

PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT
“THE LIFE OF FAITH IS AN UNENDING JOURNEY”
REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON
Philippians 3:8-14
March 21, 2010
9:15 & 11:00 A.M. SERVICES

Not only are we given new life in Jesus Christ, but we are called to share this gift of eternal life with others. We are the means by which God transforms the world.

Paul found in Christ something that made his past accomplishments insignificant. He found a new direction and a new goal. He put aside all that held him back and pursued with athletic zeal the higher calling he had received in Jesus Christ.

Pioneers and settlers all began the journey. Pioneers at some point became settlers, either from necessity or when they found a location that provided for most of their needs. The life of faith is an unending journey. We are called to follow Jesus in an upward way that extends beyond our vision into God’s own eternal realm.

Most of our journeys are practical necessities. Occasionally we may take a walk in the park, or a joy ride, or go exploring. But, as physical beings, we are unable to be in more than one place at a time. If we need to be somewhere other than where we are, some kind of journey must be made. There are many ways to travel. In the past, our cave-dwelling ancestors were restricted to walking. Today, however, many modes of transportation are available to us, from hiking to riding to flying. Still, the need or desire to be somewhere else, necessitates a journey.

Apparently there were some in the church at Philippi who thought they had arrived spiritually. Paul saw them as a dangerous influence in the congregation. He writes about this in today’s passage from Philippians. The church members he is concerned about viewed salvation as a finished, completed reality. They had received this wonderful new gospel of Jesus Christ, and the “*good news*” had

changed their lives. The transaction with God was complete, and their salvation was a done deal. This kind of naïve presumption was unthinkable to the great apostle.

Paul had just told his readers that he had found something in Christ so valuable that it had caused him to write off all his other assets. Paul had very impressive assets - - socially, intellectually, religiously, and even politically. Listen to what he says, *“Whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ.”* But Paul immediately adds that this does not mean he has arrived. He is ready to share in Christ’s suffering and death, in order that he may know the power of his resurrection. *“Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect,”* he says, *“but I press on to make it my own.”* Here Paul uses an athletic analogy, as he does in other places. *“Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”*

If Paul had not arrived spiritually by the time he wrote the letter to the Philippians, then those to whom he wrote most likely had not either! People, who think they have arrived, when in fact they have not, will likely never arrive, because they think they already have. Kierkegaard once spoke of the difficulty of becoming a Christian when one thinks one is already a Christian.

When we think we have arrived, with regard to anything, we stop growing in that area. To stop growing is deadly. But the thought of growing is threatening. That’s why some churches do not want to grow! Growth means change, and change is sometimes the most difficult thing in life. Rainer Maria Rilke wrote, **“That which would remain what it is renounces existence.”** To become mature we must continue to grow. It is certainly easier to decide that we have arrived and to simply remain as we are.

When the voice of God is heard in the Bible, it is nearly always a call. The God of the Bible calls people away from where they are and away from who they are. All of the names you recognize most quickly from the Bible - - Abraham, Moses, Samuel, David, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Paul - - represent callings from God. When we close the book on all these Bible stories about divine callings, what does God’s call mean for us? If God only calls certain individuals to specific assignments and careers, if God calls prophets and priests, ministers and missionaries, what meaning does God’s call have for the rest of us?

We must remember that Paul wrote the letters to Corinth, not only to the ordained leaders of the church, but to the members of the congregation. While Paul in many places enumerates the types of callings individuals might receive, his underlying assumption is that God calls each one of us. There is a calling we have in common as followers of Jesus Christ. Paul refers to it as “the upward call of God.”

The “*upward call of God in Christ Jesus*” is the calling that comes to all of us. It is the calling to grow in grace. It is the calling to grow into the likeness of Christ, to fulfill the reality of Christ in our own living. There is no higher calling than this. If this sounds too remote, too far from where we really live, we need to listen to our calling more carefully. The “**high calling,**” or “**upward call,**” of God is not a calling for any of us to become someone different from who we are. It is a calling that bids us become who we truly are. This is the great possibility that is ours in Christ.

Flora Slosson Wuellner has written that “**God’s transformation of us does not deny our humanity or wipe out our identity.**” She says, “**There are, unfortunately, some forms of spirituality that teach that God is not concerned with our needs, longings, or unique identities, and that spiritual growth consists of denying our humanness.**” To the contrary, she claims, the scriptures reveal God’s passionate interest in our humanness and in our unique identities.” Perhaps God is not so much interested in human beings becoming spiritual as God is interested in spiritual beings becoming truly and fully human. Remember the words of Irenaeus of Lyons: “**The glory of God is the fully alive human being.**”

God’s calling is always an invitation to become who we really are, who we were created to be. And God’s calling always aims at putting us in touch with our deepest longings and our truest selves. This is what it means to grow into the fullness of Jesus Christ. We have not arrived, but let us press on toward the mark. For now, at least, the journey itself is our home.

The Christian faith is a way, not a destination. Early Christians were sometimes called “*people of the way.*” Jesus was concerned with finding people where they were and calling them to the adventure of becoming all God meant for them to be. Because this is largely an inward journey, it does not depend entirely on our physical strength or endurance. People like the apostle Paul continued to grow in grace even in prison. The journey of faith is our home until that journey ends in God.

I invite you on this unending journey of faith where God is doing a new thing here at Park Hill. But I remind you there is always more for us to do. And if you feel that God is calling you to be a part of it, I would love to be your pastor. I would love for this to be your church.