

First Presbyterian Church-Birmingham, MI  
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### Pressing On

**Philippians 3:4b-14:** *even though I, too, have reason for confidence in the flesh. If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: 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; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. 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 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. 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. 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. 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, I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.*

He was one of the most powerful prelates in the United States but more importantly a deeply spiritual man of prayer. He was a healthy man who, at age 67, suddenly found himself diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. He had extensive surgery at a cancer hospital and awakened from surgery with pain that felt overwhelming. He wanted to pray, but could not. To visiting friends he commented, "Pray while you're well, because if you wait until you're sick you might not be able to do it."<sup>1</sup> The patient was Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, formerly Archbishop of Chicago. Continue to think about his statement. I will have more to say about him later.

In the Philippians passage we read Paul wants us to get our priorities straight. The context of his exhortation is a threat to the unity of the church at Philippi, a church Paul founded. He feels closer to this church than any other. This letter to the Philippians is personal. What was the threat? Who are these people that Paul refers to as "dogs" and "evil workers?" They appear to be a group of people who insisted that the new Christians obey Jewish law, particularly with regard to ritual circumcision. Paul asserts that religious rules can oppose the Spirit of God, which, through Christ, has established a *new* covenant. This new covenant, which is dependent on God's grace, not the

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<sup>1</sup> This quote and other material about Cardinal Bernardin are taken from M. Therese Lysaught, *Suffering in communion with Christ*, in Swinton J and Payne R, eds. (2009). *Living Well and Dying Faithfully*. Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 59-85.

following of rules, establishes an entirely new foundation for our relationship with God. Thus, the critical question for each one of us is not “Am I happy?” or “Am I secure?” or “Am I following the right rules?” The critical question is, “Am I free?” And the related question: What does it really mean to be free?

Paul speaks of those material things “of the flesh” that we try to claim as distinctive markers of success, freedom, and acceptance by God: following religious rules, being a member of the right community, recognized as law abiding, passionate about what is moral and ethical. Paul met all those criteria for being special in the eyes of God: properly circumcised, a pure Jew, a Pharisee (a strict interpreter and observer of the law), and a prosecutor of people who broke the religious laws. Then he experienced the power of *knowing* Jesus Christ. At that moment, everything changes for Paul. At that moment, he realizes that the one goal that places everything else in perspective is sharing the sufferings of Christ by becoming like him in death. Paul asserts that having material wealth doesn’t have to be a problem. Following religious rules and traditions doesn’t have to be a problem. Having social advantage or intellectual advantage doesn’t have to be a problem. However, all of these can be a problem if we forget our dependence on Christ.

So what does it mean for Christ to be the dominating power over one’s whole being and circumstances? It means that self-interest is subordinated. We strive to replace self-interest with attentive response to opportunities presented to us by God--opportunities to bring light into darkness, hope into despair, love into enmity. It is fundamentally relational. It deepens our relationship with other persons and with Jesus Christ.

I want to tell you more about Cardinal Bernardin. There is an important chapter in his life that I want to relate to you because it speaks to how he applied Paul’s words to his own life. At the height of his career, Cardinal Bernardin was falsely accused by a former seminarian of sexual abuse. The accusation turned his world upside down. Bernardin says that in that moment he “felt the presence of evil”--a destructive power wanting to destroy him. At the same time he says that he felt tremendous compassion for his accuser. Eventually, the evidence was found to be fabricated, and, eleven months later, the case was dropped. Imagine, if you can, those eleven months.

Out of compassion, Bernardin sought out his accuser, Steven Cook, a man who, at that time, was dying. He arranged a meeting with him and took to him two gifts--a Bible that he inscribed to Mr. Cook and a 100-year-old chalice with which to celebrate mass, if Mr. Cook would be willing to accept these symbols of Christ’s presence. Mr. Cook accepted the Bible with tears running down his face and asked Cardinal Bernardin to celebrate mass with him. After the mass, Bernardin said these words:

We have one family and so, after every falling out, we must make every effort to become reconciled. So, too, the Church is our spiritual family. Once we become a member, we may be hurt or become alienated, but it is still our family. And, the two men became friends.

Is this abandonment of self-love, this embrace of the enemy possible, apart from Christ? I don’t think so. Cardinal Bernardin knew, as Paul knew, and as each one of us can know, that we find real security and real freedom by trusting in Christ’s faithfulness.

We step back from focusing on what we need for ourselves and shift to discerning what Jesus Christ needs from us. This discerning is not easy, but it is the only process that replaces emptiness in our lives with a true sense of meaning. We daily seek and lay claim to the goal for which Christ has taken hold of you and me. We press on toward a *future* defined by God's call to us in Christ. We are therefore not restrained or defeated by the past. This is important because we often dwell on the past--failed expectations, mistakes, tragedies, insults, attacks--and fail to discern a future which belongs to God in Jesus Christ. This future is relational and not defined by individual achievement.

If being a Christian means anything, it means affirming the value of every person, welcoming Christ in every personal encounter--whether a member of our own community or an SOS guest or someone with a disability or someone with a sexual orientation that offends you, or an enemy such as Cardinal Bernardin's false accuser. The goal to which Christ calls us always involves building up the body of Christ, and only Christ recognizes the total membership of that body. The future is open because faith in Christ's activity among us is more powerful than any individual achievement we can claim.

I believe Cardinal Bernardin recognized this better than most people. And he recognized that "[pressing] on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus" requires discipline and practice placing the demands of Christ ahead of self-interest. Remember his comment, "'Pray when you're well, because if you wait until you're sick you might not be able to do it.'" I believe this is the reason why Paul wants us to treat personal gains as rubbish. They distract us from the discipline we need to grow in our faith with the help of God's grace so that we can hold fast to Christ when we face personal pain, suffering, and death--even when we lose the capacity to pray. Cardinal Bernardin and St. Paul also realized that we do this in response to God's grace, and we are strengthened by those in the body of Christ who reach out to us even as we reach out to them.

In the final fifteen months of his life, Bernardin took on a new ministry--providing pastoral care to fellow cancer sufferers. He walked the halls of the hospital visiting other patients, as soon as he could get out of his hospital bed following his cancer surgery. Please be clear about this: he suffered during this time, just as we would. He was depressed at times and in pain at times. But he recognized a calling beyond self-interest, beyond his personal needs. Because he can suffer in communion with Christ, he experiences an abiding peace in Christ. By the time of his death, he had ministered personally to more than seven hundred cancer patients.

Toward what goal are you pressing on? Of course, your personal goals will change as life presents different opportunities. The question you must ask is, "Am I free to love others, to build them up, even at my own expense, because Christ is at the center of my life?" If yes, then personal achievements and material gains can be seen as rubbish compared to knowing Christ. Then you *know* that Christ is praying for you even when you can't pray for yourself. Pressing on toward the goal of being in Christ means trusting Christ. And when you can trust Jesus Christ, you can love those who need your love the most, even if you suffer for it, even in the face of death. Amen.

