

## ***Don't Look Back***

Meditation on Philippians 3:4-14

Oct. 8, 2017

Merritt Island Presbyterian Church

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<sup>4</sup> ... If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: <sup>5</sup> circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; <sup>6</sup> as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. <sup>7</sup> Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. <sup>8</sup> More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ <sup>9</sup> and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. <sup>10</sup> I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, <sup>11</sup> if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. <sup>12</sup> Not that I have already obtained this or have *already* reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. <sup>13</sup> Beloved, *I do not consider that I have made it my own*; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, <sup>14</sup> I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

New Zealand runner Nikki Hamblin lay dazed on a track, curled in a fetal position after taking a fall at the 2016 Summer Olympics in Rio. The 28-year-old's hopes of an Olympic medal, a dream since she was 15, were dashed. Suddenly, she felt a hand on her shoulder. She heard a voice saying, "C'mon. Get up. We have to finish this." The one who had come to her aid was not from New Zealand; she was a competitor, a stranger from the U.S.A. Olympic team. Twenty-four-year-old Abbey D'Agostino.

Nikki doesn't know what caused her fall in a crowd of runners, with 2,000 of a 5,000-meter race still to go. Abbey stumbled and fell after Nikki went down heavily on her shoulder. Seeing the New Zealander crying, Abbey bent down and put her arms under her shoulders and gently urged her to her feet. As both runners resumed the race, no one suspected that Abbey was the one more seriously injured.

Abbey doesn't remember falling the second time, a short while later. This time, Nikki came to Abbey's rescue, bending down and helping her to her feet. But soon it was obvious that Abbey wasn't able to continue running. She urged Nikki, "Keep going. Keep going." Nikki went on to run the 5,000 meters. As she crossed the finish line, she looked back and saw to her amazement that Abbey was still running, despite a torn ACL and meniscus. Nikki waited at the finish line and gave Abbey a hug after she came in last place.

Nikki will always be grateful to Abbey, she told ESPN. She will never forget that arm on her shoulder, that voice in her ear, telling her to get up--keep on running the race. At the time, just finishing the race was the

goal. Not giving up when the going gets tough. They knew they weren't going to win any Olympic medals for the event.

But they would earn an Olympic award that was more rare than an Olympic medal and arguably more special. They were honored with an Olympic sportsmanship trophy that only 17 people before them in Olympic history had ever earned. The world took notice of Abbey and Nikki's goodwill. President Obama said their actions were "exactly what the Olympic spirit and the American spirit should be all about."

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The Apostle Paul urges us all to keep on running the race to the finish in his letter to the Philippians. Paul dispels all notions of the Christian thinking becoming a believer is all there is to being a Christian; getting saved is not the destination! Believing is the beginning of our journey of faith--the destination is a personal relationship with Jesus-- knowing him, sharing in his sufferings, Paul says in 3:10. Knowing in our hearts and minds the "*power of his resurrection,*" meaning accepting the grace God offers us through His Son and living out a life of grace. He has come to understand that what he learned from his Jewish community before he became a follower of Christ--all that gave him identity, purpose, and self worth-- was worthless. "Yet whatever gains I had," (he says in vss. 7 and 8) these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. <sup>8</sup> More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord." Paul is worried the church at Philippi may be infiltrated by Jewish Christians. This happened to the Galatian church a few years before. They insisted that Gentile converts must

follow the Jewish law or remain outsiders--“dogs” as Jews called them. They needed to perform the good works of the Torah; they needed, above all, to be circumcised.

Right before our passage today, Paul says in verse 2, “Watch out for the dogs! Watch out for the evil workers. Watch out for those who mutilate the flesh”--those who teach adherence to the Torah. While our society today loves our pet dogs and treat them like members of our family, calling someone a dog in ancient times was an insult. He goes on in vs. 3, “For it is *we* who are the circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and boast in Christ Jesus and have no confidence in the flesh...” He isn’t just talking about actual flesh, as in the mark of circumcision. “Flesh” to Paul is whatever things gave him status and identity in his former life. He is sharing a powerful personal testimony from his life as a Pharisee, a “zealous persecutor of the church,” before his dramatic conversion. Tracing one’s ancestry back thousands of years to the patriarchs and knowing which of Jacob’s 12 sons from whom they were descended was a major source of pride in ancient Judaism. Paul boasts that he is a member of the tribe of Benjamin.

Boasting turns to confession. What he valued before knowing Christ as his Lord and “being found in him” is worthless, he says in vs. 7. He actually says a bad word translated “rubbish, refuse or filth.” It could mean human waste or the foul-smelling street garbage that dogs forage through. This would be aimed at the Jewish Christians he calls “dogs” -- the ones who insist on circumcision for the Gentiles who wish to join the church.

Then, Paul describes his own spiritual growth and maturity as incomplete. In verse 10, he says, “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.” He isn’t wondering if he is saved. Our resurrection with Christ is a gift received by faith, as he will say in vs. 16, “Only let us hold fast to what we *have attained*.”

He uses the metaphor of a footrace to talk about the Christian walk, when every day we encounter trials and obstacles as we seek to follow Christ. To do this, we must put the past behind us and stop trying to bring back the old church of 30 or 40 years ago, when we had more young families and more children in Sunday school. To judge the church as somehow lacking because we don’t have a large children’s Sunday school would be dismissive of the powerful ministries we have, including our ministry to children and families through our preschool and Kids Klub. To say that we are somehow lacking as a church because we have more people older than 50 than younger than 50 is being somewhat like the Jewish Christians who thought the Gentiles needed to be circumcised. That’s the old way of thinking of church. Churches come in all shapes and sizes. We are a healthy, vital church as long as we seek to be led by the Spirit to minister to our community and world and share our gifts, talents, and resources for Christ’s sake. We are healthy and vital as long as our identities are found not in our achievements, possessions or other worldly status-- anything that Paul would call “flesh.”

When Paul tells us, “Don’t look back”-- forget what lies behind-- he doesn’t mean our personal testimonies. He models the importance of sharing our stories by sharing his. But he acknowledges that rising up from the disappointments of the past requires effort and vision -- “*straining* forward to what lies ahead.” We must press on, for the goal is the prize of the heavenly call, the resurrection life made possible through a relationship with Jesus Christ.

For nothing compares to the value of knowing Jesus and being found in him.

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After reading about Abbey and Nikki in Rio, I wondered what made Abbey help a competitor who had fallen on the track, after all her Olympic training and ambitions. Then I read an ESPN article from two months ago in which Abbey talked about her faith. She has a powerful testimony and says she has “taken joy in sharing it with people in speaking engagements and at clinics...” After tearing the ACL in her right knee in the 5,000-meter race, she kept running by “praying all the way.” Of the moment at the finish line, when the two women from opposing teams hugged, she says, “For both of us to be able to finish despite our dreams of what the race could have looked like, shattered, you know -- to just celebrate the good that came out of it--that moment together was just unbelievable.” She had prepared for the event, not just through physical conditioning, but by participating in Bible study and meeting with her team chaplain. She wrote Ephesians 3:20 on her hand for inspiration before the race, "Now to him who is able to do far more

abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us."

Friends, we all have powerful testimonies to share. Remember what God has done for you and how he has been faithful to you. Don't let past disappointments get you down or hold you back from pursuing the good that God has planned for you. Don't look back! Our identities are found not in our achievements, status or possessions-- anything Paul would call "flesh." Strain forward to what lies ahead.... Press on for the prize-- the heavenly call, the resurrection life. Nothing compares to the value of knowing Jesus and being found in him.

**Let us pray.** Heavenly Father, thank you for your gracious gift of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, our Redeemer and Lord. Thank you for allowing us to hear his call to follow Him and to want to know him more. Thank you that each of us have a powerful testimony of your faithfulness to share with others so that they may come to know and love you, too. Help us, Lord, to put aside our worldly ambitions and status--all things Paul would consider flesh-- and seek to be holy and acceptable to you in all that we say and do. Give us your vision for our good future that you have planned. Teach us to forget what lies behind and strain forward to what lies ahead, empowering us by your Spirit to live resurrection lives. In Christ we pray. Amen.