

6th after Epiphany, February 16, 2014
Columbarium mish moment
Boone UMC; Jason Byassee

Straining Forward

I'm grateful to get to be back with you and continuing this series on Philippians. Our theme is *arriving*. The church is a people on pilgrimage. We have *not* arrived. We *have* gotten somewhere. But we're not where we will be one day, with Christ and one another.

I was away last week in Rwanda with Price and Cameron St. Clair and JJ Brown. We took a pilgrimage to observe Zoe Ministry in action, to see our money at work helping 85 orphans. This is an empowerment program for orphans to graduate them *out* of aid and dependency and into self-sufficiency and business ownership in just three years.¹ Now don't worry, I won't inflict Rwanda on you all day, but forgive me if Rwanda does come up a little. Thank you for your kindness to our families while we were away and for your many prayers, we felt them all, and we told orphans halfway around the world of our church's prayers and support for them. You can see some of their gifts to us up here on the altar this morning. It's good to be home.

Last Sunday in Butare we worshiped in a Pentecostal Church. One problem with Pentecostals in another country is that you can't tell when they're speaking in tongues--is that Kinyarwandan or a Holy Spirit language? We were equally clueless either way. We worshiped for 3 hours, there were 50 or more singers on stage, a whistle was used as a worship instrument (really!), two sets of keyboards, bass, drum set, a vuvuzela.

One thing there was not was the book of Philippians. I'm glad to be back to talk about arriving together. As I read notice *who* it is who is arriving. It's not actually us, not in this passage. It's Jesus, who will come and transform everything by filling all things with himself. One day Rwandan orphans will shine like a thousand suns, like the queens and kings they are in Christ. We will too. When we help them feed themselves we're all getting ready for a feast where we'll feed each other forever in Jesus' presence. Listen to what St. Paul says about these things.

Philippians 3:12-21

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. 13 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, 14 I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. 15 Let those of us then who are mature be of the same mind; and if you think differently about anything, this too God will reveal to you. 16 Only let us hold fast to what we have attained. 17 Brothers and sisters, join in

¹ <https://lh3.googleusercontent.com/-SaPY4r14T7g/UvaXim5G3qI/AAAAAAAAABE/SuG5k3R2xIY/s640/blogger-image-1091118279.jpg>

imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us. 18 for many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them and now tell you even with tears. 19 Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things. 20 But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. 21 He will transform the body of our humiliation so that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that enables him to make all things subject to himself.

This is the word of God, it belongs to you, the people of God, **thanks be to God.**

Several themes in here, let's try these: memory, straining forward, appetite, and transformation. This may be four sermons masquerading as one, forgive me, I'm a little jet lagged. But the sermon made sense on the plane from Kigali to Addis Ababa over the Sahara, let's try it in Boone.

²First, memory. St. Paul says this,³ "Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, 14 I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus." This is a strange thing for Paul to say. His whole career is dedicated to showing that the new thing God has done in Jesus is *completely* faithful to what God has done in the past. Paul's whole career is about memory. How can he be so proud then of forgetting?

The central question in Paul's career is this: can God be trusted? Can he? Any of you ever ask yourselves that? When God says he'll be there, will he? Or is God like the derelict step-parent, always making promises, never making good? This is why Paul's thoughts on the Jews are so important. Paul never says God has left the Jews for us Christians. He never could. Because then God would be unfaithful. God would have changed his mind. Here's what Paul does say. God has chosen to save the world through Israel. Jesus is Israel. Now all people, Jews and Gentiles alike, can worship Israel's God. Here's the problem if Paul were ever to say God has given up the Jews for us Christians. It would be like saying to a woman 'Good news! this man loves you so much he'll give up his wife for you!' The problem is, obviously, he'd be the sort of man who'd give up his wife. Not a good idea.

God always keeps his promises. Paul's whole career is devoted to saying that God's new thing in Jesus is faithful to what God always said he would do.

So, why this,⁴ "*forgetting* what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, 14 I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus." Forgetting?!

Some of the best athletes talk about the importance of forgetting. A basketball team I know has as its mantra, "next play." If you make a mistake you only compound it by kicking yourself. Move on to the next play. Sorry in advance for too many sports analogies today, blame Paul. When I was a kid the Atlanta Braves were the dominant pitching staff in baseball (pitchers and catchers reported to spring training last week, believe it or not). One secret was never to get too high and never to get too low. If Tommy Glavine had just walked 4 straight, or if he'd just pitched a gem in

² I. Memory

³ Php 3:13-14 on screen plz

⁴ On screen, italicize forgetting

the World Series his face never changed. All he focused on was one pitch. The *next* one. Forgetting the past. Straining forward.

Now forgetting can be terrible. I've not experienced what some of you have with memory. Alzheimers, memory loss. are so devastating because our memory is who we are. It's not a journey if you can't remember where you've been. It's only a lot of motion. A journey, a pilgrimage, arriving, requires marking where you've been and one day looking back over a life and saying, wow, look how faithful God was to me, even when I was not. Here's how we Christians should remember: everything big or small that brought us closer to Christ and our neighbor, is good. *Nothing's* good that *doesn't* bring us closer to love of God and neighbor. Chuck Colson said our life is 10% what happens to us and 90% our response to it. And that 90% should be wow, look how God used this to make me love him more. That's how to remember while forgetting, pressing on.

⁵Two, straining forward. It is an athletic metaphor. "Straining forward to what lies ahead, 14 I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus." Straining is also an image for birth. Mothers giving birth are told to press on, there's a reward coming, one more big push and there's a child. When I ran a marathon a few years back I was struck that miles 21-26 were all about want-to. Up to that was a matter of training. After that, all desire. I couldn't stretch anymore or I'd seize up. My left arm was weirdly cold. I've never before or since felt so spent. But my friends were with me. And we didn't want to let one another down. This works in all of our lives. If we want to do something big, we should do it with someone else. Training for that marathon I didn't hit snooze at 4 am because I knew my buddy was out there in the dark all *alone*. So too with faith. If someone will ask us, "hey, have you prayed today?" pretty soon we either will, or to get new friends!. That's Methodism in a nutshell. Straining toward Christ together. None of us can approach God alone. Together we can perfectly love God and neighbor. If you want a taste, talk with me or JJ Brown about the New River Half Marathon that we'll run for our poor neighbors. Or just come back to church next week.

The orphans we met in Rwanda are straining forward together. In their first year in the program they are still hungry. Orphans are *heading* households where siblings drop out of school. Some are abused, beaten, taken advantage of. What Zoe does (and this is genius), is to put them in working groups together, 80-120 strong. Suddenly they go from being alone to having a hundred siblings. Someone has their back. Church breaks out. The beginners in the program may get a meal every two or three days.⁷ The orphans we have sponsored Boone Methodist are harvesting their own corn. They'll plant cassava soon. They have goats or pigs or cows. They start new businesses-- in sewing or fruit selling. Our group makes this drink that smells nasty and makes Americans sick but Rwandans line up for it--it's a market. And here's what's best. They won't need us anymore soon. This aid ends. That's what empowerment means. And how about this--it's much like the Circles program that many are working to bring to Watauga County to help our local poor. What the poor really lack is not money or food. It's relationships that make each other better. Our orphans

⁵ II. Straining forward

⁶ Verses 3:13-14 on screen please

⁷ <https://lh4.googleusercontent.com/-jRG0gaVhANo/UvcCFIXQqGI/AAAAAAAAAC0/upBUhJZCov8/s640/blogger-image-701108081.jpg>

presented us gifts--corn, tomatoes, cassava, eggs, eggplant. Look what they're saying--we used to have no food. Now we have enough to give it away to you. They went from being strangers, alone and vulnerable, to church, straining toward Jesus together. They remember what they've been through, you can bet. But they remember like a scar, not an open wound. They remember their pain as a place they've been, not the place where they're going.

⁸Three, appetite. What do you hunger for? This is a verse where Paul is in a bad mood, so let me prepare you for it. You notice I use a lot of movies in my sermons. One thing that troubles me about movies is how superficial everyone is. They're all rich, beautiful, and shallow. They want money, romance, fame. And that is, how to put this nicely. Pathetic? I realize watching our entertainment that as a Christian we have many more depths than that. I want to be able to ask someone, what do you think about God? What's the most important thing that ever happened in your life? What do you hope for, really hope for? And prettiness, romance, success can't be the answers. It can only airbrush them.⁹ Paul says this, "18 for many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them and now tell you even with tears. 19 Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things." When we read verses like this we have to admit that's often us. We have been enemies to Christ, we obey our belly more than our God (or our sex drive or our desire to be liked or admired or our achievements). And this way is destruction. The line between friend and enemy of Christ runs through every single heart. The whole Christian life is about coming to hunger and thirst for God. That's a hunger deeper than any other. We are empty without God.

In Pastor Jeff's passage for last week you'll find my favorite verse in the bible:¹⁰ "I want to know Christ, and the power of his resurrection, and so, somehow, to attain the resurrection from the dead." When Paul says he wants to know Christ, he uses it in the same sense¹¹ that the bible says Adam *knew* Eve. He wants to know and love Christ with every part of his body and soul, like in a healthy marriage where the other knows you better than you know yourself. Christ longs for us that way, hungers for us. Let's long for him, hunger for him too. The Catholic guesthouse we stayed at in Butare, Rwanda had a crucifix with French written above it. "Je soif de toi." I couldn't make it out so I asked, "It says¹² 'I thirst for you.' Christ says "I thirst" from his cross because God longs to drink us into his body.

Think of the hungriest you've ever been. Go ahead, remember. Do we hunger for God like that? Fasting--going without food--is a Christian practice to remind us of what our hungry neighbors feel. It's also to remind us to hunger and thirst for God alone. I hope we'll all fast together in Lent. When I fast (and, as a wise man said, I usually get most of my fasting done between meals) when I fast I get headaches, I've thrown up before, I can't concentrate. Shouldn't it be that way when I go without God? One of the other pastors on our Zoe trip fasted to raise money. He started on Thursday, and on Sunday morning told his people he wouldn't eat until they'd raised or pledged

⁸ III. Appetite

⁹ Php 3:18-19 up plz

¹⁰ Php 3:10-11 up plz

¹¹ "Now the man knew his wife Eve, and she conceived," Genesis 4:1

¹² "I thirst for you," Jesus, from his cross

\$50,000 to support orphans in Rwanda. Aren't you glad you don't have a pastor with a flair for the dramatic like that? Here's the thing, how do we hunger for God like a person on a three day fast? Like those orphans before they're able to feed themselves, who long for food for their hungry little siblings?

A friend of mine told me this once--Jason you need to learn to hunger for God the way you'd hunger for midcourt sets in Cameron for a Carolina/Duke game. Prayer needs to be like that. What would the comparison be for you? A first step is to *want* to hunger for God like that.

¹³Fourth and finally today, this,¹⁴ "3:20 Our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, The Lord Jesus Christ. 21 He will transform the body of our humiliation so that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that enables him to make all things subject to himself." I wonder if you or I noticed how odd that verse is. Many versions of the Christian faith emphasize leaving. Going to heaven when you die. Believers being beamed out of this world before Christ's return. We're leaving on a jet plane. But this passage in Paul sounds like we're not leaving at all. We're staying. It's Christ who's coming, who's arriving, to transform everything.

I am amazed at how often the bible undoes what we think about Christianity. If I could summarize conservative Christianity quickly I'd do it this way--you have to accept Jesus as your personal lord and savior, and after you do that, no matter what happens you go to heaven. Sound familiar? Alright, let me try liberal Christianity: Christian faith is about accepting others, and never ever thinking you're better than anybody else. Sound familiar? Now hear me: those are both good things. If you haven't accepted Jesus as Lord and savior let's talk after. And if you think Jesus will let you think better of yourself than somebody else, then let me suggest you meet him all over again for the first time. Here's the thing, this passage cuts against both.¹⁵ "*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. 13 Beloved, I do *not* consider that I have made it my own." Paul, writing *the bible*, says he has not arrived. I can't count the conversations where you confess to me you don't know enough. Don't believe enough. Sin too much. Feel badly because you aren't doing it right. Look at Paul. He doesn't know enough, love enough, believe enough, do it right. It's *God* we're talking about. We'll always be arriving. To meet Jesus one time and think that's enough fails. So too liberal pretensions. It is not enough to be humble. Humility is good. But what really counts is God's humility. He has come among us in Christ, washed our feet, died our death, to give us God's life. That's way more interesting than simply not judging others and being nice to them.

Look how Paul concludes:¹⁶ "our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, The Lord Jesus Christ. 21 He will transform the body of our humiliation so that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that enables him to make all things subject to himself." Christ will come and fill absolutely everything with himself. He will transform all things. This world is like an empty chalice waiting to be filled with wine. It's like the womb of Mary waiting to be filled with God. It's like the dust God blows life into to make Adam and Eve in the first place.

¹³ IV. Transformation

¹⁴ Php 3:20-21 up plz

¹⁵ 3:12-13 on screen plz

¹⁶ 3:20-21

Christ is arriving. He's coming soon. And every orphan, every great-grandparent, every cussedly mean person, every holy one, all of us will see him together, bend the knee, and be made new..
Amen.