



Broad Street Presbyterian Church

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“Press On”

Philippians 3:4b-14

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Paul’s letter to the Philippians reveals an intimacy between the apostle and a young church. He writes from prison, yet is full of joy. In today’s reading Paul tells how he has cleaned house. He has thrown away his valuables.

This week Broad Street staff shared stories about valuables they have thrown away. A home owner threw away her house-keys. That turned out to be a costly mistake! A daughter-in-law threw away an expensive table cloth from a mother-in-law. That apparently was not a mistake! And then there’s the staff member with a hand carved wooden crèche set, who decided to enhance the drama of advent by hiding the small wooden baby Jesus, in order to wait and put him in the manger the night before Christmas. She wrapped him in tissue paper and tucked him behind the crèche, on the fireplace mantle. Unfortunately, a family member knocked the unassuming bundle of tissue into the fire and baby Jesus went up in flames.

Throwing valuables away, losing them, burning them, leaves us with pangs of regret, a surge of nostalgia. That’s why the act of downsizing is so very, very hard.

And then there are times when our valuables go up in flames from no fault of our own. Times they are wrenched away, stolen. In Las Vegas, the festival grounds across the street from the Mandalay Bay Resort and Casino remain a crime scene, littered with valuables. Shoes, baby strollers, chairs, sunglasses, purses. Sunday night’s horror wrenched valuables from owners and killed people. Lots and lots of people. Hopes and dreams went up in flames.

This week I’ve alternated between feeling angry and feeling numb. Will this finally motivate change? At the same time a cynical part of me doubts anything will change. Because if we didn’t do anything after the Sandy Hook shootings, what will we do now?

I move from feeling angry and numb to feeling afraid. Afraid this isn’t the last time for such news; that this is only the latest in a continuing string of bloody encounters. Afraid people will keep acquiring semiautomatic rifles and will keep turning them on innocents.

Then there are the heroes—the helpers—first responders, nurses and doctors who worked and are still working to keep so many people alive. I cry when I read about them.

I read about the victims. You have too; these articles shred our hearts. A mother, a new husband, a dog-owner, a hair-dresser, a county clerk, a salmon-fisherman, a soldier. I need tissues to read these bios. Tributes offered by family members leave us weeping.¹

¹ Scott Black Johnston, Senior Pastor, Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, New York City, New York, from weekly email.

This week on the Las Vegas strip something so terrible happened, something so violent and so devastating that we can't get our heads and hearts around it. Stephen Paddock started firing. And when people finally realized what was happening, that those next to them were injured or dying, that they were being shot at, they let go of everything and ran. They dropped it all and ran.

In his own context, in his own time, Paul also drops it all. He drops his social and religious privilege, his family background and education; his 401Ks and diplomas. He drops everything, even his baggage—what he most regrets—his earlier persecution of Christians, his role in their death. He throws all this away and runs, temples pounding, heart pumping, in a different direction. Paul writes:

I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.
(Philippians 3:8)

Paul used to have wealth and community respect. I imagine there's still a part of him that misses his lovely home, that remembers receiving esteem and admiration from others. Paul used to be somebody. Somebody with a secretary, and a vacation home, and memberships in the right clubs. He used to be somebody. Paul writes:

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. (Philippians 3:8-9).

He used to be somebody. Now he's God's. Paul writes from prison, where loss is real. He is no longer free. Yet he is at liberty. And so he counts all his achievements as loss. He brings nothing to the table, except for the conviction that he's been claimed by God. He is Christ's own. It's as if Paul says, "All I've got, *all I've got*, is whose I am."

Roman Catholic priest Henri Nouwen writes about the challenge of integrating the entirety of our life experience:

To be grateful for the good things that happen in our lives is easy, but to be grateful for all of our lives—the good as well as the bad, the moments of joy as well as the moments of sorrow, the successes as well as the failures, the rewards as well as the rejections—that requires hard spiritual work... Let us not be afraid to look at everything that has brought us to where we are now and trust that we will soon see in it the guiding hand of a loving God.²

Even in prison Paul sees the guiding hand of a loving God. In our time a great challenge for us is to continue to seek and trust that same guiding hand, especially after a week like this one. In the words of Pastor Harry Emerson Fosdick, "God, save us from weak resignation to the evils we deplore."

² <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/681198-to-be-grateful-for-the-good-things-that-happen-in>

Paul wants Christians to press on, like Jesus pressed on. As we face “evils we deplore,” Paul wants us not to resign ourselves to them, not to expect to be saved from them, but to press on in and through them, here, now; to dive in deeply as people of faith. Paul calls us to love, care, give, serve, suffer and sacrifice like Jesus did. Jesus is everything to him; his light, his Savior, his companion, his destination. Paul sits in a prison cell, staring death in the face. But internally, spiritually, he’s running—running toward Jesus with temples pounding, heart pumping, muscles aching, face sweating, he is running.³ Paul writes:

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

We may never in our lifetimes meet anyone who takes Jesus this seriously, who presses on to this degree. Paul inspires the Philippians. This week, he inspires us. We press on when we act justly. When we put love into action. We press on when, as responsible citizens, we express resolve. And we press on when we pray. So let us do that. Let us pray:

Precious Lord, walk alongside us through this terrible valley. Steady our steps. Give us hope. Hold the wounded—the wounded in body, the wounded in spirit. Hold us. Pour your peace over our heads like balm. Save us from this madness. Show us how to press on. Help us press on.⁴ Amen.

³ Fred Craddock, *The Cherry Log Sermons*, p. 98.

⁴ *Op.cit.*, Johnston email.