

October 5, 2014 – Philippians 3:4b-14
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church

Forward

Last Sunday, as the Bears fell apart against the Packers, actually well before the Bears fell apart, hours earlier in Berlin, an astonishing new world record was set. This new world record was a running record, set in the men's marathon, by Dennis Kimetto of Kenya. Just four years ago Kimetto was not even training as a serious racer; he was a subsistence farmer. Last Sunday, straining forward, he pressed on toward the goal, and at the end, the clock said 2:02.57. He broke 2 hours and 3 minutes, the first man ever to do so.

I like running, so I read with eagerness about this race and it's thrilling, personal details. Now today we read a letter from Paul that is also personal, and thrilling, and which uses the image of a runner. This image is at the end of the passage, which talks about one's end, one's purpose, and which imagines Christian life as a race, "forgetting what lies behind, and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal."

When I run, I do not always press on. I often plod on. And, as I do, my mind is often on the ground I've already covered, as in, "Okay, now I'm half-way done." And, "Whew, now I'm three quarters done." In other words, I am focused on what lies behind me. But Paul says this is the very opposite of what we should do. We shouldn't be thinking about what's behind us, we should be forgetting what's behind us—"forgetting what lies behind, and straining forward to what lies ahead..."

Now, Paul is not a coach. It's possible that what he says is also good advice for runners, but what Paul writes here is much more astonishing than a new world record. Paul is not a coach, he's an apostle. So though he uses a racing image, what Paul writes is for all of us, runners or not, this point about how we live as and what our goal is. Paul's point, Paul's endpoint, is provocative, even, racy. Paul says, "You've got to forget. You've got to forget what's behind you and reach for what lies ahead."

That is hard for me to do, as a runner, and as a person. Reach for what lies ahead? I prefer familiar territory. I'm more comfortable on ground I've already covered. I'm not alone in this. Sometimes in churches you'll hear the phrase, "We've always done it this way." Please don't hear me dismissing this phrase, or people who say it. It's often a marker of significance, and wisdom. As a community of faith it's important we know the features of the holy ground we traverse together. Moreover, I have a real fondness for always doing things the same way. I find it comforting, satisfying. When I go running, I have just 2 routes that I do, over and over.

But sometimes, routes become ruts. We get stuck. We keep doing things in the same old ways, even when those ways don't seem to be doing a whole lot for us. We keep repeating past patterns, even when those patterns are missteps. But instead of dropping bad practices or mindsets off, shucking them off like a warm-up suit that'll weigh us down, we'll take our botched behaviors and beliefs and write them up into our work-out plan. And then they become prophetic, prescriptive, predictive.

Think of all the ways we hobble our future by an allegiance to a limping past. It's an allegiance, it even comes with a pledge, a pledge which can be memorized and repeated. One version of this pledge might be: "I've never been good at... so I can't..." Or the pledge might be, "I know who that person is, what they've done in the past, so don't expect..." Or the pledge might sound like, "We have a history of not being able to... so don't think we can now..."

These pledges, they take on the power of determination—not because of some irrefutable power of their own, but because of the power we give them. We eliminate the possibility of a new future by our attachment to the past. You’ve heard it. Maybe you’ve said it. I have. When we do this, as a friend of mine said, it’s like we’re about to begin a race...we’re stepping up to the starting line, and we take a moment to check our shoes. But as we bend to our laces, seemingly to see if they’re tight, instead what we do is tie them to each other. That’s what those self-sabotaging pledges are: they’re like getting ready for a race, by tying your own shoes together, just before the gun goes off!

That’s not the way we run, says Paul: “Forgetting what lies behind, and straining forward to what lies ahead, press on toward the goal...” Maybe you have seen that, too—maybe you have seen people overcome incredible obstacles, seen people with a hard past just leave it behind, forget it. They step out, and start going, and they find their stride, they start covering new ground, moving into a brisk and enduring future. I love those stories, stories like the one of Dennis Kimetto. I can’t hear enough of them.

We’ve got those stories, here, in the Bible. This is our story, people of God. This is the story we give to our children here. Stories of people who step out from an unpromising past. Stories of Abraham, who is called into promise. Stories of David, the runt, out tending the sheep when they were looking to anoint the new king. Stories of people called to forget what was behind them and to step into something new. I love those stories, I love that kind of story—the story of Christian life, of forgetting what lies behind, the past that would weigh you down.

But that’s not the only kind of story we have. That’s not the only kind of forgetting that Christians are called to do. And this is the even more provocative point. As Christians, we’re called not only to forget our past failures, we’re also called to forget our past success.

I think it might be even harder to do that. As hard as it is to let go of the mistakes we’ve made, as heavy as they are, I think it might be even harder to let go of our triumphs, and the weight they bear. Yet that’s just what Paul says we must do. It’s what Paul did. He had to let go of all the things that made him important, “If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more,” he says. And then he recounts all the reasons for his confidence: his family background, his education, his skill, his dedication. Haven’t you heard people say that, too? List all the wonderful aspects of their personality and the impressive things they’ve done? Maybe sometimes it sounds like you. Sometimes it sounds like me.

Sometimes, it sounds like church. As we try to understand what it means to be a church and who goes to it and why, sometimes you’ll hear people saying things that sound like a person who can’t forget what lies behind: “In the past we used pack them in...” Or “Back then, when church, when faith, was important to people...” Just as debilitating, just as dangerous, just as deadly, is that inability to forget, that self-focused grip on past success. We have those stories in the Bible, too. We have the story of David, after his success as king, when he took another man’s wife for his own and arranged her husband’s murder. We have the story of Paul, when he was known as Saul, when he was known for his successful persecution of Christians.

We have these Bible stories of failures and successes. We are invited to hear those stories, and to add to them our stories. We are invited to hear the Bible stories, to hear the Bible and hear God saying, “I love you. I love so much, I’m making you part of my story.”

We have not reached the end of that story. We don’t know what astonishing new world awaits, it has yet to be recorded. All we know is, our past is nothing in comparison with God’s future. And so, forgetting what is behind, and straining forward to what lies ahead, we press on toward the goal, for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ.