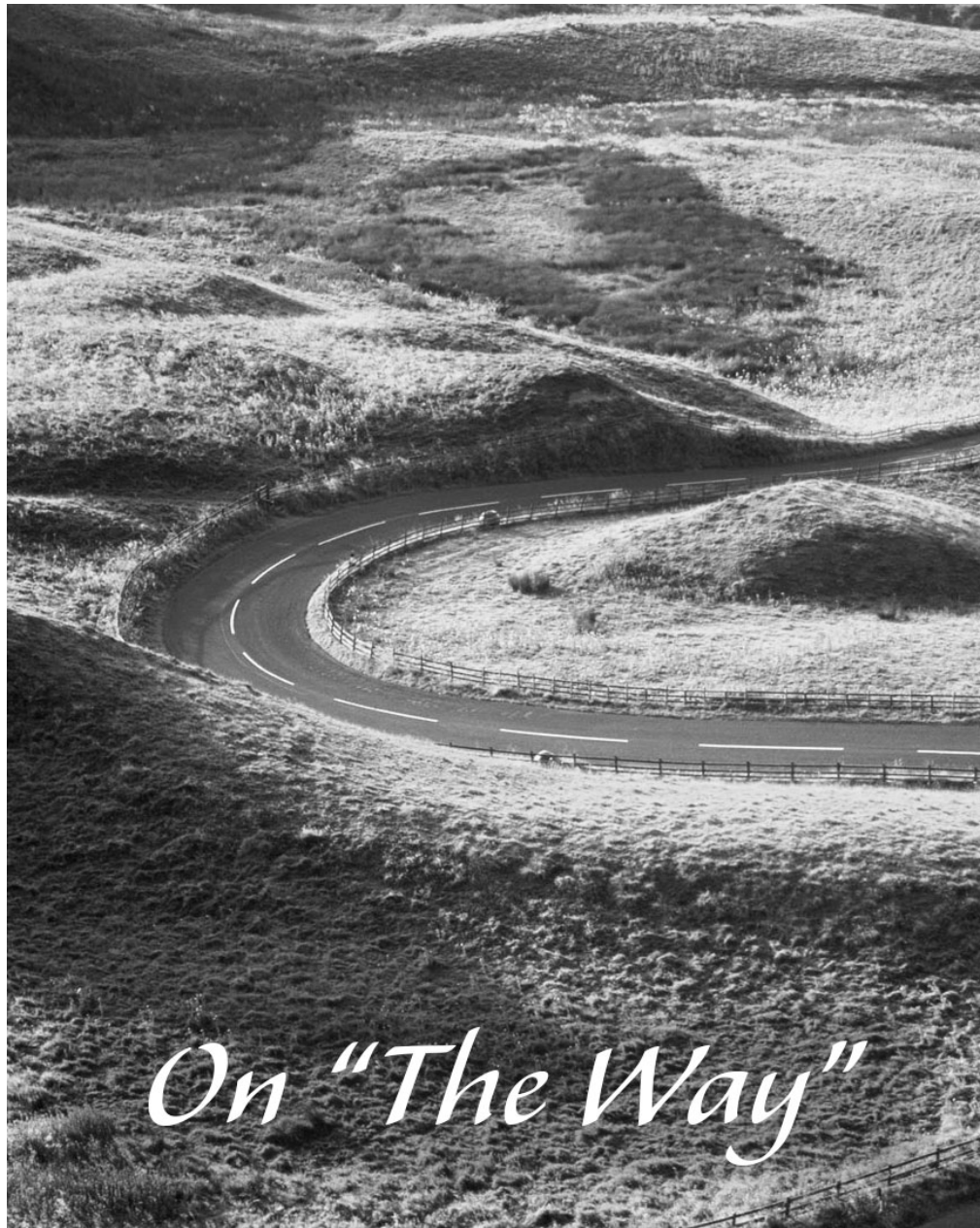


Rev. Philip L. Blackwell • Sunday, March 13, 2016
Text: Philippians 3:4b-14



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Before Christians were known as “Christians,” they were known as followers of “The Way.” Jesus had proclaimed, “I am the way, the truth, and the life,” and those who believed in him set out on a journey to embody for themselves what he had revealed to them as being truly fulfilling in life. Luke reports in his second volume (his first is his gospel, his account of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Christ; the second is the story of what happens next with his followers, The Acts of the Apostles), that Saul, “still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord,” was searching for anyone who “belonged to the Way,” (9:2) to bind them up and deliver them for trial in Jerusalem. Who is Saul? He is the one soon to be Paul, and in a complete reversal he will become a devout follower of “The Way,” who claims his allegiance to the way of Jesus Christ in his defense before Felix the governor, to whom he had been characterized as a “pestilent fellow” and “agitator” for the sect of the Nazarenes. (24:5) From persecutor to persecuted for Jesus’ sake.

So, in our passage from Paul’s letter to the followers of “The Way” in Philippi, he shares the story of his conversion. He identifies all of the privileges he had going for him. He had been circumcised on the eighth day, a sign of validity. He was of the people of Israel, specifically the tribe of Benjamin, an inheritance of proud ancestry. He was a Hebrew of the Hebrews, a claim of orthodoxy. He was a Pharisee, an indication of respectability. He was so devoted to his heritage that he persecuted the church, an act of loyalty. And in terms of the ancient law, he was blameless, a proof of purity.

He had it all, and he gave it all up to follow Jesus, to journey along “The Way.” “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 might 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.” Paul relinquishes his privileged status in order to travel light along “The Way” with the risen Christ.

He is on “The Way.” He tells the Philippians that he has not reached his destination yet, he is not perfect, but he is on the way to perfection. Actually, he did not say it in quite those terms; John Wesley did. But we get to him in a moment. Paul sees his journey in faith taking him closer and closer to the fulfilment and satisfaction that Jesus promises those who follow his way of engaging life, most succinctly, his way of loving God and loving one’s neighbor. “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.” Letting go and moving forward, the journey of faith.

Now, it was John Wesley who characterized this journey as “going on to perfection,” and he took a lot of grief for putting it that way. It sounded like pride and self-delusion to the Anglicans, like gross works-righteousness to the Calvinists. No one could be perfect in this life. Wesley tried to clarify: by Christian perfection I mean “the loving (of) God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength. This implies that no wrong temper, none contrary to love, remains in the soul, and that all thoughts, words, and actions are governed by pure love.” He was asked, “Does this mean that the person is free of all infirmities, ignorance, and mistakes?” And he answered, “Of course not.” We remain human all along “The Way.” (See “Thoughts on Christian Perfection” and his sermons on the subject.)

What he is saying is that if we truly are Christian and trying to follow Jesus’ way of life, then we should be making some progress day by day. This would be true ‘progressive Christianity.’ That is, as we move forward more and more of our life should be infused with God’s love as revealed to us in Jesus Christ. It is not enough to be a Christian for a few hours on Sunday morning. We need for our faith to instruct us and inspire us at work, at the gym, on the golf course, at home, at the card table, in the grandstands, with friends, with strangers, in the classroom, in our finances, in our internal life. All of life lived according to God’s love . . . it is that which leads to fulfilment, to wholeness, to satisfaction . . . to perfection.

“It is biblical,” Wesley could say. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus begins by presenting a long list of ways in which to live in order to make God’s love real, and then he proclaims, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” (Mt. 5:48) Jesus presents a radical example when a rich man asks him why, although he has followed all of the rules of faith, he still feels unfulfilled. Jesus answers, “If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” Going on to perfection by unburdening ourselves from what is holding us back.

I share a story that I think I heard years ago from William Sloane Coffin, Jr., in a sermon at Battell Chapel at Yale University. A man is an alcoholic, a good man, but his life is beyond his control. One day he finally hits bottom, and like the prodigal son, he comes to himself and confesses, “This is not working out. I need to turn myself around.” The man begins to attend Alcoholics Anonymous, returns to the church, fervently and simply gives his life to Christ, newly committed to following his way, and he is transformed. He becomes a responsible father, husband, and employee. One day at work someone pokes fun at his faith. “Do you really believe that Jesus can turn water into wine?” And the man answers, “I do not know if he can turn water into wine, but I do know that he can turn beer into furniture.”

When we are on “The Way,” our lives will reveal the changes that God is working in our hearts through Jesus Christ. Lent is a season during which we pursue “righteousness,” Paul’s word for what is just and true as revealed through

love. We are on the way toward the light of Easter, but only if we are honest with ourselves and pass through the shadows of the cross.

What do we find fulfilling in life? I have a friend, Frank, who just sold his bank. I was his pastor a few decades ago when he felt the frustration and hollowness of being a few steps down in the management food chain of a large corporate bank in the city. Taking a great personal risk, he started a stand-alone bank in a suburb, developing a strong financial base that survived the downturn of a few years ago, a wide range of satisfied customers, a cadre of loyal employees, and a capacity to fund local civic programs . . . children's music, food for the needy, and the like. When he sold the bank I am sure that he made a tidy profit for himself, but he also insisted that the new owners keep the bank open and honor the customers, that they keep all of the current employees, and that they increase the giving to local projects.

We can understand how this would be very fulfilling for Frank, and it is, but he said to me, "Phil, do you know what I find most satisfying? For the first time in decades I have time to do what I want to do, and now I am serving the meals to the people of our community who are in greatest need, the poverty-stricken and the homeless. It is so much more meaningful to deal with the people face-to-face than to sit on a board of directors and figure out policies and procedures for helping needy people." Being on "The Way" by using one's time to do in faith what is fulfilling, completing, satisfying, perfecting.

We live in a culture that requires that we justify our existence. So many people have been laid off and now seek jobs where they have to sell themselves as if they are the best new product on the market. It is like Paul's litany of self-importance: validity, ancestry, orthodoxy, respectability, loyalty, and purity. Put it all on the first page of the job application. We live in a society that asks us, directly or indirectly, "Why should I take you seriously? Of what importance are you to me? Are you worth my time and effort?"

Here comes the good news; those embedded in our culture might not believe it, but it is true: we already are accepted. In God's eyes we already are justified. That is what we say God has done for us in Jesus Christ. Even before we take the first step on "The Way" we are embraced by God's love. That should lighten the load as we move along in our journey of faith. We do not have to prove our worth to God, we only need to move along in God's love to discover what fulfills our deepest yearnings as followers of Christ. What a relief . . . to be accepted just as we are.

In the early 1980's I was the United Methodist campus minister at the University of Chicago in Hyde Park on the South Side. It was a fascinating place to be. In conjunction with my ministry I worked with the staff at Rockefeller Chapel for a few years, and then I enrolled at the Divinity School and took courses there. That is when I got my Doctor of Ministry degree, a professional doctorate, not a PhD. I wear it on my sleeve of my preaching robe, but I do not place it before my name out of deference to those with PhD's.

It also was a time when I began running. I am not built for running. I should have been a soccer player, but no one played that when I was in school, so it was baseball, basketball, and football. But when I was in ministry and on my own, it was hard to find twenty-one others who wanted to play football on Saturday, so I took up running.

The University of Chicago was a good place to do it because it has a highly regarded track club. Back in those days it was coached by Ted Haydon, who also had been a track coach for the U.S. Olympic team. So, when I was on the track to run my intervals, it was possible that I was being passed by Rick Wohlhuter, the national champion in the 800 meters, or by Willye White, five-time Olympian in the long jump and 100 meter dash.

And every day there was Ted Haydon, in his coat and tie, trench coat, broad-brimmed hat, and four stop watches hanging around his neck, standing at the finish line. So, all I had to do was ask Ted, "Please time me for this lap," he would say, "Go!," and I would run as fast as possible, not because I was afraid that he would criticize me for being too slow; he never said a discouraging word to me. No, I ran as fast as I could because he accepted me as the novice that I was and was willing to time me. I was worthy of his attention, and I wanted to do my best.

One day I asked him, "How do you become a member of the University of Chicago Track Club?" He answered, "Well, if you think you are, you probably are." That is all that it took . . . no time trials, no top three finishes in area races. I already had qualified simply by wanting to be part of the club. Talk about grace! Somewhere in a box in the attic I have that University of Chicago Track Club singlet that I wore when I ran the Boston Marathon. I finished at least an hour after the winners, but I was proud to wear it, and I doubt if Ted would have cared what my time was. I never did break three hours in the marathon, or five minutes for the mile, or sixty seconds for a 440 yard lap, but I earnestly pursued the goal because I had been validated and inspired.

So, more importantly, back to Paul, "Not that I have already obtained (God's righteousness) or have already reached the goal, but I press on to make it my own." The call for us, and it is most emphatically heard during this Lenten season, is to continue on "The Way" with Jesus, going on to perfection. We already have been accepted by God; we do not have to justify our existence. There are no good works that we need to do in order to win God's love. But then, given that God already loves us, what good works are we free to perform that will fulfil us, that will satisfy our deepest faithful yearnings?

John Wesley insists that if we are open to God's prodding we should be a more complete Christian today than yesterday. Do not worry about becoming completely Christian and then having nothing more to do; that lies far ahead of us, and probably not in this world. No, what are we called to do now, and what are we willing to forsake in order to do it? Back to Paul's rubbish that he discarded . . . cultural validity, impressive ancestry, admirable orthodoxy, privileged respectability, traditional loyalty, and even conventional purity. He relinquished all of that in order to lighten the load for following "The Way." The journey is worth taking, and today is the time for our next step. What will that step be for you and for me and for us? Amen.