

Toward the Goal

Philippians 3:4b-14

sermon digest

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In the 1973 movie “The Way We Were,” Barbara Streisand’s tear-jerk song became a hit that dominated the airwaves for months. I wonder why. The song did not produce a particularly pleasurable connection to the past. In fact, the mournful trip down memory lane had a tendency to touch a deep hurt that resides in some way in most of us, but we listened anyway as Streisand sang:

Memories/ Like the corners of my mind/ Misty watercolor memories/ Of the way we were/ Scattered pictures/ Of the smiles we left behind/ Smiles we gave to one another/ For the way we were/ Can it be that it was all so simple then/ Or has time rewritten every line/ If we had the chance to do it all again/ Tell me - would we? could we?/ Memories/ May be beautiful and yet/ What’s too painful to remember/ We simply choose to forget.

What are you doing with your memories? The word is *nostalgia*. It means “homesickness”—painfully longing for the past, for the way things were. Nostalgia is understandable for folks like me, who are well past the prime of life. When more of life is behind than ahead of you, you tend to long for a time in life when you had more energy, better health, and a head full of dreams. You also tend to filter out the bad stuff. All of us are prone to lie to ourselves about the way things were; memories become myths reconstructed to soothe the conscience. As Streisand sang, “What’s too painful to remember We simply choose to forget.”

Paul is sitting in prison with lots of time on his hands. He chooses to manage his confinement constructively, to remember friends and to write letters. His letter to Philippian Christians is a virtual goldmine of memory and hope, of challenge and encouragement. He begins with a statement that does not fit most of his other epistles: “I thank my God every time I remember you.” His memories of Corinth were about conflict, accusation, and immorality; but Philippi was remembered for loving and supportive friends. His hymn of *kenosis*—the self-emptying of Christ in leaving heaven for earth, from being one with the Father to becoming one of us even to the point of death, even the death on the cross—has been lauded as the most concise Christology in the New Testament. His proverbial wisdom in summary statements is some of the most memorized and recited material in the Bible: to live is Christ, to die is gain; rejoice in the Lord always; I have learned to be content with whatever I have; I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. The proverb that captures our attention today is: “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.”

Like other communities of faith at the time, Paul’s friends were encountering the crosswinds of controversy raging through the churches. Although we do not know exactly who or what the controversial teachings were about, Paul hints at the common problem addressed in Galatians: where does Judaism fit into Christian faith? Paul was at war with teachers who insisted on retaining Jewish rites and traditions, so he warns: “Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of those who mutilate the flesh.” He seems to be playing with words. Jews had commonly called Gentiles dogs, so he reversed the application; Judaizers had become the dogs. Christians who insisted that Gentile men submit to the rite of circumcision were “those who mutilate the flesh!”

It was not as if Paul did not understand the Jewish Faith. Paul began to sing his “Memories” song. He had more reason to boast of his Jewish roots than any of the people tormenting Gentile Christians: “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.”

Was Paul bragging or complaining? He claims his personal history as a boast, but treats it as “rubbish” for the “surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.” Bible translators struggle with Paul’s word *skubala*. The etymology of the word is believed to be that which is thrown to the dogs, but it also can refer to dung. Duke professor Richard Hays puts the word in context with Paul’s emotional excursion through the past and translates, “I consider it all crap.” The passage is reminiscent of the story that grew out of the Truman presidency. Harry was known for his earthy language. Bess was entertaining friends at the White House and Harry was overhead speaking to the gardener telling him where to put the manure. One of the friends asked Bess why she did not urge her husband to say “fertilizer” rather than “manure.” Bess replied, “You don’t know how long it took me to get him to say manure.”

The crude language is important. Paul is the incurable preacher, always spontaneous and brutally honest even when his perception is somewhat distorted. His language style is far more tied to speaking than writing, although all of his words have been passed down to us as “letters.” Paul and Martin Luther seemed to have a lot in common. Some of the richest material that has come out of the life of Luther and the Reformation is Luther’s *Table Talk (Tischreden)*, spontaneous conversation with friends that sometimes was a bit too earthy for recitation in mixed company. Paul’s emotional denunciation of his high achievements as a Pharisee conjured up language that might have belonged more in a high school locker room conversation. That part of his biography had become like a pile of dung, a waste byproduct of growing in faith.

Paul was given to hyperbole, overstatement of the facts, usually driven by high emotion. It is a characteristic of preaching. One of the great preachers of our time Fred Craddock adopted a style which he called “overhearing” the gospel. He wanted the congregation to find themselves listening in on a conversation between Jesus and his disciples or Jesus and the Pharisees or Paul and the Philippians. If you want to be heard, you have to speak so that people will listen. Paul used hyperbole. If he multiplied time ten, perhaps his audience would catch a piece of the truth. That is exactly what Paul does with his memories.

Is “forgetting what lies behind” either possible or healthy for a life of faith? In spite of his proverbial claim to the runner’s lifestyle of racing toward the finish line, “forgetting what lies behind,” Paul had not forgotten where he had been, who he had been, or how his roots were affecting his life in Christ. We first get to know Saul/Paul through the eyes and mind of Luke in Acts. His biographical story of conversion from a persecutor of Christians, witness and instigator of the stoning of Stephen, lingers in his preaching to the churches. His personal agony in Romans (7:24), “Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?” was about his memory of being captive to evil in his life. He came to the doxology, “There is therefore no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus,” but not without a heavy burden of guilt and regret for much of his past behavior. When you get glimpses of Paul’s biographical reflection, you certainly do not find someone who has dusted his hands of the past with a simple, “forget it!” But you also do not get the impression that it would be good for Paul or for the gospel to deny Paul’s personal history. He may have come to view his accomplishments in Judaism as a waste product life, but he had neither stopped being a Jew nor forgotten the message that had come down through his Jewish ancestors about the God of grace.

Have you ever been told to manage your memories with the simple declaration “forget it?” Henry Ford was an industrial genius the founder of the assembly line production of our modern world, but he is also remembered as one who hated Jews and sympathized with Hitler. Some believe that he suffered from mental illness that would have destroyed his kingdom had his son not finally rescued the company. Ford’s philosophy of history was very simple: “History is bunk.” The great man had no appreciation of the science of remembering the past. On the other hand stands the famous line of George Santayana. “Those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it.”

We are continue to be plagued with the bad advice that the best way to manage the past is to forget it. If senior adults are too prone to be given to nostalgia, wanting to live in the past, the primary weakness of youth is rejection of history as unimportant and impractical because it is over.

In the work of grief that follows a significant loss in life, we still hear the bad advice to just forget it. Today is the forty-fifth anniversary of the worst day of my life. I have not forgotten that terrible Sunday morning when my worst nightmare, the death of my spouse, became a part of my biography. I happened to mention that experience in a sermon one Sunday morning a few years later, and I received an anonymous letter from a church member demanding that I never mention this again in the pulpit. I do not wish to make anyone uncomfortable with the reminder that death is a real part of life, even for a pastor; but I can no more forget that day than Paul could forget who he was and where he came from. Yet, neither Paul nor Larry have to live in the past.

Easter hope calls us forward. Paul had not forgotten his past, but he kept working to put the past in perspective. After my wife’s death on April 28, I recall registration for the fall semester. I still find gratitude in the providence that I began to live out my grief in the context of a wonderful seminary community. Friends and faculty were not so different from church. Some were thoughtful and compassionate. Others were very uncomfortable in my presence. Perhaps it was a normal paranoia; I suspected that some

preferred to avoid me like a leper. One youngish professor said just the wrong thing, probably the best he could do under the circumstances. He recited the old saw, "time heals all wounds."

The proverb was not particularly helpful at the moment, but I do understand the thought. After four and one-half decades, I have not forgotten, but I no longer wake up in the middle of the night re-living every second of that day. I gradually came to the realization that I had to live toward the future. I gave myself permission to finish some of the things I had started in that other life—like seminary. Eventually I found that life goes on. I could laugh again. I could even love again. Carolyn became the most healing gift that I experienced in that whole journey.

Paul speaks of his "loss," the loss of his former life as a Jewish leader. His message is familiar to anyone who has passed through grief. Paul's metaphor was the race track, and he was running from the beginning of his life in Judaism toward the hope of the resurrection in Christ at the goal. Paul confessed that he had not arrived at the finish, but he had come to value some things along the way. Even pain had come to have meaning in his life as he shared in the suffering of Christ. Paul had learned to embrace disability, a thorn in the flesh, to find the rich heritage of his early religion as it was fulfilled in the person of Christ and his Christian life.

But forget it? Not on your life! As he moved on, Paul learned to live toward the future hope in Christ, to find a new measure of value in his life, to prize the things that matter as he lived toward the goal of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.