



World Communion Sunday, October 4, 2020

Pressing On

The Reverend Dr. John A. Dalles
Psalm 19:1-6, 11-14; Philippians 3:4b-14

In some neighborhoods of our city, the sidewalks are not what you might expect: a flat, level surface for you to walk upon. No. Here and there, throughout the city, the sidewalks are stairways. Some of them have very steep roads alongside them. Others have no roads at all, just a long stairway from down here to up there. I believe you could make a plan to visit these stairway sidewalks and to go up as many of them as you can. It might be a goal worth achieving — because the stairs in Pittsburgh are a lot like life, with its challenges and its opportunities, right there in front of us, just waiting for us to take them on.

In our Scripture passage from Philippians, Paul is encouraging his favorite congregation to see the stairways in front of them, and to meet the challenge to climb them, wherever they may be. I do not know if they were experiencing a pandemic then as we are now. What a challenging climb this has been: physically challenging, as we have learned to be in safe places at safe distances observing safe practices; and mentally challenging, as we arrange how we think about everything from working at home to meeting online; and spiritually challenging, as we find ways to worship and learn and grow together, when we have to do them all virtually.

As I say, I do not know for certain about the Philippians. But the Early Church did face problems as big as a pandemic, and as deadly. And they met those challenges. Otherwise, we would not be Christians; we would not be Presbyterians. We would not be Shadyside Presbyterians. If they had given in or given up, there would be no Church of Jesus Christ. So the guidance and teaching Paul gave them has a foundational practicality about it, for us right now. Paul says: "... forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on"

It sounds as if he is in the middle of some kind of temporary situation — that what is happening today is not the same as what he had come to expect in many past yesterdays. And he also has a sense that what is happening today will not be happening from here on in. Have you gotten to that realization? Or do you cling to wishing that what is happening today would somehow magically transform itself into what lies behind — the good old days?

Yes, Paul states he is in a temporary situation. What is happening today is not the same as in his yesterdays. What is happening today will not be happening from here on in. Have you come to that realization? Have you accepted the truth that, even though you have adapted to the weirdness of 2020, that it is not always going to be 2020? That 2021 and 2022 might very possibly bring a different reality? Have you strained forward, leaning into the present as it becomes tomorrow?

Some of the unhappiest people I have met in life were not happy that today was different from yesterday. Usually it had to do with personal loss. Someone close to them had died, at some time in the past. They looked back to before that day, and saw back then happier and carefree times. We understand that longing for what was. And yet, we cannot go back. We cannot change our personal history. So why would we allow ourselves to be forevermore constrained by such things? Honor the memories. Give thanks for the memories. But lean into what's happening now.

Among those many sidewalk stairways in Pittsburgh, there is one particular set of stairs. You probably know about it. I am talking about the Ella Street steps in Bloomfield. What makes them memorable is what you see when you are going up. Someone has hand-painted on all of the risers, so that each one of them says, in big bold capital letters: **TRY**. One step, and then the next, and then the next, as you go up the steep hillside, each one saying: **TRY. TRY. TRY.**

Like our passage of Scripture, they stand as a message of encouragement. Because on every one of the risers, someone has come along and given us a word to help us on our way, even as Paul has come along and given us his word to help us on our way. Encouragement. **Try**. You can do it. **Try**. With Christ and in Christ.

Maybe right now you do not much feel like pressing on. The realities of your life, and the world, are such that it has made you discouraged and left you drained. And yet there are more steps ahead of you. Scripture says, **Try. Try. Try.**

Will you grip the sturdy railing that steadies you? Will you sense that the power of Christ is doing for you what you fear you cannot do on your own? Will you trust, as well, that you are not doing this alone; that there are others who are on this same journey? They have taken on some of the work, so that you must not do it all. They are there to support you and strengthen you.

Today of all days, we are aware of our sisters and brothers in Christ. On this World Communion Sunday, we could look back to 1933, or any of the years since, and focus on that past. As wonderful as it was, it will make us an unhappy congregation to define ourselves only in that way. We will get stuck somewhere on our faith journey, partway up the stairs — like a church version of A. A. Milne's Christopher Robin.

*Halfway up the stairs
Isn't up
And isn't down.
It isn't in the nursery,
It isn't in the town.
And all sorts of funny thoughts
Run round my head:
"It isn't really
Anywhere!
It's somewhere else
Instead!"*

(poem by A.A. Milne, included in the 1924 collection *When We Were Very Young*)

Have you stopped at a place that isn't really anywhere? Are all sorts of funny thoughts running round your head? Try. Try anew. Try again. Say with Paul, "I press on, to make it my own."