

TEXT: Philippians 3:4b-14
THEME: Christ has made you his own
SUBJECT: The goal
TITLE: The Ultimate Prize

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Messiah Moravian
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From a prison cell, near the end of his life, Paul writes to the Philippians: “Not that I have already obtained [the resurrection from the dead] 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, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 3:12-14)

David Bentley Hart’s translation has, “Not that I have obtained it [resurrection] already, or have already been perfected, but I press onward, that perhaps I might seize that for which I myself was seized by the Anointed One Jesus.”

The notion is clear, whichever translation you prefer: Christ has made you his own, all of you, all of your life, every bit of it. So, forget what lies in the past, every bit of it, the debris which continues to accumulate and what the world admires you for achieving, all of it, and press on to what lies ahead, for God calls you to the goal of becoming one with him.

This is Paul’s summons to pilgrimage. He glimpses a destination that he can never know fully until he reaches it. Paul detested boasting but felt pushed to share “visions and revelations” he had received. “Fourteen years ago,” he tells the Corinthians, “whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows, I was caught up to the third heaven . . . I was caught up into Paradise and heard ineffable things, which no one can utter.”

Paul describes this vision to the Philippians as “the heavenly call” of God in Christ Jesus. We are not Paul but we have seen more than we let on, even to ourselves. Through some moment of beauty or pain, some sudden turning of our lives, we catch glimmers at least of what the saints are blinded by; only then, unlike the saints, we tend to go on as though nothing happened.

To go on as though something happened, even though we are not sure what it was or just where we are supposed to go with it, is to enter the dimension of life that religion is a word for. Not religion as institution, ethics, dogma, ritual, scripture, social action—all of this comes later. At its heart, religion is mysticism, a response to Something for which words are pallid souvenirs. “I have seen things,” Aquinas told a friend, “that make all my writings seem like straw.”

Katherine, Frederick Buechner’s mother, refused to talk about death the way she refused to talk about a great many other things. She refused even to talk about people she loved who had died,

even her mother. It made her too sad, she said. Her New York apartment was full of photographs in silver frames, but they were photographs only of the living.

One day, in the midst of some conversation about nothing in particular, she suddenly turned to her son and said out of the blue, “Do you really believe anything *happens* after you die? All at once she was present to her son in a way she rarely was. He said, “Yes, I believe something happens.” But as soon as he tried to tell her a little more about what he believed and why he believed it, he could see she was not only not hearing, but also not listening.

Later, at home in Vermont, Frederick wrote his mom a letter giving her three reasons why he believed something *happened*. First, he said, if I were God and loved the people I created and wanted them to become at last the best they had it in them to be, I couldn’t imagine consigning them to oblivion when their time came to an end with the job only a fraction done.

Second, apart from any religious considerations, “I have a hunch it is true. I intuited it.” Frederick explained that if the victims and the victimizers, the wise and the foolish, the good-hearted and the heartless all end up alike in the grave and that is the end of it, then life would be a black comedy, and even at its worst, life doesn’t feel like a black comedy.

Life feels as though, at the innermost heart of it, there is Holiness, and that we experience all the horrors that go on both around us and within us *as* horrors rather than as just the way the cookie crumbles because, in our own innermost hearts, we belong to Holiness, which the horrors are a tragic departure from.

And lastly, Frederick wrote, I believe what happens to us after we die is that we aren’t dead forever because Jesus said so. Jesus was another of the dead people Katherine wouldn’t talk about, so Frederick had no idea how she would react to invoking his authority. Weeks later, when he asked her about the letter she only said, “It made me cry.”

“I press on,” Paul writes, “toward the goal for the *prize* of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.” Near the end of his life, one of the characters in Susan Howatch’s novel *Ultimate Prizes*, discovers he has chased after the wrong prizes. His sister turns to him and says, “You and your prizes! The only prize worth winning is love—and just you remember that when you’re a lonely old man trying to comfort yourself with your bank balance and your fading memories!”

In the end, he acknowledges his alienation from his extended family and concludes sadly, “But one mustn’t complain, must one. . . I often remind myself of that when I’m feeling melancholy. I sit in my grand house and look around at all the mementos of my past, all my prizes, and I think: What a success I was! But after a while I begin to hear that silence, that long, long silence, and I know with a terrible certainty that the only prize worth chasing after is the prize I’ve managed to lose.”

Unlike this sad man, Paul does not become melancholy when he realizes that all he thought made for success was rubbish (the Greek word is “excrement”). Paul is not defined by his past, no matter how much he may have achieved or how badly he failed. Neither is Paul defined by the present circumstances of his imprisonment. Paul has been seized by a great hope, by the heavenly call of God. It is this pilgrimage into the heart of Holiness that defines Paul.

The high call of God is to become like the God in whose image we are created. God is never at the end of his resources when we are at the end of ours. Our horizons, bounded by death, are not God’s horizon. Relationship with God is not exhausted by the set of horizons we’re used to here and now.

God lives and loves in us no less than anywhere else, in the dead no less than the living, because the end of life is not the end of God’s love. As we allow ourselves to be loved by God, hope awakens in us and our desires become, not dissipated in trivial pursuits, but focused on the ultimate prize.

PRAYER: Origen of Alexandria (182-251) one of the greatest of Christian theologians. “All in All”

In this way, (and note) accordingly,
we might suppose that at the someday
consummation—what I would call
the promised restoration of all things—
those who make their gradual advance,
as well as those ascending
will step surprised into that land, into
the healing action of its elements.
Here, each will be prepared for all
immense occasions to which
nothing further can be added.
And here, the King of all, Himself,
will school each blinking creature
in this the holy enterprise, instructing
all and reigning *in* them ’til He has
led them wholly to the Father—who
you’ll find has joined all things to Himself
—that is, until they are made capable
of receiving God, so that the God
may ever be to them The All in All.