

Sermon for June 18, 2017 – “Eyes on the Prize”

Eleventh Sunday in OT, Year A – Text: Philippians 3:4-14; Matthew 6:25-34

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Over the course of the last decade or so, there’ve been lots of discussions in lots of churches over the direction of the church, particularly mainline denomination churches. Much of the discussion involved what leaders call a new “paradigm”, or “model”, for the church. The “old” paradigm, said an Episcopal bishop, involved focusing on **problems**. If we don’t have enough **money**, we focus on stewardship. If we don’t have enough **people**, we focus on membership. The “new” paradigm, he said, is “to make sure that the main thing is the main thing.” The problem is that churches all too often focus on the **wrong** thing (or things) and it seems to me that people’s disillusionment and anxiety, all the bickering over this issue or that, all of this seems to be a result of this wrong focus. We focus on what isn’t happening. What’s not being done. We focus on our problems, especially as a church, and when the problems aren’t fixed what happens? Well, folks get aggravated, anxious, and resentful. And, more and more often they get up and leave. I keep bringing up Mark Twain’s quote: “Most people don’t go to church because they’ve been there!” And it’s true. So, we need to do much more than focus on the problems we have. But I’m not suggesting that we focus just on the solutions either. We need to focus on that “main thing.”

The reason we – that is, the church – exist in the first place and the reason we exist is to help make disciples. It comes from, as we talked about last week, Jesus’ “Great Commission” to “**go, therefore and make disciples...**”. That’s about as straight-forward as it gets. No ambiguity there. But, what’s that mean for the church? What’s so important about disciples? Why are we to go and make them? Well, strictly speaking, the term “disciple” means “learner” or “student”. But the Greek word for “disciple” in the New Testament has a deeper meaning than that. A disciple is a “follower” someone who adheres completely to the teachings of another, making them their rule of life and conduct. What you may notice here is that in this understanding of the word, we’re talking about more than just accepting certain beliefs. We’re talking about faith, yes...but not “mere” faith. Not faith as simply an intellectual agreement of certain doctrine(s). I’m talking about something much deeper. The kind of discipleship I’m talking about is one that develops what I call “resilient” faith, a mature faith that stands firm, able to remain strong in the face of anything. This kind of discipleship should be the main thing. This is **not** to say that things like budgets, programs, meetings, money, membership and so on aren’t important...They are, but they’re merely a **means** to an end. My feeling is this...If we take care of the main thing, if we focus on discipleship, ourselves and others, if we recognize that spiritual growth, spiritual maturity, and spiritual nurture are all integral parts of that, if everything we **do** – worship, education, fellowship, etc. – centers around that then the rest will take care of itself. Sounds simple, and on some level – it is. But it isn’t easy. Simple, yes... Easy, no! Especially since it’s so hard to tell how well you’re doing! Because it’s not about numbers, it’s about faithfulness! And faithfulness, being faithful to Christ’s commandment to “go and make disciples is (or should be) its own reward. And as Christians aren’t we supposed to measure success differently? Of course we are!

So, we need to focus on discipleship. We need to keep our “eyes on the prize”. On what Paul calls in our first reading “**the prize of the heavenly call of God in Jesus Christ.**”

I'll say it again. I believe that if we're focused on that then everything else will fall into place. Now you're probably wondering: "How can he be so sure?" And I know that lots of folks are anxious (and that's putting it mildly) about the future of the church. Lots of folks are worried we may not have a future! Well, recall what Jesus said in our reading about anxiety and worry about being focused on our needs rather than upon God: **"Do not worry, saying, what we will we eat? Or what will we drink? Or what will we wear? Your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. Rather strive first for the kingdom of God and God's righteousness and all these things will be given you as well."** If I were I to ask, most of say that we believe that, right? That God will take care of us, our church. We believe that, right? Why then do we still worry? We stress about dwindling memberships, worship attendance, pledging, and so on. We think back to the way things used to be; when we had all the money we needed, when we had never needed to beg for volunteers, when we were packing 'em in on Sundays. We think about how different things are now and we worry. We wonder what we can do to turn things around! We start thinking that if we just did "such and such" we'd be fine. But then we hear Jesus say, in effect, "don't worry, be happy" and what happens? We're caught. We're caught somewhere between faith and trust! That's quite a challenge – isn't it? A challenge to a different way of looking at things. A different way of dealing with problems and worries that we face as a church and as individuals.

John Wesley used to ask his people on a regular basis: "What's the state of your soul?" It's a great question, but not one we ask very much anymore. We can get so busy within the church going to meetings, we get to worrying about money and staff and programs, about everything else that the "main thing" gets lost. Then what happens? Our behavior, what we say and do, can end up working against us. Working **against** the main thing again, discipleship, instead of **for** it.

And, outside the church the main thing's often invisible, if it's even there at all. Not only do we not walk the walk, we often don't even talk the talk. We save it, setting it aside, as it were, to Sunday mornings. Think about it. Think about the things you talk about when talking to friends or even family. We focus more on day-to-day goings on of life. We fixate what needs fixing around the house or where we're planning to go on vacation instead of seeking the mind of Christ. Why is that?

The question is: What's the main thing in our lives? What do we give priority to as part of the church of Jesus Christ? What happens Monday through Saturday when we're not at church? What's the state of our **own** discipleship? "Oh why are we so haggard at heart, so care coiled, care-killed? "So fashed, so cogged, so cumbered?" asked poet Gerald Manley Hopkins. Why indeed? Why indeed do so many of feel so scattered? So overwhelmed? So worn out? Could it be we're trying to do too much? Could it be that we're doing the wrong things? Running around like chickens with our heads cut off, trying to be all things to all people? Trying to be like other churches we perceive as being "successful"? Could it be that we lack a "resilient" spiritually mature faith? Could it be maybe a little bit of all three? Maybe it's a question of focus knowing what the main thing is and making it the main thing. Paul understood that when he talked about his background. He realized just how blessed he'd been by the standards of his day. In our first reading he said: **"Yet whatever gain I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord."** He then says: **"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."**

The past is, according to Paul, less important than the goal. What's important is following the right course and staying focused. How we as a church or individually, manage to deal with our **problems** also relates to our **focus**. Focus meaning that to which we exert our efforts.

So, I offer four simple things can help us keep our focus and bring us closer to winning the prize of our calling in God. **First**, resist spiritual complacency. It's important to recognize our strengths and virtues, no question. But there's danger in being satisfied with where we are, in thinking that this is all we **can** do or **need** to do. That we can't, or don't need to, go any higher or further. God can always make you more like Christ than you are right now. **Second**, accept the need to work on spiritual growth. Salvation's a gift, a gift of grace. It's free and we can do nothing to earn it, but an intimate relationship with God requires **some** effort on our part. Every relationship does! Musicians and athletes know their abilities. They know that they must work to **maintain** and **improve** them. Remember the old joke: how do you get to Carnegie Hall? Practice! **Third**, recognize the need for and importance of spiritual disciplines. There are several; I'll mention two: Bible study and prayer. I know so many people who've told me that they don't know enough about the Bible to study it! It's like saying that you're too out of shape to go to the gym. I'm sorry, but that makes no sense to me. Seriously, pick up the Bible. Open it. Read it. Take part in one of our Bible study's. As for prayer, well prayer really is just talking to God and we do it not because God **doesn't** know what's on our minds but because he **does**! It seems to me that "things" in our lives, all of stuff we do, all of the stuff that happens to us has a way of accumulating, becoming what's called the "elephant in the room." You know, the obvious problem no one wants to discuss. But when you finally do what happens? It gets up and leaves and ends up doing a whole lot **less** damage. Anyone who's been in therapy will tell you that just talking about an unresolved issue is half the battle. Now put that in the context of talking to the God of creation! In our gospel reading, Jesus says "do not worry" no fewer than three times. He reminds us that our heavenly Father knows what we need. God Himself has told us through the prophet Jeremiah "**I know the plans I have for you... "Plans for your welfare and not your harm, to give you a future with a hope."** Finally, the **fourth** thing, don't fear spiritual growth or maturity. Even more than that, realize that you **need** it. As I understand Scripture spiritual growth is an **expectation**. The author of Hebrews reprimands his readers because they "**no longer try to understand...**" "**Therefore,**" he says, "**let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity.**" Peter's 2nd letter encourages us to "**grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.**" I'm thinking, isn't that why we come to church in the first place? It seems to me that only to the extent that we grow **spiritually** will we grow in **any other** sense.

Some of you get this. I realize that, to some extent, I'm "preaching to the choir." But I also realize that there may be a few who hear this and think that this doesn't apply to them; thinking that they're too old or too far gone, or maybe they've tried before and it didn't work, or that they didn't like it. Maybe they think they can't or that they don't have enough time. Sorry, but that's pride talking, or fear, or both. If the thinking is that this isn't important, fine; at least have the courage to admit it. But, at the same time, we must ask ourselves: What's the state of our souls? Is my faith strong? Is it mature? Is it resilient? How do we know? How will others know?

Brothers and sisters, “here’s the thing”, the main thing. Exactly sixty-four days ago I said that we’re Easter people, people touched by the Resurrection. I said that as Easter people we should act like it, that it should make a difference in how we live. Well, here’s an opportunity to do just that. I hear lots of folks say that we need to grow our church, okay, fine! Let’s grow! But this has to be about more than just numbers, more than just survival. It’s about faithfulness and it must start within us! Brothers and sisters, God knows what we need. He also knows what we lack. Therefore, we must indeed seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness. We must be about discipleship. We must be about spiritual growth and maturity starting within ourselves! If it’s to make any kind of difference in the lives of others, it’s got to make a difference in ours first! Let’s make the “main thing” the main thing and then keep our eyes on the prize!

Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.