

PRESSING ON
[written in oral form]

Philippians 3:7-16
Ministry Team Theme Sunday

September 27, 2020
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This is one of my favourite passages. It's powerful.
It encapsulates a key element of the Gospel, and it is full of edgy, raw passion.

In verse 8, the NRSV translates the Greek word "skubala" as rubbish. That's putting it mildly. The correct translation is a four letter English word that I cannot say from the pulpit.

But, I can plant it in your thoughts. :)
It is a jolting word to emphasize his point.

In verse 2, Paul called those who teach the old way "Dogs."
And, in verse 15 he boldly said that if you disagree with him, then God will straighten you out.

You have to admire his grit and passion!

Of course the strong driver is the repetition of "Press On" Press On.

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We are in awe and admire those who Press On against all odds.  
There are countless stories and movies about brave souls who persevered, such as Terry Fox or Ernest Shackleton who amazingly saved his crew after his exploration ship became frozen in Antarctic ice, back in 1916. Interestingly, the ship's name was Endurance.

Overcoming the hazards, the lions and tigers and bears, brings accolades and praise.

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However, those who did Not succeed more than likely had the same drive and determination, too.

I'm reading this book [] called "The Cold Vanish". It is about those who never returned from hiking in the wilderness. The author, Jon Billman, estimates there are 1,800 individuals missing in North America, over the past 30 years. These are people who vanished without a trace, and were never found.

I imagine they tried just as hard to get out of the wild-lands as those who succeeded. Be it bad luck or mishap, they did not make it.

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Paul's exhortation is not a Success story either. He confessed that he is "Not there" / he has not arrived.

He presented an ongoing struggle. He was "Pressing on."  
Even so, he was not alone in his journey. He had a faith community

Keep this in mind: all those missing 1,800 were out hiking alone.  
They were all alone, and most were experienced hikers.

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An aside: I have done a fair amount of wilderness backpacking. A couple times I only went with one other, but it is strongly recommended to have at least 3 in your group. <

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Perseverance, drive, discipline, ??... what if you just do not feel like pressing on? What does that mean? Just tired? ???

Fatigue can truncate a journey, but not trying is often a sign of not having or believing in the vision / the goal.

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A number of years ago, I did a back country canoe trip with my elder daughter. We went north of Wawa. She was in high school at the time

We set a base camp, and decided to explore the lake. It was afternoon, and we had a nice tail wind. We stopped and explored places along the way. A couple times, I said that we should head back because we would need more time paddling against the waves and the wind. Finally, I insisted. The sun was getting low in the sky.

Unfortunately, the wind was increasing, along with the waves. We had to paddle brutally hard just to make progress.

As the sun was setting, we were maybe half way back.

Jessica suddenly rests her paddle across the gunwale and declares, "I am finished. I'm too tired to paddle anymore."

I yelled back, "I cannot do this alone. You have to paddle."

I told her, "We have about 45 minutes of evening glow, and if it gets too dark, we will NOT find our camp site."

"Do you want to spend the night in the canoe?"

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I then said, "I want to sit by a fire and sleep in our tent.

Paddle until your arms go numb."

We had a clear vision / a purpose, and we made it. Our arms were like wet noodles. I tied the canoe to a tree, and left it in the water.

But, we did make it.

Having a clear vision / goal is essential to Pressing On.

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From our text, Paul had a New, clear vision / goal.

He declared his past vision / the old way was "skubala."

His old religious view, which he once treasured, was wrong.

Focussing on obeying the laws puts the onus / the burden of success on the individual.  
To be sure, the rules were customized for the successful.

Subsequently, with achievement came a sense of pride and arrogance.  
Self-righteous piety does not make someone right with God.

Paul wanted to be right with God. He had devoted himself to that old way, but realized it was not the way. It was Not God's way.

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I can remember all the rules my parents kept, and most were about how to look and act, and what NOT to do.

It was all about behaviour and appearance,... and many of those practices and attitudes linger on in the church.

Back in the olden days, in the 1950's and 60's, the evangelical church was rapidly growing with the boomer generation.

The church was thought to be thriving,.... and numbers were important. The institution **was** thriving. Conformity and quantity were stressed

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As child, I would receive rewards / gifts for attending the most Sunday School classes. Being a preacher's kid made it easy.

Baptist churches would post, each month, the number of people they had baptized.  
Programs were launched, and again numbers /quantity was important.

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We still tend to measure the health of the church using numbers.  
We hear reports of lower attendance and fewer churches, and conclude the church is in decline. Yes, the institution is.

Moreover, most of our style and programs were established long ago.  
*"Worked then,.....why wouldn't they work now?"*

I still have cassette and VHS tapes, but I do not use them anymore.

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I am not suggesting we are stuck in a rut; however, this pandemic may be our "Road to Damascus" moment.

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Let's UNLOCK the church, and look inside to see what we see.

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What aspects of church do we cherish the most?

Potlucks are high on the list, and so is singing together.
And,.....we come for the fellowship, too.
Celebrating and engaging in community is a wonderful thing.

In community we can share ourselves, our passion.... and food.
Yet, community is a mere by-product,.....or should be.

Take those away....., and what is left?

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Has the pandemic removed what we cherished the most???

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Perhaps, this is an opportunity to start anew / to start fresh, as if from scratch.

Maybe doing less is better: less counting; fewer activities; less control.....

What is our vision / our passion? What do we need, and why?

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For Paul, life as he knew it went dark. He became blind before he could see the new.

Paul declared he Wanted to know Christ and the power of the resurrection.

He stated, "I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ..."

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Christ brings into focus God's way / God's passion for Us.

What was once blurry, Christ makes clear.

Moreover, Christ is the overcoming of the ugly, the evil, the corruption and pain. That is the power of the resurrection.

It is the pathway to new life -- the heavenly life now, in the present.

Christ helps us to realize how to be with God / in the love of God.

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Knowing Christ is not an intellectual attainment.

It is a knowledge which masters heart and will.

Knowing Christ is taking on the way of Jesus,.....unto death, which means totally letting go.

This is the deepest Gospel truth,..... and the hardest for us to accept.

Matthew 10:39

"Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

Accepting helplessness and letting go / surrendering is what Paul is **pressing on** to acquire. -- to be as Christ / to trust God.

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This awareness and process is much like dealing with addiction.

The path from addiction to freedom **never ends**, AND it demands:

One: admitting helplessness and the need for God.

and

Two: confessing to others and relying on their help, too.

We need God, and not just a part time God. We must empty self.

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We need each other. We cannot press on alone; it's too difficult alone.

In addition, we need the vision / the goal.

Paul wanted that unity with God / to bask in God's peace and love.

A person addicted to alcohol or drugs needs to constantly keep the freedom goal in sight. They need to imagine how wonderful life will be without the chemicals. With God and community's help, the struggle can continue.

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Nevertheless, life is not simple. Reality is messy.

Chemical addiction is a disease,.....and some never get free in this life. That is the painful truth.

Moreover, this message I'm presenting from Philippians 3 is NOT a Panacea. I wish it was.

I wish I could declare do this or do that..... and all will be wonderful.

I wish I could say "just believe in Jesus and all will be wonderful."

That is old way thinking. That absolutism is Rubbish.

I am being painfully honest. And, in honesty, the Gospel message / what Paul is presenting is the best way I know.

It rings true..... and lives true. But, letting go IS a struggle.

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If you are hiking in the wilderness or paddling against the wind, surrender is **not** your best option. This sounds like the physical domain is quite different than the spiritual, but they are similar.

It is wise not to fight or go against nature.

Likewise, it is wise not to fight or go against the spiritual.

Pressing on..is holding on to and trusting God,... and not ourselves.

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This pandemic has forced us to consider what is precious and dear / to ponder what it is we need and love,.....and why?

A transformative invitation lies in this moment.

As we ponder what next, let us start fresh.....by letting go of the past.

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May we accept our helplessness... And our desperate need for God and each other.

I will qualify that: may we embrace honesty in those relationships.

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Press on...striving to let go and trust God. That is the way of Christ.

Jesus said in Matthew 18:2

"Unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." Having a child's trust is a step forward, and not a regression.

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I'll end with a story about my first German Shepherd, "Louie."

A couple friends and I were hiking with Louie in the hills of Kentucky. One of the friends had a log cabin in those remote hills.

We went on a long hike to a lake, and just like the canoe episode, we lingered too long. It became extremely dark as we hiked back.

Night time in the woods is very dark.

We began stumbling about, and feared losing the safety of the trail.

Rocks, holes and sudden drop-offs were a great danger.

It suddenly dawned on me, that Louie can see in the dark, and even better, he could follow his nose. So, I let go..... I let go of the leash, and we followed him.

We were also worried about rattlesnakes that tend to come out at night, and he would encounter them first.

I wish I could say Louie was risking his life for us, but he did not know about the snakes. And, I did not tell him.

He just wanted to get back to his water and food bowl.

We followed him in the dark, listening to his steps ahead of us. We totally trusted him to guide us home. We pressed on following him, and we arrived safely back.

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From that experience, I acquired a better understanding of totally trusting God.

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Truth be told, we are in the dark, and we do not know what will happen next or what is before us.

Yet, in the darkness, we may find the light of Christ leading us to love and peace -- GOD.

Press on. Press ON

And, ... sing It is well with my soul.