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“Press On”

Philippians 3:14 - 4:1 14 I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. 15 Let those of us then who are mature be of the same mind; and if you think differently about anything, this too God will reveal to you. 16 Only let us hold fast to what we have attained. 17 Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us. 18 For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears. 19 Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things. 20 But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. 21 He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself. 4:1 Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.

I'm sure that most of you know who Yogi Berra is – he was the legendary catcher for the New York Yankees and he went on to be one of the most famous managers in major league baseball. But he is also famous for consistently mangling the English language. There are websites and books devoted to his long list of jumbled sentences.¹ But the reason that they're remembered is not **just** that they're mangled, but that they are often mangled in such creative ways that they often make you think. Two of my favorite Yogi-isms are: “*A nickel ain't worth a dime anymore*” and “*I'd give my right arm to be ambidextrous.*” But his most famous Yogi-ism was probably this one: “*Ninety percent of [baseball] is mental, and the other half is physical.*”

Among his many mangled Yogi-isms, though, there are three in particular that I remembered when reading our scripture this week from Paul's letter to the church at Philippi. Here's the first: “*The future ain't what it used to be.*” I think we can all agree on that. It was certainly the case for Paul, writing from his prison cell to the beloved folks in the Philippi church. I am sure that Paul must have looked back on his life and

¹http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Yogi_Berra

could hardly imagine, at times, the future that he ended up having, for his future had taken some very strange turns indeed. From starting out as a privileged Roman citizen in Judea to becoming the chief persecutor of Christians to being struck blind on the Damascus Road by the Risen Christ; to becoming Christ's Apostle to the wider Roman world outside of Israel and thereby ensuring that Christianity survived and spread; and to more than a few prison cells. Indeed, the future that he must have envisioned early in his life had little relationship to where his life actually went. No, the future ain't what it used to be indeed.

But we know that feeling too, for it is in those very moments in our lives when the future isn't what we expected that our anxiety tends to run high, sometimes right through the roof. And anxious people say things that they shouldn't, anxious people too often pick an option simply because it's there. But that way can lead to even more anxiety, and it's also true that anxious people often get more narrow and suspicious. Anxious people sometimes turn – like the people Israel did when Moses had been up on the Mount of Sinai too long and they presumed him dead and so they fashioned for themselves a golden calf to be their “god” – to the wrong things to satisfy them. The translation in your bulletin, from the New Revised Standard, puts Paul's words this way: *“For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ... Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things.”* But I like Eugene Petersen's earthy translation even more: *“There are many out there taking other paths, choosing other goals, and trying to get you to go along with them..... All they want is easy street. They hate Christ's Cross. But easy street is a dead-end street. Those who live there make their bellies their gods; belches are their praise; all they can think of is their appetites.”*

Now, nobody intends to live that way. But there are times that the uncertainties about our futures do cause us to reach for precisely the wrong things to provide safety

or the illusion that nothing has changed. It happens in individual lives – many couples experience a time of anxiety when the empty nest finally greets them. Having devoted twenty or thirty years to the project of raising children they suddenly find “the future ain’t what it used to be” when that last child leaves home. It can be an anxious time trying to figure out new patterns and new ways of being together, being a couple. Or, at the other end of things, a new child is rightly greeted with wonder and thanksgiving, but that child changes everything and suddenly the “future ain’t what it used to be” – the prospect of being responsible for another human life can lead to great anxiety indeed. It happens in churches too, and it was happening in Paul’s day. Paul was writing at a time that the first generation of Christian leaders was beginning to die. That made folks fearful. For in the life of **any** institution the passing of a generation of leaders often brings anxiety. *The future ain’t what it used to be.* New occasions and new opportunities both abound – and sometimes it seems too much.

So what is Paul’s counsel amidst such times when the future is suddenly up in the air and the occasions for anxiety arise? Well, I think Paul’s response fits right in with a second Yogi-ism that I want to share this morning: *“We’re lost but we’re making good time.”* One of the ways that you and I get lost is when we take our eyes off of where we are going, when for whatever reason the goal, the destination, the outcome becomes cloudy. For that too is a cause of anxiety. When I was a Regional Minister, I used to regularly get lost when driving all over northern California and I found that the more lost I was the faster I would then drive. But that wasn’t very productive. Because sometimes what it meant was that when I was finally once again clear about my destination, all that speed, all that making good time had taken me much further away from where I was going! So one of the things we remember is that it’s not just important to “make good time” no matter what direction we’re going, but it is essential to make

sure that we are in fact looking **forward**. One of the saddest moments in the movie “Friday Night Lights,” the story of a year in the life of a high school football team in football-crazed Odessa, Texas, is when one of the characters, now in his twenties, says to a companion about their senior year in high school, *“It’s been all downhill from there, hasn’t it?”*

The Revs. Harry and Ella Mitchell are an amazing pair of preachers. This African-American couple, married for over 60 years until Rev. Ella died three years ago at the age of 91, have something to say about how to make sure that you don’t end up making good time while going in the wrong direction. In commenting on this passage, they note that Paul uses the word “maturity” to describe someone who is aimed in the right direction. And then Rev. Ella has this to say, particularly to those who are seniors but they are words which apply to all of us on those occasions when the destination has become lost; hear what she has to say:

For seniors today, the message [of Paul’s words to the Philippians] is clear. It is never too late and we are never too old to move forward, to grow, to improve ourselves. No matter how much we have achieved in the past, we need to be sure to keep looking ahead and doing better.... It is dangerous to look back too long.... God didn’t make us to run backwards or to look back while we run. We can be hurt badly if we **try to look back and run forward**..²

Wise words indeed. Looking backwards while attempting to run forward is a recipe for getting nowhere fast and for falling down a lot. For you just cannot, to use Paul’s image, “press on” towards the goal and the destination if you’re not even looking in the right direction. You may make “good time” but you will get ever more lost.

There’s a third Yog-ism that is related to the second one and also is a helpful

²http://www.csec.org/csec/sermon/mitchell_4110.htm Emphasis mine.

lens for looking at these words from Paul: *"If you don't know where you're going, you'll wind up somewhere else."* Part of the way that you or I wind up somewhere else than where we were planning to go is when we don't give adequate attention to the habits and patterns of our lives that make a successful journey, or when we let patterns and habits that are not of Christ inadvertently affect the way that we live our lives. Like most folks with email, I receive a lot of forwarded stuff from people. Much of the time, that stuff is not terribly memorable. But last week I received one that was incredibly good. It's the story of John talking to his friend Bruce about a third friend, George; let me share it with you: John said to Bruce, *"Do you know what I just heard about George?"* *"Hold on a minute,"* Bruce replied; *"Before telling me anything, I'd like you to pass a little test. It's called the Triple Filter Test." Triple filter?" That's right,"* Bruce continued. *"Before you talk to me about George, it might be a good idea to take a moment and filter what you're going to say. That's why I call it the triple filter test. The first filter is TRUTH. Have you made absolutely sure that what you are about to tell me about George is true?"* No," John said. *"All right,"* said Bruce. *"So you don't really know if it's true or not. Now let's try the second filter, the filter of GOODNESS. Is what you are about to tell me about George something good?"* *"No, on the contrary, it's really juicy..."* *"So,"* Bruce continued, *"you want to tell me something bad about George, but you're not even certain it's true. You may still pass the test though, because there's one filter left: the filter of USEFULNESS. Is what you want to tell me about my friend going to be useful to me?"* *"No, not really." Well,"* concluded Bruce, *"if what you want to tell me is neither true nor good nor even useful, why tell it to me at all?"*

Triple filter: Is it true? Is it good? Is it useful? That indeed is a pretty good test, a pretty good rule for life, that will indeed help us to be headed in the right direction. And doesn't it sound so similar to what Paul said elsewhere? *"[B]eloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing,*

whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things." Now, as I said earlier, there are times – in our lives or even the life of our church – when we are anxious at the prospect of change. And those are the times that may indeed feel like we don't know where we are going. Those are the times when we may be tempted to take rumor as truth, worry as reality, what **might** happen as what **will** happen. But Paul is counseling us against that; Paul is counseling the church – there at Philippi and here in the Springs – to a different sort of response to the anxiety of change and the temptation to use our words to befuddle rather than to illumine. Our words used carelessly can indeed cause us to lose sight of the direction in which we are going, lose of sight of the goal that Christ is calling us toward. And if we don't know where we are going – because we've given into that anxiety – then we will indeed find ourselves lost.

But where are we going? That's the final question. What **is** the goal, what's the objective, that, to use Paul's phrase, we should be "pressing on" towards? What should we do and be in order to **avoid** being over-anxious about the future, in order to **avoid** even inadvertently looking backwards while trying to walk forwards, in order to **avoid** words that can make us seriously lost?

Paul's answer to those questions is couched in terms that probably wouldn't be our first choice of terms; but partly that's what makes his answer so startling and so true. On the one hand Paul talks about those who have given in to their anxieties about the future, those who fasten onto something false that gets them very lost. And then he contrasts this, on the other hand, with what to us may sound like a curious metaphor: Christians who **do** know where they are going and who do **not** let their anxieties about the future divert them or make them use words that tear down rather than build up, those who don't try to move forward by looking backwards, are those who can be

described as having their “*citizenship in heaven.*” Now that’s not exactly the image that I would have chosen. But the more I wrestled with it, the more I think it’s very apt. For think about it: To be a citizen of a *country* is to be a part of a history and a set of perspectives and commitments and beliefs. To be a citizen of the United States is to not simply be born on a certain patch of earth, but is to be born into a set of perspectives and commitments – the commitment that everyone is created equal, that liberty is to be for all, that justice is to be color- and race-blind. It is to be born into a legacy of believing that no one gets special privileges because of class or wealth, and that there are rights each one has that cannot be taken away. **Those** are the things that make American citizens most fully who they are. And what makes a “*citizen of heaven*” what he or she is?

Just this: The commitment to seeing that even in the midst of anxiety in any area of life, God works for the good of each and all. Just as an American betrays his or her citizenship when acting as if some Americans weren’t to be treated equally with other citizens, so too those who are citizens of heaven would betray that Divine citizenship, the call of Christ, if by their words or actions or attitudes they deny that God cares passionately for each and every creature He has made and demands justice for all. We betray that citizenship whenever we fear the future rather than embrace it as an opportunity to do in the name of that God new things for new people who need the gospel. And we embrace that citizenship whenever we affirm that even amidst change and anxiety and the temptations to fear we will nonetheless press on, we will press on, holding fast to the belief, the commitment, the freeing good news that God is not done with us yet and will yet lead us onwards and upwards in new life and transformation – in our lives, in our families, in our relationships, in our church. God will do so if we will but let Him, if we will but, with Paul, press on, press on. May it be so. Amen.