

Pentecost 18: 10/8/17

St. Paul: Luxemburg, WI

Text: Philippians 3:4b-14

Theme: The Joyful Life: Pressing on with Joy

"Well, we press on." That's a phrase that I've used frequently over the years. "We press on." But it's not something that I came up with on my own. We see those words in our text here this morning. "We press on." It seems that over the years I've always spoken those words in the face of some sort of adversity, some sort of setback. I always speak those words when there is some challenge that has presented itself, often times in the face of a challenge that appears as if it cannot be overcome.

Quite a few years back, I was sitting in my office going over the final vicarage evaluation with the youngest vicar that I supervised over the years. He was required to fill out his own evaluation of how he felt the year had gone. One of the questions that he had to answer was, "What has this year taught you about life in the church and why?" I always remember his answer because he wrote, "We press on." He then went on to explain that I had told him that many times over the year. It was a year in which I felt that nearly everything that could go wrong in the congregation had gone wrong. There were staff changes that were not anticipated. Everyone here knows what it's like to try to find workers in the church. The leaders of

the youth group had retired and the transition for the next person was rocky to say the least. There was a disagreement between some of the members of the congregation and as a result there were some who left the church. The vicar would often report his struggles to me, and I would always respond by saying, "Well, we press on."

He then went on to explain what he meant by quoting that on his report. He said that what he had learned was that church life and the life of the individual Christian is filled with challenges and setbacks. However, he said that the Christian has the assurance of victory through Jesus Christ. He said that what he had learned was that we have the confidence of knowing that because of Jesus' death and resurrection that heaven is ours. He said that what he understood "We press on" to mean is that we keep our attention focused on our goal of eternal life in heaven. It is the assurance of heaven through faith in Jesus that gives us the ability to press on in life no matter what challenges we may face in our lives. Yes, life can be filled with challenges, but we have a clear goal: heaven itself. It is that goal that gives us the ability to go forward in life no matter what our circumstances.

Well, I was very impressed with that vicar. I don't recall ever sitting down with him and explaining in detail what that phrase, "We press on" means. However, that is exactly what the

Apostle Paul tells us in our text here today. Paul tells us that we press on. He tells us first of all what our goal is. He tells us that the goal that we press toward is the resurrection of the dead. We have the confidence of knowing that through faith in Jesus will be raised up on the last day. Just as Jesus came back to life on the third day, we too will be raised up. Those who die with faith in Jesus will be raised up on the last day and gathered around His throne in heaven.

This is now the third part of our series on the book of Philippians. Our series is titled "The Joyful Life." The reason for that is because the book of Philippians is all about joy. The Apostle Paul is showing us here that our goal of heaven is what gives us joy in our lives. Paul is telling us that it is knowing that our lives have a goal that brings us joy. No matter what we might face in our lives. No matter how difficult life may be, it is knowing what our goal is that gives us joy at all times. Having a goal in life brings not just satisfaction but joy.

We know what life looks like when people have no goals. A lack of a goal robs a person's joy. A lack of goals can cause real problems for people in this world. Have you ever seen a teenage kid with no goal in life? I remember many years ago listening to a man talk about his marriage. He talked about how him and his wife had gotten married at a very young age. He

explained to me that they always had goals that they were working toward. He said that they were focused on building a house, getting ahead at their jobs, and raising their children. Eventually, the children were gone. The house was paid for. I remember him saying, "I guess we ran out of goals." It was not long after that the marriage ended in divorce. A lack of goals leaves people with no reason to continue in this world.

But a lack of goals can cause even deeper problems than that. A lack of goals can leave people with no reason to even live life itself. Sometime ago, I read about a man who had set his goals for his life. He was going to go to school. He was going to get a good job. He was going to climb the ladder so to speak. He accomplished all of his goals at a very young age. Suddenly, he felt that he had nothing left to do. He wrote explaining that he had accomplished all of his goals and had nothing left to live for and then took his life. You see he had set the wrong goals. His goals were based on having the success of this world and as a result his life ended up with no lasting meaning.

How often do we get distracted from the goal of our lives? How often do we get so wrapped up in the immediate that we lose sight of our goal of eternal life in heaven? It's easy for us to get so busy with running from one place to another that we forget why we're here. People get up so early in the morning to

get to work and then skip going home at the end of the day because they have to rush the kids to sports practice and all kinds of other activities. Sometimes, I think that our lives look like Charlie Brown in the one Peanuts comic strip. Charlie was working hard on his memory work for Sunday School. He recites it again and again with friends and heads out the door for class. Moments later, he's back again. Embarrassed, he says, "I forgot where church is." How often do we get so absorbed in the immediate that we forget our destination? We forget where we're heading. It robs our lives of joy.

The Apostle Paul had a goal. The Apostle Paul tells us that we press on. He tells us that we are able to press on in our lives no matter what challenges we face. Not only that, Paul is showing us that we press on with joy. We remember that as Paul is writing the words of our text that he was in prison. We know that Paul's movements were restricted. He was facing the possibility of death itself. Life was not good in many ways for Paul; but yet, he says that we press on. He talks about pressing on with joy. Why? It is that goal of eternal life that gives Paul the ability to press on, even with joy. You see Paul has set the right goal for his life: the resurrection of the dead.

Your life has a goal. You are able to press on in life even with joy because you have a clear goal: the resurrection of

the dead. I read a story one time about a daughter talking to her mother. Her mother was a very devout Christian lady and was constantly serving others, particularly in her church. Her daughter suggested to her that she cut back. She told her that she had done enough in her life and it was time for her to do nothing. The mother told her daughter, "I have not reached my goal. As long as I am in this world I will press on toward the goal that is before me."

A few months back I had a couple of gentlemen from the Gideons stop by to introduce themselves to me and talk about the work of the Gideons. For those of you who don't know, the Gideons is an organization that has been around for a long time. They are the ones who distribute Bibles throughout the country. They are especially known for putting Bibles in hotel rooms. They talked to me about some of the challenges that they face now. It used to be, when I was in school, that they would pass out Bibles every year as we were heading into school. I remember on the days when they did it seeing classmates sitting in study hall reading the New Testament that had been given to them that morning. These gentlemen talked about how buses now unload on school property and so it's become impossible to reach students with God's Word. They also talked about how they check the Bibles in motel rooms from time to time. They talked about how common it has become now for Bibles to be defaced. They

said that there are times when Bibles will have notes placed on their covers warning people that reading the Bible will have negative consequences for their wellness and things like this. They talked about how they face so many more challenges in America today than in the past.

But what I found interesting was their explanation of why they keep going. They explained that they keep going because it's all about eternal life. They talked about how it's through that Word of God that the Holy Spirit comes to people and gives them faith in Jesus Christ. It's in that Word that the Holy Spirit comes and gives the forgiveness of sins. You see they had a clear goal. We as a congregation have a clear goal as well. We understand what the goal is for our lives. We also understand that everything we do as a congregation is about that goal of heaven. We hold that goal out to others. As a result, no matter what challenges we face we are able to press on. We not only press on but we press on with joy.

The Apostle Paul tells us that we forget what is behind and strain toward what is ahead. What was behind for the Apostle Paul? Well, we recall all of the things that were behind Paul. We recall his past, don't we? We remember how Paul had not only rejected Christ for the first part of his life, but he had actually persecuted the church. Paul started out his life hating Jesus Christ. Paul had sent people who believed in Jesus

to jail. Paul had terrible things in his past. Paul says that he forgets what lies behind. You see what Paul is saying is that he is able to leave his sin in the past. Paul knows that he can confess all of the terrible things that he has done in the past and leave them behind. He knows that all of the sins of the past have been covered by the blood of Christ. Paul is saying that he doesn't sit around dwelling on the sins of the past. He confesses his sin, receives forgiveness, and strains toward the goal of heaven.

What things are there in your past? There are many things from our past that we leave behind. We think of the sins of the past. We think of tragedies and losses that we have suffered. We think of all of the things from the past that could discourage us. We forget what lies behind. We confess our sin. We confess the times when we have been so focused on the immediate that we lose sight of our goal. We are able to forget them because we have received the forgiveness that Jesus has won for us. We forget the past and press on toward our goal.

Have you ever seen someone who ran with joy? It seems to me that most of the time when I see people run they look miserable. They're pressing on but not with joy. I always remember when my daughter Anna was very young. I always used to joke that she never learned to walk. She learned to run. When I would have her in a safe area, I would just sit back and watch

her run. Her hair would fly behind her, and you could see the joy that it brought her. I always joked that we needed to get one of those hamster wheels that would fit her. I'm guessing I'm not the only parent who's ever thought that. You run with joy in your life. You know what your goal is in this world. No matter what challenges there might be. No matter what might trip you up. You strain ahead focused on your goal. We not only press on, but we press on with joy. Amen!!!