

“Pressing On”  
Philippians 3:10-14  
by Pastor Gary Walters

Our scripture this morning comes from Philippians,3:10-14. All I want is to know Christ and the power that raised him to life. I want to suffer and die as he did so that somehow I may also be raised to life with him. I have not yet reached my goal and I am not yet made perfect, but Christ has taken hold of me so I keep on running and struggling to take hold of the prize. My friends, I don't feel that I have already arrived, but I forget what is behind and I struggle for what is ahead and I run toward the goal so that I can win the prize of being called to heaven . This is the prize that God offers because of what Christ Jesus has done for us. The word of God, for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

I had the privilege of coaching Andrew's soccer team last fall. I had coached older kids before but this was my first experience with kindergarten. It was a good year; although there is one image, or experience, branded on my mind that kind of highlights the whole deal. Brody was a smaller than average kindergärtner, but he was still a pretty good little ball player. But, you know, there are just those few bigger kids, they're bigger, they're faster, and just more coordinated. Well, Brody on one particular scrimmage game kind of had a breakaway, he kind of went right under their armpit, and he was on the ball and he was heading for the goal and things looked great and a butterfly went right past his nose. It was just like zhoop, and he was on it. He followed the butterfly about 15 steps and the butterfly was coming right at me, and then Brody stopped and he looked up at me and nhhh! and then he ran back to the ball. Well by then it was too late--the easily distracted. Praise God for kindergärtners. When you're in a soccer scrimmage it's fine to get distracted and take in that experience of "how cool a butterfly" but on the other hand if the point is to make a goal, he was getting sidetracked. It's not just kindergärtners playing soccer. I think there is just a part of human nature that we are easily distracted sometimes. Paul lays this image out before us.

The last time we were together, I talked about the point or the goal of Christianity is that relationship with Christ. In this passage, Paul uses the exact same words that Jeremiah had used in his passage. He uses the word "knowing," the same word used, for the knowledge that a husband and wife have of one another. So, knowledge, the deepest, most intimate, the most complete knowledge you can have of another person, and that's the kind of love that's the goal. That's the kind of relationship that God wants with us. We have talked about that. But, Paul put some interesting nuances or an interesting

twist on it with some of his images and so I wanted to get into those today and it fits particularly well with confirmation and so I wanted to talk about those.

Because, Paul adds this whole idea that the Christian life isn't just a journey to nowhere. But that it has a goal and there is a destination and that destination is Christ. In fact, the goal as Paul lays it out here, that image is to draw closer and closer to Christ, not just physically or in likeness, but in a deeper, and deeper relationship and yet, being as distractable as we are, I think we take for granted sometimes, or we don't appreciate, how much of those butterfly chasing events cost us.

There is an interesting description of pressing on to the goal or running the race motif, so I want to tell you a little bit about Dean Krantz. Have you heard of him? I read his autobiography. He has the distinction of being the human being who has run the most consecutive miles and I'd have to go back to the book to double check, but I think it is 243 miles run consecutively. Just an unimaginable feat! The first time he ran 200 miles it was part of a relay race that they do to raise money for a children's hospital in California. Normally there is a team of five and they take turns and it is grueling, but breaking up with the team of five it's manageable. Well Dean, being an extremely gifted distance runner thought "I'll try this on my own." He had a support team, people who were bringing him food and drink and new shoes at the right times and places, but still, he ran the whole thing on his own. Well he did pretty good the first day and the first night, and the second day he was starting to get pretty darn tired. Well the second night he was starting to get a little disoriented, or a little bit loopy, and his support team was not right there helping him along and he actually took a wrong turn. He had kind of fallen asleep while he was running, or was just so spaced out, that he didn't realize that he was not on course anymore. He ran about a mile the wrong direction. When he finally figured out where he was supposed to be at, he had to backtrack a mile to get back on the course. He talks about, in excruciating detail, how much those two miles cost him. He had already run 150, what's two more, right? But, the butterfly chase, that losing track, just about wiped him out and he almost did not finish.

Well, those butterfly chases take a goal on us and Paul lays for us this image of running the race, and not just running aimlessly, but running toward a specific goal. And yet, our culture does us no favors in terms of staying on track, or staying on focus. In fact in our death denying, death defying, make the present eternal, or make the present the end in itself kind of mentality; we get caught up in bigger and better and satisfying every desire of our flesh and the goal becomes right here and right now and we lose track that we are going somewhere. I am not advocating some sort of stoic, monastic kind of lifestyle. God has created this world and it's wonderful and it's for our enjoyment, but

on the other hand, the things along the way, if they distract us from God, there is a problem. We need to work hard to not get distracted. Because, here is Paul's big thought in this passage. We are not a finished product. We are not a finished product! We wouldn't take a pile of bricks and mortar and say "Look at that building, isn't it beautiful?" and we wouldn't take a pile of sand and say "Wow that's a beautiful glass vase." Or we wouldn't take an acorn and think, "Wow, now there is an incredible oak tree." We know better and yet in life, in our Christian walk, we sometimes fall into that trap.

Here is why I chose this passage and this message for this morning. Today we are celebrating confirmation and these 13 students who are getting confirmed, I have made them memorize scripture, I've made them write lessons for me, I've made them come to class for two years, and I will miss them, but I've made them work hard. But they are still not a finished product. But, it's not just the confirmation class, it's all of us. It's not that we get to a point and we are done, yeah! On the contrary.

Confirmation is a milestone and not a finish line. Christianity is not a place that we arrive at but it's a relationship. An ongoing, ongrowing relationship with God. It's not gaining certain information, but experiencing personal transformation. It's not a destination but a journey. A journey that we will be on until we take our last breath. It is true for our confirmation students and it's true for us. We are on a journey.

Now, we celebrate confirmation today as this great event. Hopefully it will stand as a mountaintop experience that they can look back on and kind of keep our bearings as we go along, we have those mile markers. But, the fact of the matter is that we don't stop there but we continue on. We continue to grow, we continue on that journey.

A few of you have probably run marathons. I had the experience a couple of times and I have to admit the very first marathon I ran I had no goal other than to avoid three letters that I just think are dreadful, especially after how much time and energy it takes to train to be able to run a marathon. It's a part-time job in and of itself. But, those three letters, if you ever look at marathon results, the names are listed and then depending on how they do it all the names are listed, and then they have the times next to it. But, besides certain names rather than a time there will be the initials of DNF--did not finish. My goal was not to run a great race, and I didn't, but I did finish. There comes a point somewhere around mile 20 or 25 where it's just like "You know what, it'd be a lot easier to just stop."; especially at mile 20. Mile 25 you're way to close, if you have to crawl you're going to do it by then. All of that to say, that the kingdom of God does not belong to the fast or to the strong, but it belongs to those who persevere. It

belongs to those who keep the goal before them, who do not get distracted in the butterfly chases, but keep their eyes on Christ and continue toward him through the entire journey. Would you pray with me?

Lord, we thank you that we are not a finished product and so we pray that you will keep drawing us on, keep drawing our eyes to you. Help us day by day keep putting one foot in front of the other, drawing us to yourself, the final goal. Help us in this journey, in Christ's name we pray, amen.