

Joy Comes in Pressing on Toward the Goal

Philippians 3

Sunday, April 21, 2024

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What kind of goals do you have in your life? Maybe to get more exercise, spend time with your family, get away to the lake, connect with a friend, read about an interesting topic, sign up for a volunteer project, and let's not forget, finish spring planting as soon as possible. The list can be almost endless.

We're going to have a Church Council retreat on June 23. We'll be joined by Pastor Emily Carson of the SEMN Synod. At our council meeting on Thursday night, we were looking over a list of areas on which to focus at the retreat. Any number of council members picked "setting goals." Clearly, having goals before us is important both for individuals and for churches.

So, where do these goals of ours come from? Probably from the things we value in life. Things like health, family, food, music, travel, and of course, the well-being of our congregation at Good Shepherd. What we value tends to show up in how we spend our time and effort and money.

When I turned 50, and my years were steadily advancing, I decided to do one of two things: either get a red convertible or run a marathon. Mind you, I had kids still in college and couldn't really afford a red convertible, so I went with the marathon. I decided to run Grandma's Marathon in Duluth. I'd always been a runner, but not a fast one. My goals were really pretty simple: to develop good training habits, to stay healthy, and to use it as a stress release.

Along the way, I found out that if I finished Grandma's in six hours or less, I could get my name in the newspaper—a little like those farmers and their tractors at Wells this past week. Thus, during my training and hard work and aching muscles, I had one *main* goal: to finish the race in six hours or less.

The day of the race, I had a few friends from church cheering me on. They'd been up at the North Shore staying at a cabin. As I was finishing the last leg, it looked like I was going to finish in about five hours. Yay! I was definitely pleased with myself. But one of the guys cheering me on, a bit of a smart-aleck, did his best to puncture my balloon: "Well, Vern, you did pretty well in finishing the race. But you should know that, before you rounded the last

corner, the announcer introduced an 81-year-old grandmother who was finishing up her 39th marathon. And by the way, she finished five minutes ahead of you!” “Ha, ha,” was my only response, “Good for her!” I didn’t care. I’d finished the race and I was going to get my name in the newspaper!

The Apostle Paul is talking about goals in our reading from Philippians, and in particular, he’s talking about one of his own goals. Notice that Paul doesn’t say anything remotely close to running a marathon, or sneaking away on vacation, or staying in touch with family and friends. Please hear me: these are not bad goals. They’re just not the one Paul has in mind.

Paul’s goal is simple and lofty: “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection.” My hunch is that by spending time in prison and facing the all-too-real possibility of death, Paul’s focus has sharpened considerably. He’d come a long way on his journey of faith. Ever since Jesus showed up on the road to Damascus, when Paul was intent on tracking down and persecuting Christians, his goals had been getting rearranged. He’d gone from persecutor to preacher, from working *against* Jesus to following *after* him, from tearing down churches to building up new ones.

So why is Paul talking about this particular goal? Probably because there are questionable preachers in Philippi—“rival preachers” he calls them in chapter 1. They’re trying to lead his congregation astray. Specifically, they’re peddling a “gospel of circumcision.”

We don’t know all the details, but it’s not hard to imagine. Most likely these preachers converted from paganism, to Judaism, and eventually to Christianity. Along the way, they got circumcised—in other words, they first became Jews. And then later they got baptized and became Christians. As is common in religious circles, both then and now, people tend to want to make their experience the one right way. In other words, *You must do it just as I did it, or you’re not a true believer.*

Paul gets angry with these preachers. No big surprise there. Paul gets angry with anyone who puts confidence in human achievement over against what Christ has done. Paul knows the gospel they’re pedaling all too well. He has a long and impressive list of things he used to value: “I was circumcised on the eighth day. I’m of the tribe of Benjamin. I’m the son of Hebrew parents. I was trained as a Pharisee. Add it all up,” Paul says, “and I am blameless.”

If Paul were a bookkeeper, he'd be way ahead on the credit side. But here's the deal: Paul's not keeping score anymore, and he's convinced that God is not keeping score either. Paul goes on to make a radical claim: "I regard all these things from my past as loss—I'm throwing them out with the trash. Why? Because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus as my Lord."

Paul is sharing quite a story. Often when people tell stories of their conversion, like Paul, they talk about leaving their former life behind. Regularly they have a long list of dark and lurid sins, empty ambitions, messed-up relationships. In a sense, they're saying their conversion means leaving all the bad stuff behind. But that's not Paul's story. Paul is leaving behind all the *best* things of his life—all those things he valued most—so that he might know Christ.

Paul compares the Christian life to running a race. He's not running in order to get saved. God has already taken care of that. But he is running for the sheer joy of being a follower of Jesus. And because God is no longer keeping score, Paul is able to run without watching his feet or counting his steps. He's able to trust his future entirely to God.

Despite his apparent confidence, though, Paul speaks with a dose of humility: "Oh, it's not that I've already reached this goal, but I press on to make it my own because Christ Jesus has made me his own. There's one thing I do," says Paul. "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 Jesus Christ."

So, friends, let me ask, what are we supposed to do with a passage like this? We're not sitting in a prison cell, after all. We're not fighting a gospel of circumcision. We're not looking to start new churches in the Roman Empire. So what do we do with it? How we answer this question probably goes back to what we value in life, just like it did for Paul. What's important to us? What gets us up in the morning? What kind of mark will we make in this world?

I can tell you what a person named Barb Willard did with her life. Barb was a member of Zumbro in Rochester who died a few years ago after a battle with Parkinson's Disease. Her husband Mike and their two daughters were at her side when the end came. At the funeral we told stories of Barb growing up on a farm near Storden, Minnesota; stories of her attending a little country church and learning the teachings of Jesus at an early age; stories of Barb's mother who was very kindhearted, always looking out for others. "Perhaps it comes as

no big surprise,” said Mike, “but Barb’s goal in life was to show concern for others, and especially for her family.”

Barb’s concern was present throughout her lifetime, and it was evident in three primary ways. The first was with Heidi, Barb and Mike’s middle daughter. In her late teens, Heidi began suffering from depression and then chronic back pain. She often dealt with it through alcohol and pills. Sadly, this led to addiction. In the midst of the turmoil, Barb was willing to go to the emergency room at any hour of the day or night. She never stopped loving her daughter.

Second, Barb arranged for her mother and mother-in-law to move to Rochester so she could look after them. Her mother spent the last eight months of her life living with Barb and Mike as she battled leukemia. Barb didn’t want anyone to have to suffer alone.

And third, when Heidi tragically died of an accidental overdose, Barb quit her job so she could look after Heidi’s two small children. As Barb saw it, there was nothing in the world more important than providing a home for those children and getting them off to a good start.

So, friends, what are your goals in life? What kind of joy comes for you—and for others—as you press on toward those goals? There is any number of folks with whom we might be tempted to compare ourselves, including the Apostle Paul or Barb Willard or an 81-year-old grandmother running in her 39th marathon. But please don’t compare. That’s really not the point of running the race set before us.

What I would suggest is that you first consider your values. What’s most important to you? What gets you out of bed in the morning? How do you want to be remembered? Most of all, I would encourage you to do what Paul did, and to seek to know Christ and the power of his resurrection. I would encourage you to devote your time and effort to Christ, and to where Christ might want to lead you. If you are committed to that, you might just find a goal—and a joy—unlike any other. Amen.