

## **Left Behind**

Philippians 3: 4b-14

“...forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.” Philippians 3: 13-14

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Some of you are going to be disappointed this morning. You came to church thinking I was going to preach a sermon on being “left behind” in the rapture. That is not what I am going to speak about today, though I did love the bumper sticker that read, “In case of the rapture, I get first dibs on your car.” Today, we’re going to think about “left behind” in a different sense.

In the 1970’s, an ex-librarian named Sue Hubbell spent a chapter of her life working as a beekeeper in the Missouri Ozarks. For over ten years, she tended to 13 million bees in 300 different hives spread out across hills and pastures. She spent most of her time driving from hive to hive; making sure her bees had what they needed in order to produce a bountiful crop of honey. For transportation, she relied on a 1954 red Chevy half-ton pickup truck that “ran without many parts that are considered to be automotively necessary.” (1) The parts the truck did have were always leaking or breaking or ripping loose, but she made friends with the salvage yard owner and tinkered with the truck and year after year, she and it kept on going. She named it “Press on Regardless.”

That would not be a bad name for today’s passage from Paul’s letter to the church in Philippi: “Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call in Christ Jesus.”

Can you let your mind take its leave of hills and pastures and turn to a mental image of runners straining forward, pressing on, pushing themselves as hard as they can? Put yourself beside the track over at Grady High School. Can you see the perspiration on the runners' brows, the look of intensity in their eyes? Paul uses the metaphor of a runner in reference to himself. What is Paul straining forward toward? And what is it, do you imagine, he wants to leave behind?

The answer to that latter question might surprise you. You would assume that Paul would want to shed all that had been worthless in his life- a rotten past, for example. But that was not the case. In fact, he says just the opposite. What he intends to leave behind are the good things that have defined who he is, his status and achievements: "I am a member of tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew, born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee..." To be a Pharisee means to believe the Bible and to act according to its precepts. (2)

Let me see if I can put it in Atlanta language. "I went to Westminster School and graduated as the valedictorian. Then I went on to Harvard where I was tapped into Phi Beta Kappa. My mother was a member of the DAR, and my grandfather was the Moderator of the Presbyterian Church. That was on my maternal side. On my father's side, my great grandfather was Archbishop of Canterbury. I received the Medal of Freedom and the Good Citizenship Award. I belong to Rotary. I believe the Bible and try to follow all its teachings. And all of that is well and good, but none of it is ultimately worth a hill of beans, compared to the value of what I have now."

In a wonderful sermon entitled “Throwing Away the Good stuff,” Fred Craddock says, “Suppose a man in an expensive Brooks Brothers suit sees a child drowning. He goes into the water but finds he can’t swim with all of that on. And so, he removes his valuable suit in the water in order to rescue the child. The suit is still good, but compared to the life of the child? The suit has to go.” Or, imagine pioneers moving west, trying to get to California in those creaking Conestoga wagons. Winter comes. The snow begins to fall. The wagon wheels bog down. Over the side of the mountain goes the piano, the hope chest. In order to press on to the higher goal, the things that are of penultimate value often have to be left behind. (3)

Paul doesn’t say what he is leaving behind **is** rubbish. He says he counts it as rubbish. In other words; he neither needs it nor relies on it anymore for the meaning of his life. The great things you thought were going to define who you were- your job, your family tree, and the plaques on your wall, these things finally turn out to have legs too rickety to hold you up over the long haul. Only that which is of eternal value can save. The moment comes when you want to say with Paul, “I hereby abandon any claim to merit or status on my part. It’s too hard to live a life in which I take up all the room. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection.” That’s the main thing, finally the only lasting thing.

It is important to note, though, that Paul does not stop with wanting to know the power of the resurrection. Who, after all, does not want life out of death, hope in the face of despair, light instead of darkness? Paul also “wants to know Christ and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death.” You don’t often hear somebody say something like that. If you say that kind of thing, your friends will probably suggest an aromatic massage or a trip to the

therapist, because it doesn't sound normal, does it? But then again, think of Jesus, who showed us the norm for both human existence and divine existence. He who had the highest status at the right hand of God gave it all up and entered into the sufferings of the world. You don't want to do anything like that, do you? Or do you?

In a moment, we are going to join millions of Christians around the world on this World Communion Sunday around the Lord's Table. Every single person who comes to the table, whether in Bangladesh or Russia or Chile or France, every single one of them will hear these words: "Take, eat. This is my body, given for you. This cup is the new covenant sealed in my blood." Every one of us will take into our bodies his suffering, remembering with profound gratitude that he took into his body the sufferings of the entire world.

I wrote the words I just spoke Friday morning while sitting at my desk at home. I looked at my watch, and it was time to get dressed. I went upstairs and turned on the radio. I heard that twenty-five children had killed a few hours earlier in a bombing in Iraq in the ongoing struggle between the Shiites and the Sunnis. As I combed my hair, I heard about a Katrina evacuee family trying to keep from drowning in a sea of frustration and red tape.

I left the house and went on with my day. When I go back to my desk in the early afternoon, I have to tell you, I sat down and cried. I thought of dear friends of Al's and mine who lost their grandson to suicide last week. I thought of a good man I know who cannot find a job to save his life. I thought of the homeless woman I had just seen standing on the corner of Juniper and Pine. She wore layer upon layer of clothes, covered with a bedraggled but brightly flowered print dress

as big as a tent. She waited for the light to change, looking like a lost, frightened little girl, and I sensed that her life was anything but a bed of roses. I asked myself, “What use would a savior be who floated above all of this pain? He would be of no use to anybody.” Jesus could have stayed up there in those high, heavenly places where everything was fine, but he decided not to hold on to any of it. (4) Down he came and got into the thick of it with us all.

When we come to the table, I don't care if you're the Pope or a Nobel Peace Prize winner or a born-again evangelical or a Calvin-quoting Presbyterian, you can't bring any of it with you. You can't tip the waiter to get a better seat. You can't roll out your resume. All you can do at the Lord's Table is receive the power of his suffering love, which was poured out at the greatest cost imaginable.

Paul wanted to know both the power of Christ's resurrection and the saving power of his sufferings. After he had gotten clear about what he wanted, Paul was ready to get going toward what lay ahead with strength and determination. Of course, he still had his broken places and sins which he regretted (remember how he had once persecuted the Christians and how he had a temper that just wouldn't quit), but he trusted God to tinker with him enough so that he could go forward “toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.” If Christianity is anything, it is a living faith, a future-oriented faith. Like that '54 Chevy, there will always be leaks and broken parts to deal with, but there is great work yet to do.

Morningsiders, there are literally thousands of people in our zip code who have given up or dropped out and need an open door back to church and then a place to serve Christ in the world

and a way to nourish their souls. Our congregation needs to press on and meet them where they are. In order to do that, we are going to have to leave behind some of our old ways of doing things. Here is a question: “How many Presbyterian it takes to change a light bulb?”

The answer, “Why should we change a light bulb?” (5) We should change because God is calling us to move forward and embrace the future. “Forgetting what lies behind, and straining forward to what lies ahead, “ we press on, trusting that God will give us all the resurrection power we need to take us where we need to be as a vital church for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

But today, there is no need to strain. We do not have to do anything. We are here to receive. Your good deeds, all your bad deeds, all your regrets- now would be a good time to throw them down the side of the mountain so that you can come unencumbered to the table and be filled completely up. “And my God will fully satisfy every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen.” (Philippians 4:19-20)

(1) Sue Hubbell, *A Country Year*, Harper&Row, 1983, p.19.

(2) Fred B. Craddock, “Throwing Away the Good Stuff,” *The Cherry Log Sermons*. Westminster John Knox Press, 2001, p. 94-98.

(3) Ibid.

(4) Ibid.

(5) My friend George Wirth, senior pastor of Atlanta’s First Presbyterian Church, tells this one.