

Scripture

Philippians 3:12-4:1

¹²Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. ¹³Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, ¹⁴I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

¹⁵All of us who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. ¹⁶Only let us live up to what we have already attained.

¹⁷Join with others in following my example, brothers, and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you. ¹⁸For, as I have often told you before and now say again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. ¹⁹Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things. ²⁰But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, ²¹who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.

¹Therefore, my brothers, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, that is how you should stand firm in the Lord, dear friends!

Sermon Text

Maybe it's because our house is stockpiled with Halloween candy. Maybe it's because I am completely addicted to Brach's Mellochreme Candy Pumpkins. Maybe it's because my belly forever yearns for a peanut butter cup blizzard from Dairy Queen. Whatever the reason, my mind has become fixated on Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory. Do you know the book? Have you seen the movie? Just my opinion, take it or leave it: Johnny Depp was good; but Gene Wilder was genius. Willy Wonka, or Charlie and the Chocolate Factory is a morality tale of Biblical proportions, and I highly recommend it.

If you are familiar, you will remember characters like Veruca Salt, Violet Beauregarde, Mike Teevee, and (my favorite) Augustus Gloop: those greedy, aggressive and gluttonous children, not to mention their equally nasty parents. They argue, fight, cheat, steal, and overindulge. These characters have only one desire: to satisfy themselves. It sounds a lot like what the Apostle Paul says, "¹⁹Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things."

You know, it's easy to condemn characters in a children's book. But, it's a different matter altogether to discover I am Augustus Gloop. So often we human beings set our stomachs as our god, and consumption is our worship. And it's not just food we are talking about here. It's consuming all kinds of stuff.

Have you noticed the TV shows where teams of people help us clean sweep all the clutter out of the house? We've all heard the statistics, how "the richest 225 people in the world today control more wealth than the poorest 2.5 billion people. And that the three richest people in the world control more wealth than the poorest 48 nations." The United States has 5% of the world's population, and consumes 33% of the world's energy. According to the World Resources Institute: "About a third of people in the U.S. report being "very happy," the same share as in 1957, when they were only half as wealthy." All that consumption, and none of it makes us any happier.

I've been listening to these commentators talk about our current worldwide financial crisis. Mike Francis, one of the executive directors at Morgan Stanley said this, talking about the mortgage market, sub-prime and predatory lending. Quote: "It was unbelievable. We almost couldn't produce enough to keep the investors happy... From our standpoint it's like, there's a guy out there with a lot of money. We gotta find a way to be his sole provider of bonds to fill his appetite. And his appetite's massive." End-quote. Consumption, accumulation, and greed: I myself am guilty of these sins, and sadly, so are a lot of other people.

Now, don't get me wrong, church. Enjoying food is not evil. The Bible says it's a blessing from God. Being a collector is not sinful; neither is providing for your family. It's when good things like food, material stuff, and money, become gods. That's the problem. That's when it becomes sin: idolatry.

Paul has a response to all this in our scripture lesson for today. He sets the Christian church apart within society. He reminds us of our identity. We are first and foremost citizens of Heaven. Sure, your address might be in Philippi. You may pay taxes in Clifton Heights, Springfield, or Drexel Hill; but we are citizens of heaven. Christians answer to a higher power. We have different priorities. We have radical, foreign values.

You may remember from last week, in the verses leading up to what we just heard, Paul laid out this beautiful mission statement. He says "¹⁰I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection... [I want to become humble and forgiving and full of grace] like [Jesus was] in his death, ¹¹and so, somehow [by God's mercy], to attain the resurrection from the dead." That's what being a Christian is all about: knowing Jesus more and more, becoming like him, acting like him, and relying on God's mercy.

In today's passage, there is this beautiful sentence where Paul looks at his mission statement with humility. He says this in verse 12, "¹²Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me."

Paul does not know Christ perfectly (like the way we will know Jesus, clearly, face to face on the great resurrection day). Paul is a human being; his brain can only understand so much, so he doesn't completely know the power of Christ's resurrection. Paul has yet to love people with that perfect, forgiving, crucifixion love of Christ; but he's working on it. You see, a lot of people mistake the church for a perfect people's social club. As if worship services and committee meetings exist just for us to sit around, look cool, and receive praise, to satisfy our stomachs. But we all know that's not it. That's not how it is in this church. Church is not about us at all. Christianity is not about being perfect, it's about connecting to the God who is. This Jesus thing is about working harder together at becoming more like him.

Paul cheers us on in that effort. He puts the Christian life into the language of athletic competition, the language of the World Series, football, or more accurately, Olympic track and field. He says, "One thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead,¹⁴ I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus."

Church, you're going to have to forgive me. I misspent a huge portion of my youth getting yelled at by various coaches. Scripture like this gives me an opportunity to capitalize on all the lessons I learned at high decibels. This scripture is truly the way coaches talk to runners and ball carriers. Never ever look back. Do not look over your shoulder to see how far ahead you are, to see if you might be able to high step or showboat a little bit. If you look back for your competition you will slow down. If you look back you will probably stumble and fall. The very least that will happen if you take your eyes off the finish line, off of the goal, is you will get distracted, veer off track, and run in the wrong direction.

I think Paul may be confessing to us today; and I think this is something we all understand. In this life, it is so easy to get stuck. It's easy to get paralyzed by the past. The Apostle Paul has to force himself, I have to force myself, and we all have to force ourselves to look forward, to look only to Jesus Christ. When you are running a race, what does the 1st hurdle have to do with the 10th hurdle? What does game 1 in the series have to do with game 3? You never know. It might get rained out.

I want to be clear on this. Sometimes we have a lot to learn from the past, sometimes we have a lot to celebrate, to forgive, and even heal from the past; but still, we are living in the present. The past is gone forever. We are responsible right now for how we are living right now. The road behind us may inform us; but it cannot hurt us. What can hurt us is the road ahead, and that means we have to stay focused on what is coming up.

Paul says he is forgetting what lies behind and is straining forward and pressing on toward his goal. When I hear those words "straining" and "pressing on," I think about how runners lean forward, how runners strain to go faster, how runners struggle against their own limits and press and push themselves forward faster. That's Paul. I think he is telling the church in Philippi, and the church in Springfield, to set Jesus Christ as the goal of our life and then work at it. I think he is cheering us to push.

We must struggle to admit our own weakness. We must have the courage to quit and let God win for us. We must lean forward and work harder at stillness and prayer. We must wrestle our souls and surrender our schedules to the Lord of the Sabbath. We must defeat our enemies by forgiving them, by loving them, by turning them into family. We must fight tooth and nail to destroy all the selfishness and hate and criticism and prejudice and violence and gluttony and greed and accumulation and over-consumption in ourselves.

We are citizens of heaven. We confess our souls and pledge allegiance to the King of heaven. He has generosity. He has mercy. And he has you.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.