

September 24, 2006
Psalm 121, Philippians 3:2-14
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"The Goal of Life"

The son of a well-to-do family in the clothing business had an easy life. As a child, he had everything he needed and most of what he wanted. In fact, he was over-indulged and spoiled. He had plenty of spending money, which he freely spent and thoughtlessly wasted. He was an indifferent student, learning only what he needed to know to "get around." Then, in his twenty-fifth year, he became very ill. The experience led him to make a change. He gave up his life as an affluent young man whose main goal in life was seeking pleasure. Through his faith in God, he found a new goal in life. He gave up wealth for voluntary poverty; he gave up hatred, rancor and ill-will for a gospel of forgiveness, grace and peace; he gave up superficial pleasures for a life of deep joy; he gave up being of the world to become Christ's servant in the world. He wrote a familiar prayer that captures the heart of this transformation.

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.
Where this is hatred, let me sow love;
Where there is injury, pardon;
Where there is doubt, faith;
Where there is despair, hope;
Where there is darkness, light;
And where there is sadness, joy.
O Divine Master,
grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console;
to be understood as to understand;
to be loved as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive;
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

This man we have come to know as St. Francis of Assisi.

In every choice we make in life, there is something to be given up and something to be gained. The apostle Paul discovered the goal of his life in following Jesus Christ. We all know the story of Paul's encounter with the Risen Lord on the road to Damascus. We even speak of a person's sudden conversion to the faith as having a *road to Damascus* experience. By that we usually mean that someone has turned from a sinful, self-focused life to a life of faithful devotion to Christ.

Some people do come to Christ by turning away from evil, letting go of self-destructive behavior and recognizing how their actions are hurting others, God and themselves. Yet, some people come to Christ by letting go of something good and taking hold of something greater. This is how Paul understood his own conversion to Christ. In his letter to the

Philippians, Paul talks about his life as a pious Jew. He says that if anyone wants to boast about his or her credentials, goodness, heritage or devotion, he can out boast them all. He calls this boasting "confidence in the flesh," which means building our sense of identity, self-worth and standing before others and even before God based upon our family background and our accomplishments. Paul's credentials as a Jew are impeccable: "circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. (3:5-6)." Paul was no skid row, bar room convert to Christianity. In fact, Paul says he found pride and confidence in his religious heritage and life; he was confident, that is, until he found Christ or, I should say, was found by Christ.

At that moment, nothing that he had treasured about the past mattered anymore. Paul says that whatever gain he had, he came "to regard as loss because of Christ. (3:7)." Nothing compares the "surpassing value of knowing Christ" and "being found in him." He even speaks of all the things in his past life that brought him such confidence and joy as rubbish or garbage. Living for Jesus Christ has become the new goal of his life.

The New Testament scholar Krister Stendahl has commented that when we speak of Paul's experience on the road to Damascus as a conversion, we fail to see the connection between Paul's life as a Jew and Paul's life as a Christian. To our ears, conversion implies giving up a sordid past and accepting a new God or a new religion. Paul never changed gods or changed religion. He came to a new understanding of the God he had always known and worshipped. He came to see that the God of Abraham and Sarah was present in Jesus Christ. Stendahl suggests that instead of saying that Paul was converted, perhaps we should say that Paul was called to a new understanding of God and a new mission for God. (*Paul Among Jews and Gentiles*, p 7ff.) The transformation that takes place in Paul's life speaks to those who may not feel they have any need for Christ, whose lives seem to be moving along their charted course just fine, and who are focused on their own goals of success, accomplishment and upward mobility. Paul's experience challenges those who seem to have it all and who think they, apart from Jesus Christ, already know what the good life is. Life is about more than our human accomplishments; it is about more than what we do or how much we make; it is about more than our education or our connections or our influence. Human life is about knowing Christ and living in the power of Christ's resurrection. Yes, Christ is here for those whose lives are overwhelmed by trouble, despair and sin. Christ is also here for those who seem to have it all and who do not yet realize just how much they need Christ.

Albert Schweitzer was a talented organist and a gifted theologian. His work on the chorales and cantatas of Bach received great recognition. His theological work, *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*, caused quite a stir when it appeared. He was in Paris studying music when he heard the call of Christ. He gave up his work in music and theology in order to study medicine and go to Africa as a medical missionary. Like Paul, he had heard the call of Christ. He also heard the critical words of his friends and colleagues who thought he would be wasting his life in Africa. Schweitzer wrote, "My relatives and friends all joined in expostulating with me on the folly of my enterprise. I was a man, they said, who was burying the talent entrusted to him and wanted to trade with false currency... it moved me strangely to see them so far from perceiving that the effort to serve the love preached by

Jesus may sweep a man into a new course of life..." (Quoted in *Conversions*, ed. by Hugh Kerr, p. 192).

The love of Jesus Christ swept Paul into a new course of life. Paul uses the image of runner poised to run a race as a picture of what it means to live with Jesus Christ as the goal of life.

"...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." (3:13,14).

As Christians, our past conditioning and experiences will shape how we run the race set before us. As runners, we cannot rest on past accomplishments or dwell on past defeats. Like Paul, we forget what lies behind. As runners we take our stance, leaning into the future, ready to run. As runners we keep our eyes on the goal of life - "the heavenly call of God in Jesus Christ." Dr. Fred Craddock has written, "Faith for [Paul] involved running, wrestling, striving and fighting, none of which would end until the day of Christ.... All that effort was not for merit but was rather the activity of one who had abandoned all claim to merit. Trust in God's grace did not make Paul less active... but rather set him free to run without watching his feet, without counting his steps, without competing with other servants of Christ. (*Interpretation Commentary on Philippians*, p. 61).

As a congregation of God's people, we have a race to run. Later in this morning's service we will hear from eighth-grader Joshua Matthews about how his parent's call to serve Christ led them on a new path in ministry. Their call led them to serve as missionaries in Africa. This decision has not only changed the course of their lives, but also their children's sense of God's work in the world.

In a few weeks we will celebrate Dedication Sunday. Dedication Sunday is a time to take stock of how we are running the race set before us. I think about the astonishing gifts, talents and resources that God has given this congregation. These gifts, these talents and these resources, however good they may be, are not ends in themselves. They are not the goal of life. They are the means God gives us so that we may faithfully run the race. I see where we can go and how much we can accomplish as the people of God if we put our whole selves into the race. We will not run the race if we merely sit still, look back with contentment at past accomplishments and do not step out in faith and face the challenges of this day. We will not run the race if we do not grow in our giving, our service, our worship and our study.

Together, we lean into the future God has planned for this church. We keep our eyes on Jesus so that we may become like him. What a beautiful race it will be when we "run without watching our feet, without counting our steps, without competing with others." We let go of everything that hinders our running and we take flight.