

Hearing God's Word Proclaimed

Looking Backward, Looking Forward

Phil 3:12-14

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13 This one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, 14 I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly^[1] call of God in Christ Jesus. –Phil 3: 12-14

This is the Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

Lord Jesus come and sit with us awhile, for we need you near. As I face the difficult task of preaching on my last Sunday at this wonderful church, help this congregation know that I am unbelievably grateful for each and every one of them because they have become a part of the fabric of my life for the past ten years. Remind us that we all have difficulty coping with change--for change represents a loss of what we know and love and sometimes what we have taken for granted. Gracious and Loving God, I pray that you might pour through me the gift of preaching, so that whether we are on top of the world today, or hidden by life's shadows, or some place in between, you will give this message your blessing so that it speaks to us at our place of deepest need. And we know that you will, for we pray in the strong name of Jesus Christ, the risen and reigning Lord. Amen.

As I peeked at your names in the chat box, I saw in my mind's eye, each one of your faces. I have never stayed at any church this long, but I have found a beauty in the continuity of things. As ministers, we follow God's call. My leaving does not mean I love you less. It has made me appreciate how much I have enjoyed serving together, growing in our faith, and serving Christ, with sleeves rolled up and aprons on, as we worship and live in community together.

I have felt completely and totally at home in this church, and that is in large part because of the way you have welcomed me with open arms into your lives and into your homes. Together we have taken our youth on mission trips to Belize (2x), Costa Rica, Alaska, West Virginia, New Jersey (3x), Providence, Boston and on a spiritual pilgrimage to Iona, Scotland. Scott Beyer and I have taught confirmation together for six wonderful years. You have trusted us to

shepherd them, and help form them spiritually. And we have tried to mold and shape them into life-long Christians. They are on their way, but the molding and shaping process is ongoing. So stick with it and talk about the hard stuff.

Søren Kierkegaard, the nineteenth century Danish theologian, once said, "***We live our lives looking forward, but we understand our lives looking backward.***" Isn't it true? "We live our lives looking forward, but we understand our lives looking backward."

Let's look at the text. Everything we read in the Gospels suggests that Jesus knew he was going to die. Jesus knew the disciples would be confused, grief stricken, and anxious. And just as he taught them in life, so too he prepared them for dealing with his death. St. Paul put it this way in his letter to the church at Philippi. Three things. **(1) forget what lies behind, (2) strain forward to what lies ahead (Phil 3:13-**

14); (3) and remember, I am with you always, even to the end of the age (Mt 28:20). Let's take these apart, one by one.

First, forget what lies behind. There is a natural tendency to look back. We have history books, photo albums, and memories to look back. And there can be great value in it. We look back to affirm where we have been and help chart a course for the future. Friends, there is a time for us to look back, but only if it carries with it a positive purpose.

In *The Sacred Journey*, Frederick Buechner writes, "**it is mainly for some clue as to where I am going that I search through where I've been.**"

When I arrived here ten years ago, I heard myself saying, "at the First Presbyterian Church in Greenwich" and people would listen politely while I shared ideas. After a time, people would hint gently and then not so gently, that no one cared about my past experience. They cared whether I cared about them. *The truth is, at some point, you have to be content with who you are and be content with where you are.*

A wise mentor and minister once told me, that as ministers, when we come to a new church, we catch the local diseases, and when we leave, we are healed of them. I am not exactly sure what local diseases I have caught, but I have a feeling it has to do the sermon I preached on the Type A personality, which I titled "hurry sickness."

In that sermon, I told you there is a danger in the Type A personality, beyond hypertension and impatience. I know because I, too, have a Type A personality. Any spiritual counselor would tell you to ruthlessly eliminate hurry from your life. Why? Because you cannot do anything important in a hurry. You cannot love. You cannot appreciate. You cannot listen. At that point, I watched your heads nod as your body

language told me, alright already, get to the point.

I was crestfallen. Was I the only one feeling swept along by the rapid current in New Canaan where kids and sports and extracurricular activities challenge family time and church time? One of the church's wise elders took me aside and explained. He said, "your job as the preacher is to touch the nerve gently, not sever it." There is a fine line between gently touching the nerve and severing it. Do you see the distinction?

St. Paul tells the Philippians to "forget what lies behind." We have worked tirelessly with two gifted interims to come to terms with and let go of the past. To forgive ourselves, to forgive each other and look ahead. So spiritual principle number one, is don't live in the past. It isn't healthy. This also means don't dwell on past successes. Don't live in the past.

Second, strain forward to what lies ahead, for the upward calling of God in Jesus Christ.

I have always been impressed by how many people at FPC truly love what they do. We all know people who want to take their job and shove it (like Johnny Paycheck's famous Country and Western song), but most of you, find joy in your daily life. You find purpose and meaning in your work. You serve others with compassion and dedication. You build up those around you, encourage your colleagues, and you enjoy being a part of a team.

Spiritual principle number two encourages us to find our calling and grow and develop that calling. A calling, like a garden, must be nurtured and new challenges accepted. It's how we grow. So strain forward to what lies ahead, reach for the upward calling of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Third, Jesus tells his disciples, "Remember, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." (MT 28:20)

We have finally reached the heart of the sermon. If Jesus promises to be with us always, how do we stay connected with Jesus Christ our Lord? Two things. The Bible tells us Jesus prayed constantly, and he stayed in close contact with the disciples and those around him. I have preached on the subject of prayer more than any other subject since I arrived, and so I will not repeat myself here. Instead I want to draw attention to the importance of being deeply rooted in community.

For the same reason that climbers rope together when they are climbing mountains, for the same reason that people who go to Weight Watchers lose more weight than those who go it alone, for the same reason that people find support in AA, NA, Al Anon, we all know that when we go it alone, more often than not, we fail. We have the best of intentions, but somehow we still fail.

When we live in community, it is as if we are roped together, and when one of us falls the others around us take notice. Call it a clan, or a family, or a church. Whatever you call it **God created you to be closely connected with a family** and deeply rooted in a community.

If we learned anything from Covid 19, it was the importance of being connected to others, and how important our faith community is to us.

Today, I am told, we are going to look back and enjoy some photos from the past. I enjoyed putting together the photos on the cover of the bulletin and reminiscing about the great ministry we have built here together through the years. Remember, the reason we look back is to chart a course forward in the future.

What is the next chapter? What will FPC be in the future? As I prepare to pass the baton, I do so knowing that the church is in excellent hands--your hands. I don't know exactly what your next chapter holds but I do know this. Since its inception:

FPC has always been a warm and welcoming spiritual home to all people no matter where they are on their faith journey. It always will be.

FPC has always been a sanctuary for worship and music and honest preaching. It always will be.

FPC has always been a vital and vibrant spiritual home for children, youth, and families. It always will be.

FPC has always been a place for social justice and mission and Christian Education, a place where people can ask real and difficult questions. It always will be.

FPC has always enjoyed rich fellowship because the people here love one another. First Presbyterian Church is Sacred. Real. Beloved. Remember friends, you are the church. The people are the heart and soul of any congregation. Let me tell you a secret. The vitality and vibrancy of our church never depended on Guthrie or Gary or Paul or Michael or Carol or the B Team (Mary, Chris, and me.) The success, and vibrancy and vitality of this church depends on you, the congregation. You are the church. The ministers are just called to serve here for a time with you, side by side and provide leadership.

You are one of the most successful, qualified, and talented group of individuals I have ever known. Definitely the best looking and unquestionably the most charming. Know that I am praying for you and cheering you on. Always. May Christ be with you, and before you, and behind you, and most of all within you, within each and every one of you, this day and forevermore. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.