

The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Philippians 3-4b-14
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One of the greatest college basketball coaches ever used to say to his teams so often that it just became part of the team's culture: "I will never pull you out of the game for making a mistake. I will pull you out of the game for being selfish, or for lack of effort." There is great wisdom in that: "I will never pull you out of the game for making a mistake. I will pull you out of the game for being selfish, or for lack of effort." What the coach was trying to do was instill confidence in his players. He didn't want them playing tentatively, or afraid that if they did make a mistake they'd be pulled out of the game. 'I won't pull you out of the game for making a mistake. As long as you're giving great effort, and playing team basketball.' It's a brilliant approach. Instill confidence in your players. Help them believe in themselves. Help them know that you believe in them.

And the other approach to this was: 'Play the game with joy.' If you are playing tentatively, if you are afraid of making a mistake then you're not playing with joy. When children begin to play games they do so for fun. And this coach was trying to get his players to understand: 'Play with joy. Remember why you started playing this game as a kid. Don't be afraid of making a mistake, just give me great effort, and be a good teammate.' It's a brilliant approach to getting the best out of people, to help them believe in themselves.

When a game was particularly tight, particularly in a visiting arena, when the team was on the road and they had a hostile crowd, booing everything they did, pulling so strongly for the home team, this coach would kneel down in the huddle oftentimes near the end of the game, with thousands of people against them, and he would look at his team and smile and say: "Isn't this fun?" And sometimes he would say: "Let's shut these people up."

We'll celebrate in the locker room." Again, instilling confidence: 'Don't be afraid in this hostile arena. Believe in yourselves. I believe in you.'

It was about eighteen years ago, I went to a psychologist for help with stress. To all outward appearances my life looked perfect, but it wasn't. And so after we exchanged pleasantries this psychologist looked directly at me. To this day, I can picture in my mind where he was sitting and I know where I was sitting. I remember the moment when he looked at me and said: "Are you a perfectionist?" I thought about that for a minute and said: "I don't think so." He just gave me this knowing smile and he said: "Well, let's talk about that." And the ensuing conversation changed my life. I choose those words very carefully. The ensuing conversation changed my life. I had not, up to that point, allowed myself to recognize how much pressure I was putting on myself to always be perfectly prepared, to always know the answer, to always meet someone's expectations. I am aware looking back at my life of some of what put me in this position. I do have a handle on some of it, why I had such a struggle with perfectionism. For some of it I'm sure I don't know why. But this conversation helped me recognize the crippling pressure I was putting on myself to always look perfect. Now, mind you, in my gut I knew I wasn't perfect! There was no illusion that I really was perfect. I just felt like I had to present myself that way.

"Are you a perfectionist?" "I don't think so." "Well, let's talk about that." A moment that changed my life. He and I talked for fifteen weeks, one afternoon a week. Fifteen weeks. And during this period I came to recognize that I was serving the Lord, faithfully. But I came to recognize that I was serving the Lord out of a sense of duty and obligation rather than from a place of joy. This series of conversations changed my life when I began to, at last, reckon with the fact that the grace I preached with such commitment, I could allow myself to feel. The compassion that I offered to so many, I could offer that same

compassion to myself. I had never allowed myself to feel what I so fervently offered to others. I don't use this terminology very often. I don't know that I've ever called myself this in public but I know in my heart that I'm a recovering perfectionist. And, it's something I still wrestle with daily. Daily! It's two steps forward and one step back. Two steps forward and one step back. But two steps forward and one step back is progress.

In Philippians 3:10, Paul writes the most personal thing he ever writes in all of his letters. Paul is never more personal than when he writes: "I want to know Christ." And then he goes on to say in verse 12: "Not that I have already obtained this or have reached the goal." I want to know Christ in his fullness. I want to know the peace of Christ, the love of Christ, the joy of Christ in fullness, but "Not that I have already obtained this or reached the goal."

There are many translations of Philippians that read this way which is also a perfectly legitimate translation of the Greek: "Not that I have already attained this or have already been made perfect." In the biblical Greek you can translate what our lesson today has as "goal" as "perfect." So Paul is saying here in this very personal way: 'I want to know Christ in his fullness. I want the peace of Christ, the joy of Christ. But I know I don't have it all yet.' In 1 Corinthians Paul writes: "Now we see through a glass dimly. Then we shall see face to face." Life is a journey until the end. We don't have to be perfect yet. All were asked to be is faithful.

"I want to know Christ," Paul says, "not that I have already obtained this, or have reached the goal, not that I have already attained this, and am perfect." And then he writes: "But I press on." One of the great insights of Paul. "I know I'm not perfect." "I know I have my issues," we might say in our language. 'I know I have my growing edges, but I press on. I'm

not defeated. I'm not giving up.' "I want to know Christ in his fullness. I know that I have not yet reached perfection but I press on." Extraordinary wisdom.

And then at the end of this passage Paul writes one of the great insights in all of his writings, and in all of the biblical record. This is one of those moments in scripture where the words just leap off of the page and take hold of us if we're really thoughtfully engaged in what's being said. "I want to know Christ. I know that I've not yet reached perfection but I press on." And then Paul writes: "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." I know I'm not perfect, says Paul. I have my regrets. There are things that I wish I could change but I can't. But this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on. 'I don't have to be perfect yet,' says Paul, 'That day will come in Christ. But today I can be faithful. Today I can live fearlessly without fear of failure. Today I can go for it. I can press on because I'm the beloved of God. I am redeemed, forgiven, and cherished. Not as I will be, but as I am.' "Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on."

I'm going to end with this. Some of you know that I love to read bumper stickers. I love to look at church signs. I read every billboard I can. And I'm always watching what's around me. I've looked at hundreds of bumper stickers in my life, thousands probably. Hundreds of church signs, thousands probably. While I was studying this week and thinking about this passage one bumper sticker came to mind. And I realized that of all the bumper stickers I have ever seen, of all the messages I've ever read this is the one that sticks and has had the most lasting impact. Here is the most poignant bumper sticker message I've ever seen: "Be patient with me. God's not finished with me yet." Amen.