

October 8, 2017 • 18th Sunday after Pentecost

“Going Deeper: Eyes on the Prize”

Sermon by the Rev. Patricia Farris



Philippians 3:13-14

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, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

I was in our nation's capital this week for a meeting of our United Methodist Church and Episcopal Church dialogue. Representatives from both churches have been working to bring our two denominations into closer relationship with one another, fulfilling the prayer of Christ that “they may all be one.” Those discussions may seem rather trivial in the wake of the tragic mass murder in Las Vegas. But we very intentionally see our work in the context of our fractured and hurting world. And we pray that in some small way, it may witness to the possibility and power always present among us to heal that which has been broken and torn apart. Our joint statement is entitled “A Gift to the World: Co-Laborers for the Healing of Brokenness.”

The preamble states: “In the fractured human community there is a great need for the realization of the unity among the followers of Christ Jesus. This proposal for full communion between The Episcopal Church and The United Methodist Church is an effort to bring our churches into closer partnership in the mission and witness to the love of God and thus labor together for the healing of divisions among Christians and for the well-being of all. The vision of Revelation 22 is of the tree of life planted on both sides of a river “and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.” (Revelation 22:2) Faithful to Jesus’ prayer that his disciples be one so that the world may believe (John 17: 20-23), may this proposal be an expression of God’s will for the churches.”

That mandate added deep urgency and poignancy to our work as the Las Vegas story unfolded in last week’s news. Our meeting was held in the United Methodist Building at 100 Maryland Ave., just across from the Supreme Court. As we met, the Court was beginning its new session and people were lined up down the steps from early in the morning, hoping to get a seat inside. The Capitol building itself, having undergone the recent project of repair and refurbishment, gleamed in the bright sun of an unusually warm autumn. The work of our democracy continues, even while all the flags within sight had been lowered to half-mast.

“Going Deeper: Faith for Such a Time as This” has been our theme here across these weeks of early Fall. And indeed, we continue to ask ourselves, do we not, just what time is it? How do we get our heads and our hearts around all that’s going on? How do we drop our plumb-line deep into the resources of faith? How do we keep focused on what Paul calls, in the letter Andy read for us this morning, ‘the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus’? The prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus...

Prizes have been in the news, too this week as this first week of October is when the Nobel Prizes are announced each year. We have heard the prizes for Chemistry, Physiology or Medicine, Literature, Peace, with the prize in Economics to be announced tomorrow. Sometimes when the news seems filled only with sorrow and mayhem, it’s good to remember that all the while some of our fellow humans are doing such magnificent, important, world- and life-changing work that expands the minds and the hearts of us all.

The prize of which Paul writes is of a different magnitude all together: the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. This has been one of Paul’s main themes throughout this letter. In Chapter 2 he wrote: “Therefore, my beloved...work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for God’s good pleasure. Do all things without murmuring and arguing, so that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God in a dark world full of people who are crooked and stubborn, in which you shine like stars in the world.”

Are we shining like stars in the world? In his closing homily at our meeting, the Episcopal bishop co-chair asked: “If you asked a bunch of your neighbors, friends, co-workers if they know you are a Christian, would they know?” It’s another way of asking: are we shining like stars through the love and grace of Christ Jesus in our lives? Are we so filled with his presence and peace that we witness by our lives to the faith through which God has claimed us as God’s own?

For Paul, attaining that level and depth of faith was not a once-and-for-all moment in his life nor did he expect that of the church. No, for Paul, this was a life-long journey of growing into what God had already done in him. Letting that love become more and more manifest in him, a bit more each day, as he puts it: “pressing on towards the goal” for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, himself an Episcopal priest we need always remember, taught this very same perspective. He called it “going on to perfection.” For Wesley, the call to be perfect as God is perfect, or what we call ‘Christian perfection,’ was at the heart of what he preached and taught. Through his own study and ministry, he became convinced that contrary to what others were teaching at the time, Christian perfection, becoming perfect in love, is not something that happens after death. Nor is it something purely intellectual, though Wesley was a child of the Enlightenment. It’s not finally something we can think ourselves into.

No, Wesley insisted. It's God's gift to us NOW and it changes how we are to live NOW. Christ redeems us, he argued, Christ saves us by taking away anything that would block the growth of God's love within us. It is God's intent that we are to grow in love of God and love of neighbor throughout our lives. Wesley described this as having a heart "habitually filled with the love of God and neighbor" and "as having the mind of Christ and walking as he walked."

This fundamental Methodist teaching is so important that candidates for ministry, prior to ordination, are still asked a list of what are called "the historic questions." Among them: "Do you expect to be made perfect in this life?" This is usually met with some nervous laughter and self-conscious hesitation, 'til finally everyone says "Yes."

Being perfect is not a checklist. It is not a scorecard. It is an invitation to love the world as God loves—fully, richly, selflessly, generously, abundantly, magnanimously, completely. It is an invitation to love God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength and our neighbor as ourselves. It is at the very heart of what makes us Christian. And if that love is in us, if it's growing in and through us, we will be salt and light and that love will shine forth in all that we do. We will shine like stars in the world.

How do we shine in times such as this? How do we go on toward perfection, letting God work in us to perfect us in love?

As one writer puts it, "we take back both the moment and the long horizon of awareness." That is to say, we resist the temptation to become cynical. We refuse to resign ourselves to "the way things are" as the last word. The light of Christ opens our eyes to see more in this moment, and to see beyond this moment to the future God is creating even now.

Seems to me that we do what we pretty much always do. We pray. A lot. St. Therese of Lisieux described our prayer as "a surge of the heart...a simple look turned toward heaven...a cry of recognition and of love, embracing both trial and joy." This is prayer in the midst of tragedy and confusion that causes us "to pause, take a breath, and remember that the future is still coming to meet us," as another writer puts it.

And we act in other ways as well, in the spirit of Pope Francis who is purported to have said: "You pray for the hungry. Then you feed them. That is how prayer works."

And so, we pray AND we give blood. We donate Health Kits. We give generously. We press for laws and common-sense policies that will insure safety in our communities. We care for the elderly. We teach and mentor children and youth. We join Habitat for Humanity and build a home. We support Upward Bound House to give families and children a hand up. We speak up for the most vulnerable among us. We pray for God to work in and through us always. We shine like stars in the world. And we keep our eyes, our hearts, our hopes focused on the future God has in store for the whole of creation, the future that keeps coming to meet us.

On March 4, 1865, President Lincoln stood on the steps of that same Capitol building to deliver his Second Inaugural Address. The President spoke to the devastation of the Civil War, the pain and suffering of so many. He concludes with these words, as pertinent now as then:

"With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations."

In that same spirit, may we all strain forward to what lies ahead, pressing on for the goal of the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. Let us shine like stars!

AMEN

Notes:

Bishop Frank Brookhart. Homily in the Joint Eucharist. Simpson Chapel in the United Methodist Building, October 4, 2017.

Brandon Ambrosino. "After Las Vegas, who says prayer doesn't 'work?'" Religious News Service, Oct. 4, 2017.

Abraham Lincoln, Second Inaugural Address, Saturday, March 4, 1865