

“Looking Back – Leaping Ahead”

January 18, 2016

Last November I read Bob Buford’s great book for men *Halftime*. Buford’s premise, succinctly put, is that in the first half of the game of life, men inevitably strive for success. But when halftime arrives, the serious players, those truly intent on winning the game, realize the need to make a critical adjustment, refocusing from success to significance and from self to others. This shift is difficult for most men. Buford makes his point in numerous ways, one involves a scene from the movie *City Slickers* starring Jack Palance and Billy Crystal. Palance plays a wizened old cowpoke. Crystal is a tenderfoot from Los Angeles dreading mid-life who has paid for a two-week vacation on a dude ranch – and as you might expect, he gets a lot more than he bargained for, and in the process learns something important about himself. In this scene, Palance and Crystal are riding slowly across the range discussing life.

[show scene]

Now here’s the question. Have you figured it out? What is the one thing for you? Until last week I had it narrowed down to a few things centered on faith, family

and friends. But then my wife Becky inadvertently nailed it for me. Let me explain. Becky is a great cook; she is also a great believer in vitamins. I take a basket full of vitamins every morning and have for years . . . I do it to please her but down deep I think it's one of the reasons I'm still so good looking . . . but that's another story! Well anyway, last week Becky added yet another vitamin to my regimen – one might say that now “my basket runneth over.” When I questioned the need for it, she simply said, “I want you to be able to press on!”

I've been thinking about Becky's words since. My son and son-in-law are in their mid-forties; unlike them I'm past the halftime of my life. In fact, to use Buford's analogy, at seventy-two I'm way into the last quarter of the game. But you know what? I'm probably about the age St. Paul was when he wrote these words:

I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, 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, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

Philippians 3:12b-14

That was Paul's "one thing" . . . forgetting the past, he pressed on toward the finish line with all of his strength; and my brothers and sisters, I've adopted that as my "one thing" as well. You see, I believe I have not yet done all that God created me to do for Him; and I pray that you believe the same about yourself.

This is my twentieth annual celebration with members of The Church of the Cross and each year we've acknowledged God's ever-increasing blessings on our ministries together. At this stage in my life, it would be easy for me to do what many older clergy do: slip into retirement and spend my remaining days reveling in past accomplishments and dwelling in a world of wonderful memories. Now that time may well come for me, but it hasn't yet . . . my fourth quarter is not over – true, the clock's winding down but it hasn't run out - and we've got a lot of ground left to cover! What are the major goals we should set our sights on and what strategy would serve us best? Those are the questions before us tonight.

Because the answers to those questions ultimately rest on my shoulders, I need to share a secret with you: I have multiple personalities. There's the Tom Cruise side of me. [**"I feel the need for speed" scene**] And there's the

Clint Eastwood side of me. [**“A man’s got to know his limitations” scene**] Those who know me very well have seen these personalities emerge at various times in my ministry [**slide showing both characters**] . . . the reckless abandon of youth and the measured approach of middle age . . . both have had their due place over the years, but clearly neither has the wherewithal for this moment. What’s needed is a combination of both personalities tempered with the kind of wisdom that comes from pondering one’s scars – it’s time for my third personality and he’s not make-believe. [**Gen. Patton “L’audace”**].

L’audace, l’audace, toujours l’audace! *L’audace* is the French word for a kind of bold risk taking born out of confidence, passion, experience and a sense of urgency to achieve a goal with lasting significance. *L’audace* captured Patton’s personality as he led the Third Army’s sweep across Europe in World War II. His strategy was not complicated. He deployed his resources across a wide front and his field commanders had a simple mission: penetrate enemy lines rapidly moving toward clearly defined objectives. If a commander met resistance, he was to lead his men around the trouble spot until he got through. The mission of the second wave was to secure the path behind the advancing

forces. Patton's corps leaders were instructed to focus on opportunities, not on problems.

As I see it, by God's grace and with the Bishop Lawrence's permission and Becky's vitamins, I've got about five years left as your Rector. That tells me that we've got to get busy . . . forgetting what is behind, we must press on to seize the opportunities before us, leaving those who will be following us to capitalize on our gains!

Now before I go any further, I need to stop and make sure you understand something about me. All rectors fall into one of three categories: some are risk takers, some are caretakers, and others are undertakers. Friends, hear this: I do not intend to preside over the demise of this parish! Hear this as well: even though we're on the right track, we will get run over if we stand still! And lastly, failure to take risks does not prevent failure – it just turns life into a slow death. Folks, I believe that when you're through risking, you're through! The best fruit is always out on the limb; and because we serve the Lord of the harvest, that's where we must go with *l'audace*!

And I can see the limb and the fruit and the Lord of the harvest clearer now than ever before. Perhaps because, like my friend Pete McKoy told me when he was on his death bed, “When your time is short, you’re able to see what’s important with 20/20 vision.” And what do I see?

I see first, that with the construction of the new port on the South Carolina side of the Savannah River, the population of southern Beaufort and Jasper Counties is projected to explode to 250,000 in the next ten years. With the urgency of a dying man, we must act now in advance of skyrocketing land prices. A few of you may remember that we purchased this 79 acre property in 1998 but did not build on it until 2005 – that same preemptive strategy needs to be employed now to purchase two tracts of land, each at least ten acres in size, on which those who come behind us will center future ministry initiatives.

Beyond purchasing the land and saying our prayers, most of us will not be laying hand to trowel to bring those future building projects to fruition – in God’s time younger folks will shoulder that mantle. Meanwhile, I see before us other immediate opportunities which must not be squandered; I’ll file them under the rubric of

focusing our time, energy and resources on the things that are presently working well for us. And what might these be?

For starters, we added 274 new members to this congregation last year. That's an amazing number in and of itself; in fact, that number is larger than the total membership in over half of the congregations in the Diocese of South Carolina. But there's something even more wonderful about that those 274 folks; their average age is 41 and among them are 83 men, 110 women and 81 children. Friends, our demographic is continuing to get younger and include more families with children – that's counter to every trend in denominational circles. Consider this statistic as well: in 2015 we baptized 63 people - their average age was 9. That's significant because it continues an upward trend and signals that we are baptizing more adults. A final statistic: our average weekend worship attendance for 2015 was 1220; that's up from 1076 the previous year. These numbers are important because they confirm that our present strategy is reaching and nurturing people; we're continuing our upward growth trajectory on two campuses by offering multiple approaches to worship, multiple venues for discipleship, and multiple opportunities for fellowship and service . . . praise God!

But as this area continues to grow, so must we. In short order we will no longer have the infrastructure needed to sustain 10% annual growth. Clearly, our worship services are the primary doorways into congregational life and our CrossPoint services are the primary growth drivers; the two services held each Sunday on this campus regularly draw more worshippers than the three services conducted each weekend on the Historic Campus. With what I believe to be an appropriate sense of urgency, I've asked professionals to begin drawing preliminary plans to double the size of this venue; and I'm looking forward to leading worship services in it before I run out of vitamins.

I mentioned previously that our demographic is growing younger and has been for years. I believe this is due in no small part to our ministry to families and children through Cross Schools. The School's steady growth has paralleled ours to the point that, the four new classrooms we helped fund last year are already full. More classrooms are needed to house students starting at age 18 months through the eighth grade and a high school needs to be built to complete the program envisioned decades ago . . . that construction needs to be

done by us in conjunction with the Cross Schools family. I've already suggested to Becky that she look for a bigger basket for I'm intent on seeing this construction completed during my tenure as Rector of our great and growing parish.

There's more I see but I'll stop with that because I can tell that a few of you are beginning to feel like Chippie the parakeet. One second he was peacefully perched in his cage singing up a storm. The next he was sucked in, washed up and blown over and he never saw it coming! The problems began when Chippie's owner decided to clean the bottom of Chippie's cage with a vacuum cleaner. She removed the attachment from the end of the hose and stuck it in the cage. As she did, the phone rang and she turned to answer it. She'd barely said "hello" when "sssopp!" Chippie got sucked in.

Chippie's owner gasped, put down the phone, turned off the vacuum, and opened the bag. There was Chippie – still alive, but stunned.

Since Chippie was covered with dust and droppings from the bottom of his cage, she grabbed him and raced to the

bathroom, turned on the faucet, and held him under the running water. Then, realizing that Chippie was soaked and shivering, she did what any compassionate bird owner would do . . . she reached for the hair dryer and blasted the parakeet with hot air. Poor Chippie never knew what hit him!

A few days after the trauma, a friend and fellow parakeet lover who had heard about the event contacted Chippie's owner to see how the bird was recovering. "Well," she replied, "Chippie doesn't sing much anymore – he just sits and stares!"

I wonder, is that where you are after hearing a bit of my agenda for the coming half-decade? Do you feel like you've been run over by one of Patton's tanks? Well, if so, you're in good company because that's how the handful of saints who began this journey with me twenty years ago felt – they were stunned and challenged by the scope of the vision set before them; and at the same time they were inspired to think that they could be a part of making such a Kingdom difference in the lives of those who would come after them. They pressed on with *l'audace*. Though many of those folks have gone on to

glory, we're standing on their shoulders tonight as we sit this building they made possible.

A decision will soon be before us. Kayakers know that whatever they do, the river will keep on running; and if they don't make a decision, the river will make one for them. My point is: ambiguous leadership produces ambiguous results. Leaders make God's preferred future real in their time. We're gathered tonight as leaders of The Church of the Cross . . . I've plotted a clear course into God's new tomorrow and want you to hear and believe that we can launch into the deep with *l'audace* knowing that where God guides He provides, for with the Lord of the harvest all things are possible! And for that we can say, "Thanks be to God!"