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Philippians 3:12-16

Moving into God’s future

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Philippians 3:12-16 Common English Bible

It’s not that I have already reached this goal or have already been perfected, but I pursue it, so that I may grab hold of it because Christ grabbed hold of me for just this purpose.  Brothers and sisters, I myself don’t think I’ve reached it, but I do this one thing: I forget about the things behind me and reach out for the things ahead of me. The goal I pursue is the prize of God’s upward call in Christ Jesus.  So all of us who are spiritually mature should think this way, and if anyone thinks differently, God will reveal it to him or her. Only let’s live in a way that is consistent with whatever level we have reached.

Jesus says in Matthew 22, the greatest commandment is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind. And a second is like it, to love your neighbor as yourself. For the last few weeks we have talked about how you love yourself. It seems like it should be easy to do because it sounds easy. Just love yourself. But it is often a daily struggle to love yourself in a healthy way.

We talked about seeing ourselves as God sees us, and loving ourselves as God loves us. God knows us, God made us, and God loves us, just the way we are. We talked about our strengths and our weaknesses. We heard the Apostle Paul’s words in 2 Corinthians where Paul hears God say, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” We can view our weaknesses in a different way, because with Christ in our lives our weaknesses can be strengths.

We talked about forgiveness. If we are going to love ourselves, we have to forgive ourselves, and to do that we have to truly accept God’s forgiveness in our lives. To forgive is to set a prisoner free and that prisoner is us.[[1]](#footnote-2) We are going to continue to make mistakes because we are sinful human beings. But God can give us the courage to face our failures, to help us embrace our imperfection. When we refuse to forgive ourselves, we are cutting ourselves off from our relationship with God.

Today we talk about letting the past be the past and moving into God’s future. The past is a powerful phenomenon in all of our lives. I remember when we lived in Krum, which is just north of Denton everyone would talk about the Claypot. The food was served homestyle and they had the best chicken fried steak in the world. The Claypot had been the restaurant, really, the only restaurant in Krum for almost 20 years. But it had closed in 1993 and we lived in Krum in 2002, almost 10 years after it had closed. But, I think I could have told you everything that was on the menu at one time because people always talked about. It had closed 10 years before! For some people, the past was amazing and the present and the future have no possibility of being as good.

The past also has a way of playing into the way we see ourselves now. For some of us, the best moments of our lives were when we were 18 years old. Like kids who are the stars on their football teams and that is the highlight of their entire life. For some of us, our identity and our sense of self-worth is tied up with something that happened 20 years ago.

Or, we hold onto the mistakes that we have made in the past and they weigh us down until we are sinking. We let the mistakes that we have made in our life define who we are and who we think we should be forever. But the things that we have done are not who we are. We are God’s beloved children and the future is wide open for us. Will we let our past mistakes define us? Or will we chose to believe that God’s future plans are bright?

This week it was hard to miss the news about Caitlyn Jenner. To be transgender, for your body not to conform to what you know so deeply to be true of yourself, seems such a burden. Our God loves us all unconditionally and wants wholeness for all of us. Jesus promises us abundant life, and Caitlyn is claiming that promise. It isn’t easy because loved ones don’t always get it and families are complicated, but peace now radiates from Caitlyn. Wholeness and transformation.

Our Scripture today is from a letter to the Church in Philippi that the Apostle Paul wrote. Now, Paul had a past he could boast of. He says early in Philippians 3 that he has reason to have confidence because he was circumcised on the eighth day, is from the people of Israel and the tribe of Benjamin, he is a Hebrew of the Hebrews (Philippians 3:5). He has done everything he was supposed to his entire life. He was known as Saul and he was zealous in his dedication to persecute the early followers of Jesus around Jerusalem. He tried to destroy the Christian movement. But then he had an experience on the road to Damascus that changed his life from being one of the most ardent persecutors of the Christian movement to one of its most fervent supporters.

Paul was traveling on the road and he saw the resurrected Christ in a great light. He became blind and after three days his sight was restored. After that experience everything Paul says and does is about preaching that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah and the Son of God. Before Paul had his transformative experience of seeing the Christ, he had confidence in his pedigree, and he did what was expected. But then his life was changed. What he had seen as foolish, was now foundational. He now knew in his heart that God is in Christ and Christ is in each one of us. He forfeited his title, reputation, professional friends and standing in the community to follow Jesus.

Tim McGraw is a country singer who sings a song, “Better Than I Used to Be.” He sings, “I can’t count the people I’ve let down… you ain’t gotta dig too deep if you wanna find some dirt on me. I’m learning who you’ve been ain’t who you’ve got to be. I’m cleaning up my act little by little. I’m getting there. I can finally stand the man in the mirror I see. I ain’t as good as I’m gonna get. But I’m better than I used to be.”[[2]](#footnote-3)

The Apostle Paul knew that in his life for his faith to grow he had to forget about the things behind him (Philippians 3:13). We can’t get stuck in the past. Paul knew he had to reach out for the things ahead of him. Moving forward in your faith takes work. We have to confront our fears. We have to be stretched. We have to embrace every day the fact that Christ loves us and claims us. We have to forget about the past and move into God’s future. Paul says the goal he pursues is the prize of God’s upward call in Christ Jesus. Our goal is Jesus, to live as he lived, to love as he loved.

Our best years are not behind us. We are not too damaged. We have not made too many mistakes. Forget what lies behind, strain forward to what lies ahead, press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus (NRSV). Our lives are defined by God’s future. By the grace of God it is so, Amen!

1. Smedes, Lewis. “Forgive and Forget: Healing the Hurts We Don’t Deserve,” HarperCollins, San Francisco, CA, 1984. P72. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/timmcgraw/betterthaniusedtobe.html [↑](#footnote-ref-3)