

### **Philippians 3:4b-14**

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, 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 may 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, the righteousness from God based on faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

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, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

### **“Straining Forward”**

There’s a Lutheran minister in the Bronx named Heidi Newmark who lives her ministry straining forward day by day with her congregation. She finds creative ways for her disenfranchised and oppressed congregation to know themselves as beloved children of God. Creativity allows three troubled youth to be transformed into the three kings in the Epiphany pageant. Recovering addicts give testimony to God breaking into their lives and seizing them, giving them new life and another chance. Heidi longs for a new city for her congregation in the Bronx, one not so full of grace mixed with disappointment over and over, again and again. At the same time she proclaims good news in the dynamic tension of the world her congregation welcomes her into as an outsider. Life at Transfiguration Lutheran in the Bronx is not stagnant. It moves and breathes and heaves forward and back, lurching toward a promise of peace and God’s eternal reign.<sup>1</sup>

When Paul talks about straining forward, he’s not talking about progress as we think of it in today’s world. He means living into the dynamic and moving life of a disciple of Jesus Christ. Pressing on into the upward call of God, is a calling each believer must live out in our own way.

Paul was leaning into the vision God had called him to in our Philippians passage. In God’s self-revelation in Jesus, Paul had realized his call must be of the same pattern as Jesus’ ministry. The gospel gave Paul no answers to problems, but instead it disturbed his answers and set him in search of a new “solution,” a new understanding—it thrust a new understanding on him, an understanding that required radical reassessment of past, present, and future.<sup>2</sup> Peter and many other Jews were called to proclaim the gospel to

Israel, but Paul's call was to preach the good news of God in Jesus in a way that allowed the news to remain "good" to non-Jews.

Many of us who read Paul's letters today are tempted to label Paul's arguments as being against the law, against Judaism. Nothing could be further from the truth. We have to remember the context in which Paul wrote. That the whole early church community was grappling with how to live in the good news as Gentiles came into their worship with no understanding of the God of Israel. Paul's calling was to help Jewish followers of Christ to be more inclusive to outsiders and less of an old school club. He proclaimed a way of grace and peace in the midst of heated debates between himself and other church members.

The early church was straining forward to live into Christ's call as they discerned the good news for converts—the Gentiles. Other evangelists had come through the Philippian community and told new gentile believers that they weren't free to be Christians until they adhered to certain Jewish laws, primarily circumcision which was the mark of God's covenant with Israel. But this notion made the good news, law bound. The good news of Jesus Christ is a free gift of grace, not contingent on its receivers' adherence to Jewish law first. Besides, when God gave the 10 Commandments to Israel God's love and grace were already with the people, not contingent on their fulfillment of these commands. The commands were to help them live into God's ways as response. Now, righteousness from faith in Christ meant being found as one who professes the good news through actions stemming from belief. This was straining forward!

Christians are constantly challenged to lean into a vision which is not our own, but God's. God's peace is at the same time realized and yet unrealized. "Depart from evil, and do good; seek peace, and pursue it." (Ps. 34:14) People who strain forward into the holy mystery of life in Christ are called to proclaim the peace of Christ while acknowledging the turmoil in our own lives and the world. Our call is to security in the middle of insecurity because we believe God will bring about the promised peaceable reign where the lion lays down with the lamb and snakes and babies crawl around together! God's promise sounds fantastic considering the state of the world throughout time. But God does not live in fantasyland. God lives in each one of us, and our lives are full of disappointment and hope, joy and suffering, heavy burdens and tearful laughter.

The heavenly or upward call of God in Jesus is realized as we live with eyes open to the atrocities of this world and claim, in the midst of it all, our call to peace and communion—just as Jesus did. Remembering and rehearsing the good news changes us into instruments of peace. Instability abounds and in it we are upheld by grace! Faith, hope and love enable us to give plow making priority over sword making, not because such a strategy is more successful but because believers are called to be peacemakers even in the presence of enemies, following the example of Jesus.<sup>3</sup> In Christ we find the strength for peacemaking in brokenness. So we strain forward for peace motivated not by fear, but by the Spirit who has set us free to buy into and testify to God's world order instead of the ways of the world.

We cannot remain the church if we lose our identity, that we were found and taken over by the Prince of Peace just as Paul was. Peacemaking means entering the struggle! The struggle to accept God's love for us, to live in peace ourselves and to work for it in our relationships with our closest neighbors and our enemies. Teresa of Avila, a mystic and nun who lived in the middle ages, wrote these words, "Christ has no body on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which Christ's compassion is to look out to the world. Yours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good. Yours are the hands with which he is to bless us now."<sup>4</sup> We are a body seeking to testify to God's peace. Sometimes this means leaving abusive situations at home or work. Sometimes this means fighting for the rights of those who are oppressed. Sometimes it means protesting policies that are unjust. Sometimes it means admitting we need help to clean up our addictions so we and those who love us can know inner peace again.

Those who know our righteousness in God find strength for our journeys in the story of this table and all that happened afterwards. At the table, Jesus invited betrayers, the self-righteous, the unclean—all sorts of sinners whom he loved—to dine with him. Afterwards, they deserted him and he died with just a few women and the beloved disciple possibly standing nearby. Then God raised Jesus in triumph over all evil. A new Way rose in the midst of this world and changed it even as things appear to stay the same. Every time we claim our call as peacemakers and as those in communion with God and the world, the power of the resurrection is at work in us and we glimpse, even if only for a moment God's promised future.

Come and be fed by Jesus' grace and dare to be examples of what it means to know righteousness through faith and to live for God's peace. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> For more on Transfiguration Lutheran see - Heidi Newmark, *Breathing Space: A Spiritual Journey in the South Bronx*, (Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> Walter Brueggemann, Charles B. Cousar, Beverly R. Gaventa, James D. Newsome, eds., *Texts for Preaching: a lectionary commentary based on the NRSV—year A*, (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, 1995) 513.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.pcusa.org/peacemaking/believers.pdf>. Page 18.

<sup>4</sup> Morna D. Hooker, "The Letter to the Philippians" in *The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, Vol. XI, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000) 537.