



“Philippians: Official Guide for a Joy-filled Life”

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Saturday & Sunday, October 3-4, 2020
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Camp Hill, Pennsylvania

Philippians 3:4b-14, Matthew 21:33-46

Have you ever been on a long car ride with someone who keeps saying, “Are we there yet?” Or maybe it’s you who finds yourself asking that question while you sit in the car? I’ve been thinking a lot about this question lately, wondering if we are there yet. But instead of a long car ride, we are on the long road of coronavirus. We are wondering, are we returning to normal life anytime soon? Are we there yet?

In fact, it feels like we are in this in-between time; we are still in the middle of the pandemic. Life surely isn’t like pre-corona and life surely isn’t like it will be post-corona. We are living in this tension of what used to be and what will be, so we are left wondering, “are we there yet?”

And so, I wonder what this “in-between-ness” is doing to us. How is it affecting us emotionally, mentally, spiritually? Perhaps you are feeling impatient; you’re ready for this thing to be over. You’re frustrated that we are still living our lives at a distance and masked. Perhaps you are feeling anxious. You feel like you’re being pulled in two different directions: you’re lonely and you want to see people, but you worry about spreading or contracting Covid-19. Perhaps you’re pining for what was. You’re nostalgic for the days when you could go to a restaurant and enjoy a meal with friends. You long for the opportunity to gather with your siblings in Christ for worship without the restrictions or fear.

And mentally? How is the pandemic affecting our mental health? In mid-July, Kaiser Health News asked folks about how the pandemic was affecting their mental health. They found that 53% of adults in the United States reported that their mental health has been negatively impacted due to worry and stress over the coronavirus. 36% said they are having a difficult time sleeping. 40% of adults surveyed said they are experiencing some form of depression or anxiety related to the pandemic. That being said, friends, there is no shame in addressing our mental health; in fact, it shows strength.

And how about spiritually? How is the pandemic affecting our faith? Maybe your faith is like a life jacket keeping you afloat? Maybe you’re wondering where God is in all of this? Maybe you’re a combination of the two?

Regardless, this time of in-between is difficult no matter where you find yourself emotionally, mentally or spiritually. The pandemic and its effects are exhausting. We are weary, uncomfortable, and stretched to the max.

And the reality is, friends that we can't go back to the way things used to be. We can only move forward toward a future that is still unknown. We are at the point of no return. I learned this week of the origin of this phrase. The point of no return is something a pilot might say; while flying a plane, pilots speak of the point of no return, the point in the flight in which there is not enough fuel to go back to their place of departure, so the plane must move forward toward its destination. So, like a plane, we can't go back; we can only go forward, and so there is tension, exhaustion, and frustration in this middle place.

And yet, friends, thanks be to God we are not alone in this mess. This in-between time is not a lone journey. In our reading today from Philippians, Paul writes, "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. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead."

In these verses, Paul uses an athlete's language; he speaks of "the goal." The goal is the end of a foot race, the marker, the finish line that a runner would strive toward. As a former cross-country runner, this image is helpful for me. My coaches taught me and my teammates to look forward, never look behind us. Focus on the race ahead, not the race behind. This strategy meant to keep us moving forward to the finish line.

Paul's goal is Jesus and the promise Jesus made to him. "Christ Jesus has made me his own," Paul says, and it's not because of who Paul is or what Paul has done. That's the promise; that's Paul's focus. This focus gives Paul strength during his in-between time; remember, Paul writes this letter to the Philippians from prison. During our own time of in-between-ness, we, too, can rest in Jesus' promise to us; the promise that he has made us his own. The promise that no matter what, no matter who we are we have been claimed and named as Jesus' own. From Jesus comes the strength to move forward, and not look back. From Jesus comes the motivation to get beyond the proverbial wall. From Jesus we are given the joy of this promise.

With these words to the Philippians, Paul seeks to encourage his friends. Remind them that their race may be strenuous, but their race is not run alone. I love Philippians because it brings to mind the image of a cheerleader. Paul is the Philippians' cheerleader, their encourager and motivator. He is standing on the sidelines and cheering the Philippians forward. And so, I am transported again back to my old cross-country races. During those difficult races, I found strength in the cheers of my teammates. Their encouragement and support kept me moving forward. Paul was the Philippians' cheerleader and now, he is ours. He reminds us that though we strain forward, we do it with the grace of Jesus; we strain forward with Jesus' presence upon us and we strain forward together, cheering each other along.

So, friends: though the question might be "are we there yet?" there is comfort while we are betwixt and between. Because Jesus has made you his own. You belong to God. Because in Jesus, there is nothing between you and God. Nothing separates you from God. Because of Jesus, you have won the race and you have already received the ultimate prize, so thanks be to God! Amen.