

Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
May 28 & 29, 2011
Dan Anderson
Philippians 3: Running Buddies
Philippians 3:12-17

¹² Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. ¹³ Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

¹⁵ All of us, then, who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. ¹⁶ Only let us live up to what we have already attained.

¹⁷ Join together in following my example, brothers and sisters, and just as you have us as a model, keep your eyes on those who live as we do.

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I wonder if we have any runners here. Do we have any Marathoners here? Any half-marathoners? 10K or 5K runners? Any 8, 16 or 3200 meter runners? Anyone who has run an errand this week? So we all are runners. When speaking of the Christian journey, the Apostle Paul often uses the analogy of running a race. On at least 6 occasions, not counting this passage, he compares our movement toward Christian maturity with a runner in training or a runner in an actual race.

Last weekend Rich Phenow pointed out, from verses just preceding these words, that what we are running toward is the **goal of fully knowing Christ ~ of becoming like Christ**. Paul wrote in verses 9, 10 & 11, *I want to know Christ. I want to become like him. I want to be found with a righteousness that comes through faith in Jesus ~ a right standing with God and a rightness of behavior*. This is the goal. This is the finish line toward which Paul was moving.

As he wrote these words, where was Paul on this journey? How was he doing? Was he nearing the finish line? Had he already crossed in victory? And, where are we in this race?

Let me draw three observations from this passage about the Christian journey.

I. The 1st observation, we have begun the race.

The words Paul uses in verse 12 speak of a race that is in progress ~ not one that has ended. *“Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on.”* Referring back to the words just spoken, Paul says that while *I want to know Christ. I want to become like him. I want to be found with a righteousness that comes through faith in Jesus*, I am not there yet. *I have not obtained all of this*. I have not arrived. I, like you, am in the race.

I would guess that most of us are ready to be a part of this Christian journey. Some may be standing by the registration table trying to decide if we are ready to commit to this journey. Others may be standing at the starting line with our wave of runners, ready to punch the button on our stop watches when the gun sounds. And still others, the elite runners, may be well on their way. The experienced racers have been at this for a long time. You were in the first group of runners and you are feeling good about this pursuit.

A few years ago over 900 CPC'ers completed a survey designed to help us assess where we are as a community on the journey of faith. Here is what we learned:

- **17%** of the folks in our community are exploring the Christian faith. These are the folks who are standing at the registration table or looking at the brochures. They are gathering information, deciding whether or not to join in. You may be asking the question, *"Is this for me? Am I ready to commit to the journey?"*
- **42%** of our folks have already signed up. As Paul wrote in verse 9, *You have right standing based on your faith in Jesus*. You may not have been at this for very long but you have committed. You have begun the race and you are running with energy and enthusiasm. You may be glancing at your watch, or looking around to see how others are doing, but you definitely are in. You believe in Jesus and are discovering what it means to know him.
- **27%** of the people in our community are running steadily. These folks have been in training for a while. While they may not be the "elite" runners, they are definitely in the race and doing well. This group of people feels really close to Jesus and has learned to depend on him for daily guidance.
- And in the first group, the elite runners, we find **14%** who are so single-minded and focused that their whole life is wrapped up in Knowing Christ and becoming like him.

We may be at different places on the journey, but we are in the race. *"Not that we have already obtained all this, or already reached the finish line, but we have begun the race and we press on."*

II. This brings us to a 2nd observation about the Christian journey, **Our goal is the finish line** Verse 13, *"Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal."*

We are focused. We are keeping the main thing the main thing. And what are we focused on? What are we working toward? The main thing is **to know Christ in such a way that his character and his priorities become our own.**

Some of you, who have been on the journey for a longer period of time, know that there can be setbacks. Difficult experiences of life may cause us to doubt or to lose focus. ***What are some of those life experiences that can cause setbacks on our journey of faith ~ life experiences that may cause us to lose sight of the goal and threaten to derail our walk with Jesus?***

- Unanswered prayers
- Serious illness
- "Out-of-time" death of a loved one
- Failures of Christian leaders
- Busyness
- Temptations that may lead to addiction
- Self-centeredness, self-focus
- Personal failures
- "Pleasures of sin for a season"

Yes, there will be set-backs, challenges to our faith, experiences in life that knock us down and keep us from seeing the finish line. Paul advises, ***“Forgetting what is behind, we press on toward the goal.”*** This is not to imply that we are brain dead, that we cannot remember the broken places of life. Nor do I suggest we gloss over our own failures. What Paul is suggesting is that we don't set up camp in those broken places. We don't dwell on the failures and setbacks.

Years ago I heard a youth speaker illustrate this concept with Jr. High school students. He said something like this: *“Imagine you are walking through a hallway at school when you trip and fall. What do you do? Do you lay there and let everybody walk around or over you? Do you let people step on you while you moan about what a failure you are? Most likely you jump up and keep going. You pretend you were just being cool. ‘I like to walk like this. I wanted to make people laugh.’”* We will get knocked down from time to time ~ but this does not mean we are defeated ~ that we can never run again. Paul says it this way in 2 Corinthians 7, verses 8 & 9. *We often suffer, but we are never crushed. Even when we don't know what to do, we never give up. In times of trouble, God is with us, and when we are knocked down, we get up again.* (Contemporary English Version)

“When we are knocked down, we get up again.” We begin to run again with determination. Now I will admit, these words are easier to say than to do ~ to get up when we have been knocked down, and

III. This leads to a third observation about the Christian journey, **we run best with buddies.**

In verse 17 Paul uses cooperative and mentoring terminology, ***“Join together; Follow my example; Use us as your model; Pay attention to those who live as we do.”***

We have a tendency to view running as a solitary experience, and we have a tendency, especially in our American culture, to view the journey of faith as a private and individual pursuit. Our text is calling us to view the journey as a partnership. We are in this together.

68 year old Gill Schumaker used to be one of those people who savored running alone. When he moved to Chicago, he joined with Team North Shore, a running group to help make running more interesting. He and others discovered that when you run with other people, you run faster and easier. *“It is easy to roll over and go back to bed if it's just you. But if you know you have a group waiting for you on the corner, you don't want to be the one to not show up.”* (Liz Robbins, New York Times, June 25, 09).

This is another way of stating what the Bible says in Proverbs 27:17, *As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another.*

Recently I have been receiving a series of devotional thoughts from a friend who was in a life threatening accident 3 years ago. That accident injured his spinal cord, which in turn left him with a few physical limitations. In spite of rigorous therapy, he still has some difficulty walking.

Recently, a Christian friend had been staying with my friend and accompanying him on some walks. This is what my friend wrote in his e-mail last Friday: *Yesterday I caught my foot on a rug as I was stepping from the house onto the step in the garage. This is something that happens quite often. I nearly fell and uttered a few words that perhaps I should not have. Then, I looked apologetically toward my Christian friend and said, “Sometimes I have to talk to myself!” She replied very quietly, “Maybe you should talk to God instead.” This was a good lesson for me. In my*

embarrassment I thanked God for the recovery He has allowed me to have and apologized for my ungratefulness.”

“Iron sharpens iron.” The accountability of others makes us stronger for the journey. This is why at CPC we offer Spiritual mentoring and small group opportunities. We know the Christian journey is best run in partnership with others.

Ecclesiastes 4 makes this observation: *Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor: If they fall down, they can help each other up. But pity those who fall and have no one to help them up! . . . Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.*

In the difficult seasons of life, when prayer seems to go unanswered, and temptations threaten to topple us; when life challenges seem more than we can bear, the support and strength that comes from doing life together empowers us to keep going when we feel like quitting.

Our Congregational Care ministry offers a whole variety of groups that support us in the difficult seasons of life ~ *Grace and Hope for Our Children* ~ for those derailed by parenting challenges; *Grief Recovery* for times of loss; *Diving Deep* for men wrestling with difficult issues. We are stronger when we are united with supportive sisters and brothers who empower us to keep going when we feel like quitting.

Doing life together also increases joy on the journey. *We rejoice with those who rejoice.* When you walk the Superior Hiking Trail and just around the corner you come upon a doe with two fawns, or when the trail opens up to a panoramic view of the Lake, how wonderful to share those experiences of joy with a companion. In a similar way, when a specific prayer is answered, or you experience a moment when you have been used by God to touch a life ~ to share these times with another believer enhances joy.

Conversely, when we struggle in the hardest places of life, it is the support of friends who hold us up that keeps us going toward the finish line. As we rejoice with those who rejoice, so we weep *with those who weep.* The Christian journey is best navigated when we run with buddies.

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In this letter to the Philippians, written at the beginning of the last third of his ministry, the Apostle Paul said, *“I have not yet arrived. I have not yet become all that I may become.”* Some years later, at the end of his life, he wrote his final words in 2nd Timothy: *the time for my departure is near. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness.*

With the support of Barnabas, Timothy, Lydia, Priscilla, James, Peter and others, Paul had run the race and was ready to receive the victor’s wreath and hear the words, *“well done, good and faithful servant.”*

On your journey of faith, with whom will you run? No one can run for you but your sisters and brothers can and are willing to run with you. Who will be your Apostle Paul? Your Lydia? Your Priscilla? With whom will you sharpen your faith? Who will be your accountability partners? Your prayer partners? Who will hold you up when you are about to fall?

Baby Boomers will remember a 1970 song by The Brotherhood of Man that had these lyrics, *“united we stand, divided we fall, and if our backs should ever be against the wall, we’ll be together, together, you and I”*

Our text today reminds us, 1) we are in this together; 2) our goal is the crown of Righteousness at the finish line; and 3) we run best with buddies. At the end of the journey, may we like the Apostle be able to say, *we have fought the good fight, we have finished the race, we have kept the faith. Now there is for us the victor’s wreath. . . Well done, good and faithful servants.*

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.