

## Passing the Torch

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(PHILIPPIANS 3:4B-14 NRSV) *If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: <sup>5</sup>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; <sup>6</sup>as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. <sup>7</sup>Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. <sup>8</sup>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 <sup>9</sup>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. <sup>10</sup>I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, <sup>11</sup>if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. <sup>12</sup>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. <sup>13</sup>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, <sup>14</sup>I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.*

An interesting side note regarding the role of women in the church. When Paul first arrived at Philippi, it was Sabbath, and there was no synagogue. Had there been a synagogue all the leaders would have been men. But since there was no synagogue, Paul and his companions went to the riverbank just outside the city and begin to speak to the women gathered there.

One of them, Lydia, was a wealthy dealer in expensive purple. It was Lydia—a woman—who became Paul's point of contact with the church there at Philippi, which clearly was one of Paul's favorite congregations. Later, in Corinth, a married couple, Priscilla and Aquila, were the leaders, and Priscilla comes across as the primary figure of leadership.

I've been told that the measure of a pastor's effectiveness is not so much about what happens within a given congregation while he or she is serving it; it's about how that congregation fares after the pastor leaves. In today's text, Paul was passing the torch—giving marching orders to Lydia, and the other leaders of the church in Philippi; and he's wanting to finish strong—"I press on toward the goal."

I retired 13 years ago; knowing that in retirement I would continue to work through interim ministries. Now, with my 77th birthday in the rear-view mirror, my thoughts are on finishing strong. I don't have a termination date in mind; but, whether I continue for six more months, or six more years [*whether you'll put up with me that long*], I'm pretty sure this is the final congregation I'll serve; and I want it to be strong and fully equipped when I pass the torch.

Paul's closing remarks in this letter to the Philippians are about finishing strong. Look at that last sentence from the New Living Translation:

*“Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, <sup>14</sup>I press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us.” (PHILIPPIANS 3:13-14 NLT)*

But before finishing strong Paul passed the torch to those who were his sons and daughters in Christ. “I’m retiring; but I want you to carry on the faith.”

Several years ago I preached series of sermon based on Philippians, and as I finished the preparation my heart was full of joy. Not only because the series was completed (isn't that a wonderful word?) but also because joy is the theme of that inspired letter I'd been studying for several weeks; and the joy had rubbed off—as if Paul and I had shared the same office—had written at the same desk.

One-by-one I took the books I had used in my study and preparation and inserted them back onto my library shelves. As I shoved the last volume in place, my eyes fell upon an old book by a British pastor from years earlier: F. B. Meyer. It was his work on Philippians, but for some reason I'd not used it in my studies. I wondered whether there might be something to enhance my now-finished manuscripts, so I began to leaf through it before calling it a day.

It was not his words that spoke to me that evening, however, but the words of my grandmother. Because as I began thumbing through the book, I realized it once had belonged to her; after her death in 1989 it had found its way into my library. In her own handwriting, she had added her own observations, prayers, and related Scriptures in the margins throughout the book. Inside the back cover she had written: “Finishing reading this, June 8, 1958.”

When I saw that date—1958—I flashed back to a church camp in a west Texas campground. It was the summer between my sophomore and junior years. There, in June, 1958, I had reached a crossroad in my own spiritual journey and made the decision to commit myself to a lifetime of ministry.

It was the same month of the same year my grandmother had finished Meyer's book. As I scanned her words, I found one reference after another to her prayers for me as I had been growing up ...her concern for my spiritual welfare ...her desire for God's best in my life.

As I slid the book back onto the shelf, I thought of the priceless role she played during the formative years of my life. I've known for years that it is a result of her influence and her prayers—in large part—that I am in the ministry. And so the torch was passed from her to me. It was passed to me for me to do the same with my children and grandchildren—and they, in turn, with theirs.

I could almost hear my grandmother's voice saying, “I'm still praying for you, Jimmy. Keep walking with God. Finish strong!” There's a sense of connection there; a sense that what we are is a part of something bigger than we are—a sense

that we have roots that are deep, not only in history, but also in history's God.

What we share is our legacy, passed from generation to generation—something we share—that binds us in some way that makes each of us more than we are without it. Something without which each of us would be isolated specks, ad-libbing—improvising our way through time and space.

But here we are. Together. Aware of each other's presence and sharing our joys and concerns. Sharing in the work that keeps this congregation strong.

But it's not just the work that we do—the prayers we offer on behalf of one another—the words of encouragement and comfort. We're building a legacy—together and individually.

You know, we don't really have a choice about whether we will leave a spiritual legacy. The question is what kind of legacy will we leave.

I suspect each of you can recall some influence—and there probably will be a name associated with that memory. You likely are aware of some *treasured spiritual legacy that's been passed on to you. What prevailing prayers, what lasting expressions of love, what wise warnings or sage advice, what hearty laughter do you recall?*

*And what impressions are you passing on to your children—and your grandchildren—and your great grandchildren? How will they remember your Christian presence, and how will it influence them?*

In many cities across this country, at certain times of year, there's a race. It's called a marathon: 26.2188 miles. Hundreds will enter each of those races; but the overwhelming majority of those who enter have no illusion of winning the race. Like Paul, their goal is not to win; but, simply to "press on; to finish the race."

Paul wrote those words while he was still in the race. And Paul accomplished the goal toward which he was "pressing on." Later, in a letter to his young minister friend, Timothy, he wrote, "*...the time of my departure has come. <sup>7</sup>I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. <sup>8</sup>From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing.* (II Timothy 4:6b-8 NRSV)