

# Eyes on the Prize

Jim Benedict – Union Bridge Church of the Brethren  
Sermon for May 2, 2010, Philippians 3:4b-14

The spring semester is coming to an end and college students across the country are scrambling for summer jobs. Most will be glad to get something that pays a decent wage and gives them plenty of hours, but a few will be fortunate enough to land something really interesting. Among the most intriguing summer jobs, according to one website for students, are jobs at upscale resorts and jobs that involve travel. Of course, the competition is pretty keen for those kinds of jobs, and some jobs like working in an Alaskan salmon cannery may not appeal to everybody.

My summer jobs when I was in college were summer pastorates in a little church in the Bootheel of Missouri. The Broadwater Church served mostly farm families in an area that grew winter wheat, corn, milo, soybeans and cotton. I spent twelve weeks each summer preaching the Sunday sermon, teaching a weekly Bible study, helping with Vacation Bible School, attending church camp, and visiting families. I also learned how to assemble irrigation pipes and gig frogs.

My younger brother, Marc, had a pretty interesting summer job. 30 miles south of the university he attended was a place called Living History Farms, a kind of museum composed of three farms, each operating as it would have at a given point in the history of the state of Iowa. The first was the 1840's farm basically just a cabin, with a large garden and a couple of small animal pens. The next was an 1890's farm, which included a small barn and draft horses, a small frame house and larger fields. The third farm was a 1930's farm which had a larger barn and house and used small tractors.

My brother's job was to be the farmer at the 1890's farm, which meant he lived each day between 9 a.m. and 6 p.m. in character as a farmer, using the tools that a farmer from that period would use, doing the tasks that a farmer from that period would do. Meals were prepared and served by the young woman who played his wife, and were cooked on a wood or coal stove, using fresh items or things that could be kept in an ice box. For the job, he got to learn how to harness and drive horses, stack hay and shock corn.

Part of the reason I think my brother's summer job was so cool is that I've always been something of a history buff. I'm intrigued by the past, and I've studied it seriously from the beginnings of the early church in Palestine and Rome, through the Reformation and later rise of the Church of the Brethren in Germany, to the Revolutionary and Civil War periods in U.S. history. Just ask my kids, if you don't believe me. I can't tell you how many times I've seen them roll their eyes when I've started off a sentence with, "That reminds me of something I read about . . . . They know a history lesson is coming."

The past is important, and real progress requires that we remember and try to understand the past. But the past can also become a prison. Living in the past might be a cool summer job, but it is no way to live your entire life. But many do.

In our text this morning, from the Letter to the Philippians, the Apostle Paul spends some time talking about his past. He speaks of his Jewish heritage, his career and accomplishments as a Pharisee and a persecutor of the church, and the success he experienced earlier in life. But then he says, "Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ." And he goes on to add, "This one thing I do: 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 Christ Jesus. Paul is not only describing his own outlook. He is also prescribing for the Philippians how they, too, should approach the life of faith. In short, the message is,

Don't get stuck in the past. Instead, focus on the future.

How is it that people get stuck in the past anyway? There are three common ways worth mentioning. First, there is guilt or regret. People get stuck dwelling on the past because of something they did or didn't do that has left them feeling guilty or regret. Maybe they broke a promise, or failed to take advantage of an opportunity. Maybe they were reckless or careless, and somebody else got hurt. Maybe were too careful and missed out on a relationship or an adventure, and it has haunted them ever since.

Here are the actual words of one such person stuck in the past because of regrets and guilt: I am plagued by memories I wish I could forget. Stupid choices going back to childhood, and painful events in my past that still affect how I feel about myself and those around me. Sometimes I wish I could get amnesia, and forget everything. I can remember everything I ever did wrong, and can't appreciate the things I did right. I live in what was and fantasize about doing it over, making it right. I can't look ahead; I can't turn around, or even see what is around me now. All I can see are the monsters in the rear view mirror, chasing me, telling me things about myself I no longer want to believe, but must believe, because they really happened.

That probably sounds familiar to some of us, but for others, the reason we get stuck in the past isn't because of what we've done or left undone, but because of what others did to us. Painful past experiences can keep us from moving forward in life. Losses inflicted upon us, by illness, by the cruelty of others, or by accidents or events beyond anyone's control can come to so dominate our thoughts that they leave little or no energy for planning for a different future. What has happened to us comes to dominate our sense of who we are.

The third and most overlooked way we sometimes get stuck in the past has to do not with the mistakes we have made or the bad things that have happened, but with our past successes and good fortune. Some people peak early, and forever after find themselves focused on the days in which they were young, strong, successful and at the top of their game. This can happen to the star athlete or the woman who was the prettiest and most popular girl in school. This tends to happen to child prodigies, who are able to do amazing things at an early age, but often struggle as they reach adulthood and others catch up to them. A few years back, rock and roll star Bruce Springsteen had a great song about this way of getting stuck in the past. Called *Glory Days*, a line in the chorus of the song went like this: *Glory days well they'll pass you by. Glory days in the wink of a young girl's eye!*

So those are the three ways we get stuck in the past. We get stuck in our regrets, we get stuck in our pain, and we get stuck in our glory days. But how do we get unstuck? For the answer, let's turn back to the text and see what Paul did. Paul writes, *For [Jesus ] sake, I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him.* Paul was able to overcome the past by turning his attention to the future. And once he became focused on the future, he began to see how so many of the things that had seemed so important in the past, so many of the things he'd been trying so hard to hold on to, were actually impediments, keeping him from becoming what God was calling him to be.

I told you I was a history buff, so I'm going to use an historical illustration to help you understand what Paul did. During the American Civil War, the Union Army had several

advantages over the Confederate forces. Not only was the Union Army much larger, it was much better equipped. In fact, I think you could argue that it was often too well equipped.

As proof, consider what happened time after time as a new Union regiment set out on its first extended march. Every soldier carried a ten pound gun, six pounds of ammunition, a knapsack, a haversack, and a three-pint canteen, all full with 3 days rations, rubber blanket, woolen blanket, shelter tent, full winter clothing, tin cup, tin plate, knife, fork, spoon, stationery, photographs, journal, Bible, tobacco, pipes, comb and brush, shaving tools, sewing kit, toothbrush, soap and whatever other gear did not hang from hooks on their belts. All in all, it amounted to something like 45 to 50 pounds.

Especially in the summer, marching under the hot sun, the load proved to be more than most were willing to bear. The roads were soon littered with overcoats, blankets, extra clothing, and shelter tents that had been tossed aside to lighten the load. Wagons from the Quartermaster Department always followed the line of march and scooped up the discarded items, which would be cleaned and re-issued when needed.

Like those soldiers on the march, the Apostle Paul recognized that the regrets and accomplishments from the past he was carrying were not helping him get where he wanted and needed to go. So he discarded them. As the text says, they became to him as rubbish.

The future is what liberates us from the past, and Christian faith is future focused. As followers of Jesus, we are pilgrims, people going somewhere, and a pilgrim is a pilgrim not because of where he has been or where he is, but because of where he is going. Pilgrims do not let the past define them. They are reaching forward, striving toward a goal.

For us, who call ourselves Christians, that goal is God's kingdom, the future that God is shaping. Our calling is not to recreate what was or to preserve what is, but to participate in the creation of the world yet to be. Our calling is to be part of this work, even if we may not live to see it completed. Quaker theologian Elton Trueblood put it this way: A man has made at least a start on discovering the meaning of human life when he plants shade trees under which he knows full well he will never sit.

Appreciate the past, enjoy the present, but keep your eyes on the prize! Discover the future God has in mind, and devote yourself to its realization. There is no higher calling. There is no more fulfilling life.

Amen.