

Preaching Series: “Let’s Run the Race” (Part 2): “The Accelerating Church”

Philippians 3:13-14; John 9:1-7

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost: August 29, 2010

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I think the key word in the Philippians’ text today is “**movement.**”

In the Letter to the Philippians, chapter 3, verses 13-14, the apostle Paul summarizes God’s plan for his life: *Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.*

Paul leaves no question about his willingness to run the race with Christ, to be a partner with God in God’s mission in the world. He could look back at everything he had experienced in life and knew that there was nothing that he would rather be doing. The only thing that really mattered was joyously moving forward to achieve Christ’s goals.

I think the key word in the text from John’s gospel chapter 9:1-7 is “**urgency.**” Before Jesus performs a healing miracle for a man who was born blind, Jesus explains that the man’s blindness was an opportunity for the work of God to be displayed. In the context of preparing to demonstrate the power of God at work by healing this blind man, Jesus says [and I am quoting from the *New Living Translation*]: *All of us must quickly carry out the tasks assigned us by the One who sent me, because there is little time left before the night falls and all work comes to an end.*

Does the word “urgency” not come to mind as you listen to these words? The text reminds us of the urgency of Jesus’ mission. There is an “urgency,” a “compulsion,” and a “necessity” about God’s mission. There are no excuses, no questions, no doubts, no misgivings, no reservations, about the mission; God’s work must be done. Also the time is limited; we don’t have forever to accomplish the work. The work must be done “*now*”. “The night is coming when no one can work,” Jesus said.

Ultimately, the time will end; the opportunity will have passed. We could condense the words of Jesus into a shorter statement: “We should urgently complete our tasks because time is running out.” Literally translated this verse reads: *It is necessary that we work the works of the one who sent me as long as it is day. Night is coming when no one is able to work.* The expression, “it is necessary,” was a common Biblical phrase meaning that it was the will of

God. It was God's will for Jesus to heal, teach, redeem, and bring people to faith. As Jesus' disciples, it is also God's will that we work those same works with the same sense of urgency Jesus had.

In Ephesians 5:16 we are reminded that we must use our time wisely. We must be zealous to accomplish those good works which we have been created in Christ to do. If we are going to be an athletic church like the New Testament church, we will be constantly following Jesus, making disciples, and transforming the world with a sense of urgency. Why? Because what we are about has enormous significance.

When I put Jesus' thought in John 9 and Paul's thought in Philippians together . . . when I relate the word "movement" to the word "urgency" . . . and apply these two words to my life at a personal level . . . when I consider our theme "Let's run the race" from Hebrews chapter 12 . . . I begin to feel the need to accelerate my pace in order to accomplish the purpose of my life. If I intend to move forward with urgency, I must begin to accelerate. Right?

Returning to our text in Philippians, I find that Paul used a unique word to describe what he was willing to do. The word is "straining." "*Straining* toward what is ahead," the apostle writes. I am taking the liberty of replacing the word *straining* with the word *accelerating* – like a runner who is putting forth maximum effort . . . *accelerating* . . . sprinting . . . stretching out the whole body to try and cross the finish line first. In a marathon I understand that this is called the "last sprint." Because there is a sense of urgency to win the race, there is acceleration in the movement of the athlete.

Think of the life and ministry of Jesus. Just three years to accomplish so much. Consider the urgency, immediacy, and conviction of Jesus. Remember the time when Jesus called the fishermen. Notice that they didn't question his call; they didn't think about it; they didn't consult their families, and they didn't say they wanted to see if anything better would come along. They followed Jesus. They must have picked up on this sense of urgency in Jesus' voice, invitation, determination, and personality.

Now apply this biblical illustration to Memorial Church. When a church wants to follow Jesus faithfully and obediently, there's no time to think about it, to weigh it, to study the *pros* and *cons*, to wait and see if something better will come along. Jesus doesn't want Memorial to see if its situation in which it finds itself will improve . . . you know: more money, more

members, more volunteers, more children, more attending worship and Sunday school. Rather, when Jesus calls there is a sense of urgency; there is a sense that Jesus is erupting into our lives with such a strong force that we have no choice to decide tomorrow or the next day. It is now.

I encourage you to read Christian biographies. Read about people like St. Augustine, St. Francis, St. Patrick, St. Teresa, Martin Luther, John Wesley, George Whitfield, Francis Asbury, Charles Spurgeon, J. Hudson Taylor, Cory Ten Boom, Albert Schweitzer, Martin Niemoller, William Booth, and Billy Graham. These people all had something in common: first, their devotion to Christ; second, their sense of urgency; third, they were intense, passionate about the Gospel of Jesus Christ; and fourth, they spent their lives in the service of the Lord.

But wait! A word of caution needs to be sounded! Although the urgency of the church's mission means movement and acceleration, let us take care not to think that it is like the "final play" or a "two minute drill" in pro football when the team that is behind in the score tries risky and desperate measures to score before the time runs out. Quite the contrary, the church's assessment of the "clock" here is quite sober. Urgency does **not** mean panic. Rather, it means that the accelerating church acts with all deliberateness with regard to the proclamation of the gospel. The accelerating church acts with a sense of the importance of God's mission.

Let's run the race, and let's accelerate, not because we are in panic mode, not because we've heard the "two minute warning" but because this is the most significant thing we can do in life. This is the time for Memorial to work carefully, deliberately, strategically to advance God's mission. It is the time to choose the very best of people to be servant leaders to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ by word, by action, by deeds of mercy, by advocating for justice, and by being in solidarity with those who are on the margins of society.

This is the time for God's people at Memorial to use the resources that God has placed at our disposal for the work of getting the message of God's love out to our world. It is the time to offer the gospel of peace in the midst of the constant threat of war. It is the time to be a conscience in our society: to fulfill both priestly and prophetic roles. It is the time to assert boldly that "Jesus is Lord." It is the time to make all people Jesus' disciples. It is the time for Memorial Church to move – to be dynamic, not static – in its role to transform the world. Someone has said that the church does not share the custodial role of a museum, but has a far more urgent task to ensure that the gospel becomes a living reality in the world today.

Study the first century church and its marvelous growth as seen in the New Testament. Why was its growth so dramatic? Acts 8:4 states a most significant reason for this astounding numerical growth. Scattered abroad by persecution, we read that the disciples “went everywhere preaching the word.” In a span of approximately 34 years, the Christians had saturated the then known world with the teaching of the gospel. They accomplished that great task because every one of them recognized her or his responsibility to Christ and worked at fulfilling it. And these were mostly lay people who formed the team of that accelerating church. They carried the gospel of Jesus Christ with them as they ran the race along every highway and byway, and into every nook and cranny, of their world in that First Century.

The vision of the fulfillment of God’s kingdom and the redemption of creation spurs us on to share with eagerness and joy the hope that is within us through faith in Christ. The focus of all that motivates us to accelerate as a church participating in God’s mission is the very heart of God—the gracious love of our kind, merciful and forgiving heavenly Father. See what love the Father has given us that we should be called children of God (1 John 3:1). This love “has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us” (Romans 5:5). The heart of the missionary message, whether expressed in words or deeds, is that “God shows God’s love toward us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8), and that “whoever believes in God should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). Enlivened by this love, the church accelerates its mission confidently, joyfully and zealously, saying with the apostle Paul: “We are ambassadors for Christ, God making God’s appeal through us. We beg you on behalf of Christ, to be reconciled to God. . . . Behold, now is the acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation.” (2 Corinthians 5:20; 6:2).

Let’s run the race. Let’s accelerate our pace. Let’s start sprinting now. Let’s work while it is day for the night is coming when all work will come to an end. Let’s strain toward what is ahead: a glorious future for Memorial Church, a sign of God’s kingdom in the midst of this Triad region. Let’s press on toward the goal to win the prize to which God has called us in Christ Jesus. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.