an analogy that works in many sporting event – racing (which Paul uses more specifically in other places, like passing the baton in relays), swimming races, horse races, foot races, ski races; various contests like ski jumping, or shooting or tennis; or team things like volleyball, football, soccer – Olympic

level events as well as more casual pick-up things. What Paul's talking about may be the training we put ourselves through in preparation, or more likely, the feelings inside us as we are actually in the event, when we have to call on the determination, the training and even more calling on our heart and mental ability to press on, to reach, to go on and not give up.

When we watched the Olympics this past month, we heard stories about many of the favored American athletes, inspiring stories of people from many backgrounds and experiences. I was struck by how many of them had come back into their competition from rough times, losses, set-backs, injuries and family crises. No one really had a straight line from glory to glory to glory. There was no guarantee that if you won last time, that you would win the next time. There was no resting on your successes, nor was there any giving up because of a loss. The current event was a new event – the past did not determine how they did in this event now.

Paul talks about forgetting the past – ‘This one things I do,’ he says, “forgetting what lies behind and straining forward towards what lies ahead, I press on towards the goal....” It's the very knowing of Christ, identifying with Christ, coming into the very resurrection of Christ, that motivates us and moves us in the present. The things in the past we thought counted, they're gone. The things in the past we thought held us back, they're gone. What counts is the now, the relationship with Christ now, how we are moved by God now, how we say yes to God now, how we let Christ into our hearts now. We can't rest on what used to look like great achievements, because they don't count now. We can't be worrying about past mistakes, because they don't count now, either. Now counts. Being obedient now. Being receptive now. Being faithful now. Saying yes to God now. Seeing where God is leading now. Resurrection is new life, now life.

Paul himself says he had great advantages of birth and dedication and training – so what, he says now. He addresses some other teachers of his day that were trying to tell Christian folks they had to do thus and so outward things, behave such a way, do certain observations – Paul says, they don't matter. Well, training and such can give us certain abilities to draw on – but in the reality of knowing Christ, they are a “so what.” So what if your grandfather was a great preacher? So what if your family has been Presbyterian for 4 generations? So what if you studied in the most prestigious seminary with the most

lettered professors? So what if you have perfect attendance in Sunday School? So what if you are the rich young ruler who kept all the commandments from his youth onward? So what if you gave magnificent gifts of charity last year? So what if you dress well? So what if you're a community leader? Or on the other hand, so what if you made some wrong decisions a few years past? So what if you've had some personal problems? So what if you are addressing some difficult issues in your family? So what ??? What matters is pressing on towards that goal of knowing Christ, and being known of Christ, of living in Christ and putting on Christ and moving on towards being resurrected with Christ. That's all that matters. At any age, and in any era.

Its interesting that Paul wrote this letter to the church at Philippi when he was in prison for proclaiming the gospel. Paul didn't have a life free from difficulties. In another place, he talks about some problem he had that he calls "a thorn in the flesh", which he prayed for God to remove – but God evidently meant for him to learn to live in spite of it. Paul learned the truth of being content in whatever situation he found himself; he learned that the "now" of being in Christ was what mattered, and that everything else was a "so what."

So the challenge of the Scripture this 6th Sunday in Lent is this opportunity to evaluate our lives, to look at the positives and the less-than-positives, and to join Paul in saying, So what? Give them to God with thanks, and press on now towards our desire to know Christ, to live in Christ, to speak Christ, to love Christ, to show Christ, to walk with Christ, and let Christ's new life fill us all anew. AMEN.