

Getting to the Goal

I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me His own. Phil. 3:12

Leaves are falling around us and their colors transform our landscape. There is a sense of change in the air with cooler days ahead of us in Wisconsin. Children will be tracing leaves on to thin paper exposing their veins and the path of life giving chlorophyll. At the Wollersheim Winery in Baraboo, skeletons of once producing vines hang in place where they were tied. Fall signals a time to clean out the garden and prepare the “harvest” to start again in the Spring. Our readings reflect that need to start again as well. It requires that succeed or fail one gets up again and presses on.

The vineyards in today’s readings were having a tough time. One vineyard did not yield the kind of grapes expected. Wild grapes were produced instead. Disappointing crops in one year, so why not try again? In Isaiah 5, the owner decides to start over and tears down the vineyard.

In the Psalm, the LORD is called upon to tend and restore His vine that He led out of Egypt. It’s certain that the palmist is alluding to Israel. The vine has been subject to attacks from man and beast and the people call upon God to preserve what He has planted.

In the gospel, the vineyard is the subject of a parable about tenants who do not produce a harvest for their landowner. Instead they mistreat his slaves and even his son, going as far as killing the landowner’s heir and stealing the vineyard. The landowner rids himself of those tenants and tries a new lease with different ones. He starts over again and presses on.

The apostle Paul exemplifies this perseverance when he writes in the second lesson today, “I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me His own” (Phil. 3:12).

The whole second lesson is devoted to staying in the race. The image Paul uses is that of the athlete in the Olympic Games who sets sight on a target to get to the finish line. He presses on to the goal and doesn’t stop until he gets there!” Despite past triumphs, to win again will take everything one has to win the prize. Despite Paul’s credentials (and he had several) his list of degrees, and his zeal for perfection under the law, he was only an honorable mention for this new prize he sought. And the prize he sought had no earthly tether like the gold medal. The prize he wanted was to *know Christ by the power of his resurrection and sufferings*. He wanted the church to experience this. As fellow “athletes” he wanted Christians to focus on that prize, forgetting the past, reaching out, straining forward, and pressing on!

What prize if offered to you would keep you going? In 1976, the Nobel Foundation opened its archives to scholarly study. That study has shown that the selection process for its Prize, like much else in life, is affected by human frailty. It reveals that while committee members usually try to be objective, their own pride and prejudice shape the selection process.

There were times when objectivity was knowingly, even deliberately, abandoned. The most glaring example of that is how the committee handled the many nominations it received to award the great physicist Albert Einstein for his development of the theory of general relativity. Although it was a great achievement, there were committee members who opposed him because he was a pacifist, he was Jewish and did his work in theoretical rather than experimental physics. They stalled his prize for three years and then only awarded him based on some work he had done on another theory.

We'd like to believe, of course, that prizes on the level of the Nobel are objective measures of excellence. The Nobel Prize is an important award, and those who win it gain prestige, publicity and sometimes advantage in their field. But winning the prize is not the only reason for doing the work, or at least it shouldn't be. Typically, those who win and those who do not win, continue working in their field of research. They press on for different prizes: those that benefit others or purely for the advancement of knowledge.

While some would kill for the Nobel Prize, Einstein remained aloof. The Nobel Prize committee passed him over for the prize in 1920. The committee, paralyzed by their professional agendas, political pressure and individual bias and pettiness refused to award anyone in 1921 though submissions on behalf of Einstein continued. In 1922, they awarded Niels Bohr for his new quantum theory of the atom and they awarded Einstein - not for his delayed award on the Theory of Relativity but on lesser work he had done with Niels Bohr. In the end he accepted the award, needing money to continue his work, but did not attend the ceremony. When asked to name the most important honors he had received, he recited an impressive list, but he did not mention the Nobel.

— from Virginia Hughes, "Einstein vs. the Nobel Prize," *Discover*, September 28, 2006, <http://discovermagazine.com/2006/sep/einstein-nobel-prize/>.

In the context of the Nobel Prize, suppose that people working in the fields where that prize is given make only the moves that call attention to their achievements. If they do that, they are liable to miss some of the discoveries that yield progress because they don't have their minds fully on their work. Better for us all if they press on with their research, with thoughts of the prize put aside.

The apostle Paul ran after his own Nobel Prize. He did not act as if he had already received it but said, "I press on to make it my own, because Christ has made me His own" (Phil. 3:12). He continued his work though he had a laundry list of other accomplishments as well. He did not stop there and say it was "time to retire". Kingdom work is never finished at any age. There are still vineyards to plant. There are still harvests to reap. There are many who need to be taught of Christ. Paul's prize was eternal. He valued knowing Christ, His resurrection and sufferings more than any of his own personal accomplishments.

One writer on this scripture lesson, Ernest F. Scott, called this matter of "pressing on" toward God's call as one of choosing a "closed morality" versus an "open morality." Closed morality, "is always looking for some place to stop," and

open morality, “sees that the ways of expressing a good life are endless in variety and infinite in scope.” To illustrate this, Scott pointed to the parable of the Good Samaritan, where both the priest and the Levite declined to help the injured man because they did not see their moral obligation as extending that far. The Samaritan’s open morality, however, “led him to do an original and un-prescribed service” -- *The Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. 11. Nashville: Abingdon, 1955, 87-88.

How we understand this “pressing on” work will be a very individual matter. No one can choose for you how you will fulfill the upward call of God. My father, a high school teacher, retired from teaching English as a Second Language, only to take it up again because it was his passion.

How will I “press on?” A number of you have been a model for me in my future retirement. Retired minister Neal Dupree and his service in Rock County is another example. After leaving parish ministry I see myself working on some mission field, whether distant or near at least part of the year. I think my children will understand and be proud of my desire to keep on giving and reaching out. After receiving daily emails from United Way of Rock County, I now know how much need there is in our own backyard. It is endless and it leads me to rethink whether I can afford to retire from ministry. My uncle Sandy, whom many of you met at my wedding, continues to serve at age 83 as a Stephen’s minister in his church. Despite lung cancer almost taking his life his personal resurrection and service continues to be an inspiration and model to me for my retirement.

St. Paul wanted to know Christ. To know Him is to want to be like Him and follow Him. As a prisoner for Christ, Paul longed to be released, only to keep pressing on toward God’s heavenly call. Though he never had children as far as we know, Paul had many spiritual children and grandchildren for which he longed to be with and love and teach. Likewise, the church becomes our family as well. No, its children may not have your DNA. Yet there are many who need spiritual grandparents and spiritual parents that have none. Where will they be taught if not in the church? Who will lead them if not those who know Christ? Who will show them how to run the race for the greatest prize of all if not you and I? Let us press on in our race to make Christ our own as He has made us His own. This is our vision: to know Christ and make Him known. Amen.