

WGUMC November 11, 2012 Philippians 3:4b-14  
“Pressing On”

We are almost to the end of our stewardship campaign. We've talked about goals. We've talked about budgets. We've talked about giving. Today I don't have anything to say about money, but I want to tell you a story about motivation.

“Why can't you just be average?” a friend in high school was asking me one day when a group of us were sitting in the cafeteria talking about what we were going to do after graduation. I had just said that I wanted to be a medical missionary and go off to Africa and cure people. I can imagine how annoyingly goody-goody I sounded, and I probably deserved her snide remark. But, the fact is, I didn't want to be average. From very early on, I wanted a whole lot more. And there were signs around me telling me that my life would be anything but average.

In my sophomore year in high school, I won a statewide contest and went to the Hugh O'Brian International Youth

Leadership Seminar at UCLA with kids from all over the world. In my junior year, I was diagnosed with epilepsy. In my senior year, I was named a Presidential Scholar, went to Washington, D.C., met a bunch of officials, got the grand tour, and had a big dinner at the State Department. That same year I received a full-tuition four-year scholarship to Boston University. At age 17, it seemed like I could save the world.

So I smile as I read about how the Apostle Paul had qualifications up the wazoo. In his letter to the people in Philippi, he lists them: “circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin [King David’s tribe], a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee [no backslider]; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.”

As a Jew, Paul had everything going for him. And yet, somehow having it all wasn’t enough for him. Just like it wasn’t enough for me. Paul was blessed with a very good pedigree. I

was blessed with a brain and the discipline to get lots of degrees. But I want everyone in Silicon Valley to know that having a good life doesn't depend on a pedigree or a PhD.

Good grades didn't fulfill me. I knew that I could do just about anything I wanted to do. I could make a good living, but I wanted a good life, and no grade will guarantee you that. By my sophomore year in college, I wasn't sure about going to medical school anymore. I discovered that I didn't much like my classmates. They seemed a lot more interested in doing well than doing good. They were in premed to make money. I wanted to make a difference.

In the meantime, I got to know some students in seminary, and they were making a difference, in my life, anyway. They seemed to be so full of life and purpose, and so full of fun. And I began to wonder what my grades were really worth in the grand scheme of things. All the honors I'd received were not

the most important part of me, not the person God was calling me to be.

Paul wrote, “Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ.” There are times when the Bible hits a little too close to home. All the adults around me—parents, professors—were expecting great things of me, but the “more” that I was looking for was not “me.” Somehow, somewhere, there was a Something I wanted that was beyond me. And try as I might, I couldn’t earn it. I couldn’t do anything to deserve it.

Paul said, “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection....” It would take some more years before I knew that the Something was a Someone. Still, I knew that I wanted to know a power that could give me a sense of being really and fully alive (hard to be when you’re on epilepsy meds). I wanted a power that could turn my worries into hope, my fears into

faith, and my sorrow into joy. I wanted to know the power that could give me the courage I needed to be me.

Well, that's a bit of my story, but you know, pastors aren't the only ones who need to know Christ and the power of resurrection in their lives. On some level all of us are longing for a Something, even if we don't what it is. Like the people of Athens that we read about in the Book of Acts, all of us at some time or other have worshiped at the altar of an unknown god. [Acts 17:23] Even those of us who were raised in the church, steeped in Bible stories from our birth, begin our spiritual journeys with an unknown god—unknown, at least, to us.

You see, the stories we read in the Bible are someone else's story, someone else's attempt to know God. Just knowing these stories doesn't mean that we know God. Knowing Christ means writing our own story. But when we do

that, we don't have the whole story. Remember Paul says, "For now we see in a mirror dimly." [I Cor 13:12]

I began my spiritual journey with a Something, which isn't much, but it's better than a Nothing. Likewise, for some of you, Christ is a stranger in a story that you're not sure how to relate to. But I am quite certain that your uncertainty will be your blessing, because your questions will drive the quest. But for others, Christ is a someone you've been relating to for an awfully long time. Christ is your soul-mate, your faithful companion, and each new chapter of your life is an opportunity for extraordinary new adventures with your best friend.

That's a wonderful story, but it isn't everyone's story. I've been listening to stories for a long time. And I can tell you that for some folks, Christ is less a friend and more an Idea, a beautiful, lofty, living Idea that, in spite of everything, begins to live in them and their lives begin to resemble that Idea. And for others, Christ is less of a person, in the conventional sense,

and more of a mystical presence that lives for them in the relationships that they forge in a community of love and forgiveness. For still others, Christ is a spiritual power, indeed a power that makes wrongs right, wounds whole and all the emptiness full. Then there are those for whom Christ is a promise, the promise of our spiritual potential as children of God. They look to Christ and see what we were all meant to be. They see a brand new humanity in a kingdom of justice and peace.

Stranger. Friend. Idea. Presence. Power. Promise. I'm convinced that Christ is all these things and much, much more. But don't be ashamed if Christ is not all or any of these things for you right now. Just ponder the question: Who is Jesus Christ? Start with a Something, and start writing that story. Just don't think for a minute that you're writing it alone. You will need other folks' stories in order to live your own. They can't and mustn't try to take you down their path, but they

can shed some light on yours. So, if you really want to know Christ, don't let anyone, least of all me, dictate who Christ is for you. Just trust where the story is taking you.

And the best part of your story is that it isn't finished yet. Paul said, "Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal." So, it doesn't matter how many years or how many degrees we have, we still look through a mirror dimly.

But that doesn't mean that we are totally blind. Remember Edwin Hubble, the astronomer who peered into what was then the world's largest telescope back in 1922 and discovered that the Milky Way was not the only galaxy in the universe. Through his work, we learned that the cosmos was a whole lot bigger than anyone had ever conceived, and not only that, it was getting bigger. It was expanding.

That's what getting to know Christ is like. It changes the way we look at the universe and the assumptions we make



about God and everything. And as we get to know more and more Jesus, our universe just keeps getting bigger.

I don't know about you, but it blows my mind to think about how much I don't know about Christ, how much I have yet to learn about the power of resurrection and how it works, not only in my life and your life, but in the life of the cosmos. (Personally, I think that grace is more ubiquitous than gravity, but that's another sermon.) It blows my mind, but it also burdens my heart, because I sense that I can't know any more Christ, I can't experience any more power, unless I am around people who are seeking the same. That's why I'm here. That's why I care. I know I can't make any progress in my knowledge of Christ unless you are getting to know him, too.

I'm certainly not here to raise money! But if I have to do that so that we can get on with the real work of blowing people's minds and expanding their spiritual universe, then

that's what I have to do. But it isn't my motivation. And it surely isn't my passion.

I just want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection. And so, I press on. And that's all I can ask of any of you, to press on and make that goal your own, because—like it or not—Christ Jesus has made you his own.

Whether we're talking individuals or churches, pressing on means “forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead.” In your own life you know that resurrection is your very best option. But for churches, it is the only option. If we aren't all about resurrection, then we are surely about extinction.

So, it's a good thing that grace is as pervasive as gravity, because we're going to need it. Sometimes we'll try and fail to be the person or the church God wants us to be. Take it from me. But if we keep reaching for the power of the resurrection, there is no end to the life we can live, no limit to the love we

can experience, no telling what joy we'll come to know as we get to know Christ.

That's why we press on, not to reach our pledge goal, but to reach the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. So be it. Go to it.