

Called to Persevere

Philippians 3:12-4:1

Dr. M. Craig Barnes

Sunday, October 15, 2000

We live in a culture that tempts us to rush about every day in a hundred different directions that tear at our souls. The only people who survive are those who know who they are, and what they are about.

After working for months on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, painting from scaffolding while lying on his back, Michelangelo found that his hands and arms had become numb, and as heavy as his heart. He was attempting to capture a hint of the glory of creation, but the project was proving to be too difficult. One night, exhausted and discouraged, he climbed down, ate a quiet dinner by himself, and then wrote a brief sonnet to his aching body. The last words of the sonnet were, "I am no painter." But the next morning Michelangelo got out of bed, climbed back up his scaffolding, and resumed his calling to depict the Creator's majesty. What was it that made him pick up that paintbrush once again? I want to let this question just hang in the air for a few moments. I'll return to it later.

We are spending this year of worship looking at the theme of calling. I have begun the theme by preaching from Philippians on our calling to come to Jesus Christ. In the third chapter of this book, Paul begins by making the claim that knowing Jesus Christ is of surpassing worth to everything else. But he isn't just telling us to know about Christ. He's telling us that we can know Christ in a relationship that is so close and overwhelming that we actually begin to participate in the life of Christ. We are dying to our old life on the cross with him, and we are then raised with him to a new life that looks just like his life.

This is the goal of our calling in life -- to become just like Jesus. It isn't our goal that we strive to achieve through hard work. It is God's goal that he achieves through the work of the Holy Spirit. As the Holy Spirit perseveres in this transforming conversion of your life, the world around you gets a vision of who Jesus Christ is, by looking at you. This is what we mean when we refer to the church as the Body of Christ. Through the people in the church, the Spirit is continuing the work of Christ on earth. In the words of the medieval mystic Theresa de Avila, "Christ has no body on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which Christ's compassion looks out to the world. Yours are the feet with which he goes about doing good. Yours are the hands with which he blesses us now."

So let us at least keep clear about our goal: to become the eyes, feet, and hands of Jesus. But in today's passage Paul continues by saying, "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." I press on, Paul says, because Christ has given me his identity on earth. I press on, to look and act more and more like him. For all of his many personality quirks and idiosyncracies, the Apostle Paul is at least a model of perseverance. He knows who he is, and he knows what he is about. Conflict, stoning, and imprisonment cannot keep him from his goal.

Now actually, I think perseverance is an overrated virtue. Unless the thing in which you are persevering makes you more like Christ. This, then, is a good criteria for deciding if you should persevere in a direction or make a change to begin doing something else. Which option will make you more like Christ? Typically, the answer is the harder option. So perseverance is not always a good thing. Also, it isn't helpful when you are persevering in an activity for which you have no gift. It doesn't matter how long I stand in the Sistine Chapel with a paint brush in my hand, I'm not going to come up with anything remotely resembling art.

It's also unhelpful to persevere when you are lost and are heading in the wrong direction. Earl Palmer, pastor of the University Presbyterian Church in Seattle, tells a story about a time when he was a seminarian at Princeton. Over Christmas break he and some friends were driving back to the west coast. Their plan was to drive straight through, alternating drivers while the others in the car slept. Halfway through the country, in the middle of the night, the driver of their car pulled into a gas station, filled the tank, woke Earl up, and told him it was his turn to drive. Earl jumped behind the steering wheel and, still a bit sleepy, got back on the highway driving east without realizing it. For hours he continued to speed along the road so proud of the good time he was making. But then he saw a beautiful sunrise coming up ahead of him. Maybe it is a problem all pastors have, but Earl says his first response to this vision was to wonder what the sun was doing rising in the west? "How can this be?" he wondered. But when the others in the car woke up, they assured him, he had not seen a miracle but had just spent the night persevering in the wrong direction.

If you realize that you have been heading in the wrong direction in life, wasting time collecting the wrong things, or spending too long working for a company that has sucked away your soul, don't think it is a spiritual experience to persevere. Don't think God is calling you to a dogged commitment to keep going in the wrong direction. Don't even spend a lot of time in prayer asking God, "How can this be?" Just turn around! The sooner you do, the sooner you'll start heading in the right direction.

So the call to persevere is not necessarily the call to become a thirty-year company man or woman. The calling is to stay clear about your ultimate goal in life -- becoming like Jesus Christ. The way you do that, according to Paul, is to "forget about what lies behind and strain forward to what lies ahead." We just had a wonderful illustration of this a couple of weeks ago in the Olympics. When you saw the athletes racing for the finish line, not a one was thinking about the past. They were not thinking about either the failures or victories that were behind them. All their energy and thought were focused on straining for the finish line. There is nothing that will prevent you from moving ahead like turning your attention to things behind you.

In spite of spending so much time persecuting the church, dragging its members into jail, and participating in the stoning of Stephen, isn't it striking that nowhere in the New Testament do we ever get even a sense that Paul felt guilty about that? Why? He had forgotten about it, because he believed he was forgiven and even God forgets about forgiven sin. Of all human emotions, guilt is the least useful to us. It paralyzes us with a preoccupation over what we did, making it impossible to move toward the goal. The goal, remember, is being like Christ. And Christ is not guilty. Neither can you be.

By contrast, others of us look back upon the past as a better time than we are having now. Those, we say, were the "good ol' days." We say that because, when we look ahead, we see only reasons for anxiety: loss of health, loss of loved ones, our children moving farther and farther away, the nursing home moving closer and closer. But anxiety about the future will paralyze you just as badly as guilt about the past. Again, the goal is to be like Christ. And Christ is not afraid. Neither can you be.

Well, with the temptation to be guilty behind us, and the temptation to be anxious ahead of us, how can we press on in the present? Only by finding Jesus Christ in your past and future. When you hurt someone in the past, or failed at something important back then, or wasted time running so fast in the wrong direction, you have to remember that Jesus Christ was there also. Whether you realized it or not, Jesus was covering your sins with the forgiveness and mercy of the cross. So you have to take the past out of your hands and leave it in his hands. He alone can heal the hurts, redeem the failures, and even use the wrong roads to get you to the right place.

When you are worried about the necessary losses or the volatility of the future, you have to remember that the only thing we know for certain about the future is that the same Savior we met in the past will be waiting for us down the road. If there is a cross ahead for you, Christ will lead you there — only to bring you to his resurrection where more new life and more opportunity to be converted to his image are waiting.

In the meantime, we press on, persevering in our commitment to receive more of this delicious conversion into the image of Jesus. That is who you are. And every day the Holy Spirit will help you become more and more who you really are.

Now let us return to Michelangelo as he climbs back up that scaffolding to paint the Sistine Chapel. Why did a discouraged and tired artist persevere? Because he was a painter, and no amount of self-doubt could convince him to the contrary. Why do I keep climbing back into your pulpit Sunday after Sunday? Because I am a preacher. Why do you keep climbing back into minivans to cart kids around and run errands? Why do you keep returning to school and work and all of your responsibilities? Why do you persevere? Because you are called to it. But our callings are not just to work, or preach, or paint. That is only a means to fulfilling our deeper calling of becoming like Christ in all these places.

If you keep running to different places, you may get distracted thinking the next place will make you happy. But it won't. It never has, has it? No, happiness comes from being the eyes, feet, and hands of Jesus wherever you are.

Lord God, in the midst of the many competing demands of life, we yearn to find the one thing that will center us, telling us who we are and what we are about. So we ask that your Holy Spirit will break into the rush our daily routines with a persevering image of Jesus Christ, our Savior, our Mission, our Life. Amen.