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Isaiah 43:16-21

Philippians 3:4b-14

## PRESSING ON

Motivational speaking has become a way to make a good living for those who are accomplished at it. Most motivational speakers seem to have a similar message - that they encountered adversity and because of their attitude and certain positive habits they developed, they found a way to success and those who follow their lead can too. I think my favorite motivational speaker was a fictional one named Matt Foley who was a bizarre character played in a hilarious way by comedian Chris Farley on Saturday Night Live years ago. This character did not follow the normal script. He did not speak to large conventions, but instead he would be hired by a small group of parents who were trying to get their teenage children motivated to do something beyond watching TV. He would seek to motivate them by telling them not to follow his lazy example. He described how badly his life had turned out, that he was living out of his van down by the river, and if they didn't get on the stick, that would be where they would end up as well - motivation by negative example.

The Apostle Paul wasn't living in a van down by the river, but he wasn't in the best place either. As he writes seeking to motivate the church in Philippi to press on to fulfill their calling, he is in prison. Earlier in his life, Paul had all the credentials to be a respected religious leader. He had been born into the elite Hebrew tribe of Benjamin, his family had strictly carried out what they understood would put them in good stead with God. He diligently studied Hebrew law and became a meticulous adherent of it, a fiery defender of the purity of his religion. But rather than live as a respected religious leader in the faith tradition into which he had been born, he gave up all of that because of an encounter with Jesus Christ.

In another of Paul's letters, (2 Corinthians 11) he describes what had resulted from his decision to follow and proclaim the gospel. There certainly had been those who were not receptive to his preaching. It had at times been a very rough road.

Five times he had been whipped, three times he had been beaten with rods, once he had been stoned. There also had been three times he had been shipwrecked, and there were periods that he went without food or adequate shelter, in addition to the challenges of multiple imprisonments. And yet, Paul did not regret the path he had taken, and he did not give up. What motivated him? What kept him going?

I have to say that I am humbled and inspired by the example of people who faithfully press on in spite of what must be disheartening conditions. Twenty-eight years ago, Nancy and I met Elias Chacour, a man who lives near Nazareth who follows a man from Nazareth. He describes himself as a Palestinian Arab Christian Israeli. He is a Palestinian and a citizen of the state of Israel, and as a person of faith, daily he urges his fellow Palestinians and others to be committed to justice for the Palestinian people without resorting to violence against the people of Israel. He understands the existential fears that the Jewish people of Israel have, but constantly pleads with them to build bridges of understanding and peace with those who are their blood brothers and sisters.<sup>1</sup> As a result, he has been harshly criticized by both Palestinians and Israelis, but day in and day out, he presses on to work for peace in that troubled land.

The Apostle Paul could be bold in God because he had experienced the boldness of God's love for him and for others in the person of Jesus Christ. That love bolstered him to be able to press on even when discouraging events occurred. It became his life's committed passion. P. T. Barnum was a motivator who operated differently. He knew how to generate short-term excitement to encourage participation. One instrument, so to speak, that he used to publicize his circus was a bandwagon, which would lead a parade through town to let everyone know the circus had arrived. When politicians saw his success with this method, they copied his promotional practices and started using bandwagons to encourage people to come to political rallies. Over time, the phrase 'jumping on the bandwagon' came to be used. It referred to those who were following the crowd for the excitement of an event rather than because of any firm conviction.<sup>2</sup>

There may be times when we are looking for the latest bandwagon onto which to jump. But the music of even the most entertaining bandwagon pales in comparison with the heavenly love songs to which we are called to march. As we

listen for them and join in with them, we will be directed and empowered to press on in service of the One who embodied God's resurrecting love for the world. How could we be disheartened when we have been shown God's ever-beating, loving heart? When connected with the source of all compassion, we are strengthened to press on with joy and hope. Our motivation does not come through just having the right attitudes and habits – no, it comes in the person of Jesus Christ, God's very own transforming power at work within and through us, who even in the face of death, causes our hearts to sing.

One of our country's greatest poets, Mary Oliver, died earlier this year. One of her poems which describes the desire to serve God is entitled, "More Beautiful than the Honey Locust Tree Are the Words of the Lord." It ends this way:

I had such a longing for virtue, for company.

I wanted Christ to be as close as the cross I wear.

I wanted to read and serve, to touch the altar linen.

Instead I went back to the woods where not a single tree turns its face away.

Instead I prayed, oh Lord, let me be something useful and unpretentious.

Even the chimney swift sings.

Even the cobblestones have a task to do, and do it well.

Lord, let me be a flower, even a tare; or a sparrow.

Or the smallest bright stone in a ring worn by someone brave and kind, whose name I will never know.

Lord, when I sleep I feel you near.

When I wake, and you are already wiping the stars away, I rise quickly, hoping to be like your wild child the rose, the honey-maker the honey vine;

A bird shouting its joy as it floats through the gift you have given us: another day. <sup>3</sup>

In writing to this church in Greece urging them to use each day in loving service to God, Paul used imagery of a footrace which would have been familiar to them in their love for sports. He makes it clear that part of what allows us to press on is that we do not run the race alone.

A number of years ago, the summer Olympic Games were in Barcelona. Britain's Derek Redmond had dreamed all his life of winning a gold medal in the 400-meter race, and his dream was in sight as the gun sounded in the semifinals. He had recorded the fastest time of the first round race and then he won his quarter-final heat. In the semi-final, Redmond started well, but 175 meters from the finish, he felt a sharp pain go up the back of his leg. He fell, face first, onto the track with a torn right hamstring.

As the medical attendants were approaching with a stretcher, Redmond fought to his feet. He set out hopping, in a crazed attempt to complete the race. About that time, a large man in a T-shirt came charging out of the stands, pushed aside a security guard, and ran to Redmond, embracing him. It was Jim Redmond, Derek's father. "You don't have to do this," he told his son. "Yes, I do," said Derek as the tears streamed down his face. "Well, then," said Jim, "we're going to finish this together." And they did, holding on to each other. With the son's head sometimes buried in his father's shoulder, they stayed in Derek's lane all the way. The crowd rose to its feet and cheered and cried along with Derek and his dad as he slowly pressed on to complete his race.<sup>4</sup> Derek did not win the gold medal, but he had something much more valuable which would keep him going even beyond the race track.

Paul writes of pressing on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. He calls upon his Christian friends to look and move forward, motivated by resurrection hope, bolstered by a gift of faith, accompanied by love. All of that is much more powerful than any motivational speech or sermon. Friends, we have another day to get to serve our Lord through living out God's love. Press on. Press on.

<sup>1</sup> Elias Chacour, Blood Brothers: The Dramatic Story of a Palestinian Christian Working for Peace in Israel, Chosen Books, 2003

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/jump-on-the-bandwagon.html>

<sup>3</sup><http://yearsrisingmaryoliver.blogspot.com/2010/09/more-beautiful-than-honey-locust-tree.html>

<sup>4</sup><https://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Derek-Redmond-The-Day-that-Changed-My-Life>