

October 8, 2017
Eighteenth Sunday After Pentecost

“Onward”
by Mary Anne Biggs

Philippians 3:4-14 ~ Matthew 21:33-46

My father was really big on perseverance proverbs. "When the going gets tough, the tough get going," he would remind us. "Quitters never win and winners never quit." It made sense that he would emphasize persistence, as he was a child of the depression. His father, like his father before him was president of the bank, but the bank failed after the great crash. The family had to pull themselves up by their bootstraps, and learn to be grateful to have boots. He worked hard to put himself through college and graduate school. He went on to fight in the European theater in WWII, and was wounded on the beaches of Normandy on D Day. It was important to him that we fulfill our potential and contribute to society. I appreciated his desire for his children to use their gifts, and I admired his accomplishments. But it would have been nice ... every now and then ... to be able to quit something! My meager talents certainly would not have been missed at piano recitals, for instance, and enrolling in calculus was a mistake from the very beginning.

Paul, in writing to the Philippians, was just as insistent as my father that one can never give up ... but must press on. I don't know if he would have insisted I stay at the piano bench or the back row of calculus class. But I know he would want for me what he clearly wanted for the Philippians ... not a perseverance toward success ... but a perseverance of the soul. He would want me to persevere in my walk with Christ.

And let me tell you, I can really use a push in *that* direction ... because *I am sick and tired*. *I am sick and tired* of living in fear of gun violence. *I am sick and tired* of living in a culture where gun violence is tolerated. *I am sick and tired* of hearing people defend the 2nd amendment over the 6th commandment ... "Thou Shall Not Kill." *I am sick and tired* of hearing politicians bemoan mass shootings and making no effort to halt them. *I'm sick and tired* of wondering how anyone could carry out such an act ... and why it could possibly be legal for ordinary citizens to own such lethal weapons. *I'm sick and tired* of waking to news programs reporting "The worst mass shooting in modern American history." *I'm sick and tired*, because we've heard these words so many times before ... only to have the next mass shooting supersede the former. *I am sick and tired* of the need to toll our bell an ever-increasing number of times to mourn and honor the dead. *I am sick and tired ... of being sick and tired* ... and if you are too ... I implore you to contact those who represent you in Congress and let them know that you are a constituent ... that you want to make gun reform a priority ... and that you *expect* to see them take strong action on common sense gun reforms ... like legislation to strengthen the background check process ... like legislation that prohibits the sale of high-powered assault weapons ... and high capacity magazines ... and bump stocks. Bump stocks are what Stephen Paddock used to fire the automatic rounds that shot more than 500 people in Las Vegas, and they were perfectly legal, according to rules established by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF). This is vital... because our nation's absolute refusal to enact responsible gun legislation all but guarantees the next tragedy ... and the one that follows ... again and again and again.

Yes, I need Paul today, as do we all. We need his words of encouragement. They are all the more helpful to my anxious heart because he isn't out lolling on the shores of the Mediterranean. He is writing to the Philippians from prison on trial for his life. His beloved Philippian church was worried about him. They sent Epaphroditus with gifts ... to see if he was surviving his ordeal. And they had reason to be concerned. In the letter, you can hear Paul's faith ... but also his anxiety as he speaks of his possible execution. He says,

To me, living is Christ and dying is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me; but I do not know which I prefer. I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you. Since I am convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith, so that I may share abundantly in your boasting in Christ Jesus when I come to you again. (Philip. 1:18-26).

When you're facing death ... especially execution for your beliefs ... you can't help but reflect on the meaning of your life and the value of the sacrifices you have made. We know what Paul suffered for the sake of the gospel ... beatings, assassination attempts, imprisonment, misunderstanding from his friends, abuse from his enemies. But Paul also sacrificed a great deal. So, the Apostle reflects on what he has given up:

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 (Phil 3:5-6).

Quite a resume for a Jew to claim in those days, and Paul did not find being a Torah-obedient Jew an impossible burden. It was a source of pride ... a significant accomplishment for God! Paul was a rising star among the young Jewish rabbis of his day. But he gave it all up. The people he had loved all his life lost all respect for him. He had met their standards ... he had accepted their laurels, but he gave all of that up to follow his conscience ... to follow Christ ... to persevere in carrying the gospel to the despised Gentiles. Was it worth it?

Whatever gains I had, (writes Paul) 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 (Phil 3:7-9).

It's a funny thing about accomplishment. So often we strive for something ... a degree, recognition, a job, a position of status, or even some material good. And when we get it, we find it doesn't mean as much to us as we thought it would. It isn't worth what we sacrificed to gain it. Instead, we discover something else that makes life worth living ... that gives us peace ... fulfillment ... inner joy. We feel the pain of what we have lost ... yet somehow it shrinks in relation to what we have gained ... and the sacrifices of persevering are somehow liberating.

That is what Paul discovered in his long obedience to Christ:

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 (Phil 3:10-11).

I love that *"if somehow."* Paul is humble about what he has accomplished. He knows it was actually God's doing. And he is not so arrogant as to presume he has grasped it yet. He goes on to write, *"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 toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus"* (Phil 3:12-14).

Paul chooses the metaphor of chariot races in that passage, even though his physical movements in prison are severely limited. Yet this is the metaphor he chooses to inspire the Philippians to persevere and press on. It is an athletic, physical, and forward-moving metaphor. Hear verse 13 and 14 once again.

"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 toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:13-14).

In Roman culture the circus, with its chariot races, provided the most popular form of entertainment. The first and the greatest circus of all was the Circus Maximus in Rome. Philippians 3:13-14 describes the charioteer ... intent on the race ... his eyes fixed on the front ... not daring to look behind lest the slightest pressure on the reins (wrapped around his body) produce a false move and cause him to lose the race and possibly his life.

We know that persistence proverbs are a staple of self-help, achievement-oriented wisdom. They teach us to persist so we can succeed in personal goals. Often, perseverance is seen as a positive quality because it is a means of winning out over others. But that was *never* Paul's point. For Paul, it is a way to get closer to Christ. It means not looking back, but looking ahead toward Christ with single-minded purpose.

And an important part of perseverance is not looking back. Jesus himself in Luke 9:62 says *"No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."* The chariot metaphor is a perfect vehicle (pardon the pun!) for Paul to explain to his readers that those who long to be like Christ face danger in looking back. He knew that dwelling on past achievements could bring complacency ... and that dwelling on past failures could make one despondent. For Paul, both are best forgotten in the interest of pressing on toward the objective.

Paul's notion of perseverance and its goal are different from the secular success motivation of sayings like "See you at the top!" In contrast, we see Paul's brand of perseverance of the soul in the African-based belief system, reflected both in the culture of the slave era ... and in Africa today ... which places high value on patience and perseverance. A Yoruba proverb declares, "the snail climbs the tree carefully and slowly." This statement is typical of a whole body of wisdom praising the virtues of making steady progress toward a goal in contrast to haste, which often fails. An often-quoted biblical saying in African American communities is "The race is not

to the swift but to him that endureth to the end" (a collation of Ecclesiastes 9:11 and Matthew 24:13). The old Spiritual expresses the sentiment of determination and perseverance well ... "I have decided to follow Jesus. No turning back, no turning back."

A woman tells of a conversation with her elderly mother, in her early nineties, still active in visiting the sick, preparing communion elements, and tutoring children at the elementary school.

"Mother," she said, "don't you think at your age you could back off from these activities and enjoy a lighter schedule? You've earned it after all these years, and I'm afraid you're tiring yourself out."

Her mother drew herself up to her full five feet tall and answered, "When I decided to follow Jesus, I did not promise to follow him part of the way. I promised to serve him all the way. And that is what I intend to do."

I don't know what her daughter said to that. What could she say? But I know what Paul would have said. He would have nodded in agreement and affirmation and said, "*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 toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus*" (Phil 3:-13,14). As must we, beloved, as must we. We must put aside our anger, but not our righteous indignation. We must never forget that the majesty of God undergirds all that is ... that the mercy of Christ accepts and helps us to carry our despair ... and that the comfort of the Spirit embraces us in communities of care. We are called to ventures of which we cannot see the ending ... by paths as yet untrodden ... through perils unknown. But God has given us the grace to go out with good courage ... not always knowing where we go ... but *always* knowing whose hand is leading us ... and whose love is supporting us as we press ever onward.

May we pray?

O God, where hearts are fearful and constricted, grant courage and hope. Where anxiety is infectious and widening, grant peace and reassurance. Where impossibilities seem to close every door and window, grant imagination and resistance. Where distrust twists our thinking, grant healing and illumination. Where spirits are daunted and weakened, grant soaring wings and strengthened dreams. All these things we ask in the name of Jesus Christ, our Savior. Amen.