

Pressing On Toward The Goal

A sermon by James R. Newby

Text: Philippians 3:13-14

As many of you know, because I told you, and although you might not believe it by looking at me now, I was once a long-distance runner. I ran in many races, mostly 10 k's, but there were the occasional half-marathons, and in the late 80's there was one marathon—the Chicago marathon. Although it has been a number of years, I remember that day as clearly as any day in my past. I awoke to a beautiful fall morning in Chicago—no wind and no rain. It was a perfect day for a run. Before this marathon, the longest race that I had run was 15 miles in Charleston, West Virginia, and so I was not in the best of shape. But I was *determined* to run the marathon, and to finish. My wife, Elizabeth, was running that day as well, and at the 18 mile mark, I heard her voice from behind me, “Come on, Newby, you can do it!” As she passed me, and as I watched her becoming a distant figure in front of me, I became discouraged. “Could I finish?” I asked myself. The words, “Come

on, Newby, you can do it!” became a *mantra* that I would repeat over and over again, as I struggled to finish...*I pressed on towards the goal, and I finished the race.*

In the passage from Paul's Letter to the Philippians, which I just read, the Apostle imagines his whole life as a kind of long and arduous marathon. He imagines himself as a runner, hitting the wall and straining forward to break the tape at the finish line, trusting that it is all worth the pain and the burn: “forgetting what lies behind,” he says, “and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on towards the goal of the heavenly call of God in Jesus Christ.” The Greek word which we translate as “press on” in this passage has the connotation of *chase*, of *hot pursuit*, of *hunting down*.

This was not always so for Paul. In the beginning of Paul's relationship with Christians he was running *after* Jesus' followers, trying to exterminate them. He had been running after a different prize. He wanted to be a religious success...He wanted to be holy...He wanted to be good and follow God's law. His spiritual

resume is long...He says he was circumcised on the 8th day after his birth...born of the tribe of Benjamin...a blue-blood with a good family name...a Hebrew born of Hebrews and accepted into *Phi Beta Pharisee!*

Then suddenly, we have the story of his transformation on the road to Damascus, and the rest is history. Paul realized that he had been running for the *wrong* prize—that he had been running in the *wrong* direction.

In a 1964 National Football League game, Minnesota Vikings defensive lineman, Jim Marshall, scooped up a fumble by a San Francisco 49ers' receiver and saw daylight ahead of him. None of the opposing team stood between him and the end zone 60 yards away. So, he took off running, as fast as a big defensive lineman could go, with dreams of a touchdown dancing in his head. He heard the crowd roaring around him. He saw his teammates running alongside him, waving their arms on the sideline. He

cruised the last few yards into the end zone, and he celebrated his touchdown by throwing the football into the stands.

And then...a player from the San Francisco 49ers walked up and gave him a big hug. Marshall's eyes were opened...Jim Marshall had just run to the wrong end zone, and scored two points for the 49ers. When you watch the video of this run...and yes, it is on Youtube, you hear the announcer yelling, "He's running the wrong way!" The only person in the old Metropolitan Stadium, who did not realize that Jim Marshall was running the wrong way, was Jim Marshall! I am reminded of the man driving down the highway whose wife called him to tell him to watch out, because she had heard on the news that there was a crazy person driving the wrong way down the highway. The man replied, "You're not kidding, there's not just one crazy person going the wrong way, I can see hundreds of them!"

And so it wasn't Jesus who had departed from the Law and was lost...it was Paul who was running the *wrong way*. Paul did what

you do when you realize you have lost your way, and have been running the wrong way in life—he *repented*, which means he turned around and made a 180. What mattered for Paul at the time of the writing of Philippians was becoming the best Christian that he could be.

Students of Philippians sometimes marvel at how often Paul’s letter sounds notes of joy, even while he is in prison. It is important to remember that Philippians was written while Paul was imprisoned. Paul is running the race, pressing on, straining forward for what lies ahead—and he is doing it while being incarcerated. You see, Paul *has not only* changed the direction of his running, he is running in a different manner. He is running with the freedom of someone who has nothing to prove. He no longer has to justify his existence by his achievements in the race through life...His existence is already justified by the love and the grace he has found in his faith.

Perhaps it is human, or maybe it is just me, but I am always asking myself, “Am I running in the right direction?” It is an important query for all of us. For me, it is a part of the spiritual process of trying to be as loving and caring, and as nurtured spiritually as I can be. I work hard at forgetting what lies behind, giving up all hope of having a different past. Now, I want to look forward to what lies ahead. I am a Quaker who believes in a God of new beginnings, and of these new beginnings there is no end.