

## **"Moving Ahead in Life"**

Isaiah 43:15, 18-21; Philippians 3:13-17

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

June 17, 2018 – 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost – Rev. Ronald Botts

Strange, isn't it, that we give so much effort today to advancing technology and comparatively little thought to making spiritual progress in life. That seems to apply to almost every field of endeavor and to other advancements in society.

If anything, the strong fundamentalist push we see now in many religions is dedicated to moving backward in time. Examples can be seen in many places. One American denomination, who had been ordaining clergy regardless of gender, recently adopted a resolution stating, "While both men and women are gifted for service in the church, the office of pastor is limited to men..."

So while science is fully planted in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, many religious leaders would have us step back into the 20<sup>th</sup> or even the 19<sup>th</sup> century to frame their principles. When major areas of life are therefore out of step with each other, how can they interact meaningfully?

When I was a teenager I was sure I was going to be a scientist, and was firmly committed to being on the cutting edge of life. I read every book in our town library on atomic energy and space exploration. I could easily imagine that I would make some discovery that would improve life for everyone. Of course I had no idea what that would be. At 15 you understand not everything is fully clear yet.

While I was trying to envision the big picture of life I liked to listen to shortwave broadcasts, to hear countries from around the world come right into my bedroom. If you tuned in at the right times you could get English-language programs from all the major capitals: London, Paris, Rome, Moscow, Cairo, Berlin. Much of the music I didn't like, but the newscasts and feature programs were exciting.

I listened on a sleek Hallicrafters set that had taken many months of saving from yard mowing. It was silver in color with a shiny chrome faceplate, plus a whole array of knobs that I could twist and turn to get the stations to their peak of reception. I loved that radio and listened to it almost every night until I fell asleep, it's dial putting a soft, faint glow into my room. I wrote for, and received verifications of reception, from far-away places all around the globe.

And to think, all that was possible from a set only about 8 inches high, 15 inches wide, and about a foot deep. I'll bet it weighed ten pounds or more. Today, this is the shortwave radio I keep beside my bed and it weighs about six ounces. It receives several international bands in addition to AM and FM. This radio may actually get better reception than the old Hallicrafters 20 times its size and weight. It runs on batteries, so there's no limitation on where it can go.

Technological advancements have made great strides the last hundred years. The seemingly impossible has become commonplace. There appears to be no limits to what we can do, given enough time and money. Sure, we have some set-backs from time to time; but, all in all, our achievements are really spectacular.

Even the world of sports has seen the limits pushed back steadily. The mile run has always been one of those benchmark events. When Norman Taber ran this event in 4:12 in 1915 it led one coach to remark that the record might never be broken because this was just about as fast as human legs could go. Little by little, though, the record kept moving downward until finally, in 1954, Roger Bannister broke the four minute mark. Now the time is down to 3:43 and, no doubt, will continue to be broken.

The apostle Paul must have been a participant in athletics because he often uses the language of competition in his letters. In our reading today from Philippians he says: "...forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal...."

Surely that is what all successful runners have to do. They can't take time to look back where they've been or even to determine who's following. Nor can they be troubled about a mis-step earlier in the race and then dwell on it. They have to keep their eyes and their thoughts ahead at all times.

Only the athlete who has disciplined him or herself in this way has a chance to win the prize waiting at the end. Paul, however, has something different in mind than a crown of leaves, then symbolic of the triumphant athlete. The goal he thinks about makes everything else pale in significance. It is to faithfully follow God's personal call to us, which has been revealed most clearly through Jesus.

"Brothers and sisters," he says, "Join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us." Here Paul takes the role of a coach. He has already achieved proficiency in his event and now turns to help younger participants. He tells them, in essence, "If you recognize my achievements, then give credibility to my words of advice. I've been at this longer than you. Follow my example, learn from me, and benefit from the whole coaching staff that I send to teach you."

One purpose of this letter to the church at Philippi was to stimulate in them things spiritual. Paul felt there could be nothing more important to be about. In addition, the letter provided a corrective to other influences which were beginning to affect the faith of the people in that church. Chief among these was Gnosticism which stressed that while the soul might approach perfection, the body is hopelessly corrupt. The soul, in this view, is always going in one direction and the body in the other. Soul and flesh were at total odds.

Paul didn't doubt that both good and evil influences could be at work at the same time within a person, but to equate the soul totally with good and the body with bad, was to make a false division. One Gnostic approach was to treat the body as unimportant. And since the body was a corrupting influence, it needed to be held in check. Starving it, abusing it, were ways of punishing the body and showing that it was not a person's true reality.

Other Gnostic Christians at the time took exactly the opposite approach. This group thought that since the body was hopeless, let it engage in whatever temptations it wished. So instead of living ascetic lives, this group lived **excessive** lives and indulged in anything that came their way. These people were known for their debauchery. They said it didn't matter what the body ate or drank or engaged in, for their souls were clear and that was all that mattered.

Paul thrust himself into the center of this debate. He insisted that we should take the whole of our being and make the most out of what has been given us. Life in Christ is about making progress in our personal lives rather than assuming we ever fully achieve it.

So Paul encourages us to run the good race. Strive toward God with the best that is in you. Perfection may always be beyond our grasp, but that's simply the limitation of being human. The good news is that we don't have to be perfect to be acceptable to God. We don't first have to work out all our problems and then we will be received. God cares for us now and, because of that, we are freed and empowered to become all that we can be.

Being a Christian is not reaching some personal mark and stopping but it is a continual process of becoming. How you run the race, how you live your life, is all important.

To do this Paul would advise you to condition and equip yourself in the best way you are able. Try as hard as you can to move forward each morning. Strive to better your old marks, your previous bests, every day you live. Learn from others who are a bit more advanced than you. The race is never over until you take your last breath.

If we are ever going to be able to live in peace and harmony with each other in this world, we must begin to make as much progress in the spiritual realm as in the scientific. All that we have achieved thus far as a civilization is not enough, and will never be enough, to deal with the great underlying problems of intolerance and violence, poverty and exploitation. We must learn to live as if all others are truly our sisters and brothers, no matter how different from us they may appear to be. We cannot let external differences divide us from the common nature which we all share.

God bids each one of us individually to move onward, upward, and ahead and to the full life of which we are capable. God also calls humanity as a whole toward this same process. When we stay only where we were yesterday, we lose ground today. Forward movement is the key. We can look to the past, and learn from the past, but never retreat to the past. This applies to societal progress as well as to technology and to science.

Christ has shown us the straighter and better route, and encourages us in every way possible to seek after life's greater goal. He will not only lead us in the desired way, but promises he will be with us right along side.

The world today desperately needs people who will be able to push humanity to the next higher plane of development and accomplishment. We cannot retreat back to what makes right, but must move forward to where the brotherhood of man, and the sisterhood of women, will come together in acknowledging the Lordship of God.

It's not only our best hope for the future, but our **only** hope.