

**Special guest speaker, The Reverend Dr. Robert A. Chesnut,
East Liberty Presbyterian Church
April 22, 2012
“Pressing On”
Philippians 3:4b-14**

Read the scripture online: NSRV, <http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=206536316>

What a joy and a privilege it is to stand in this pulpit again--the first time since I retired, ten years ago next Sunday. Jan and I thank Randy, the Session, and all of you for this precious opportunity to reconnect with dear old friends and with this dearly beloved congregation.

It is wonderful as well to share this occasion with the return of our good friend (the Reverend Dr. J.) Richard Szeremany. Finally, an extra bonus today is reconnecting with Chris Iosso, whom Jan and I have known for over three decades, back to the days when he was clergy spouse at Jan's home church in Palisades, NY. Chris and others of you know that we are studying the Palestinian Kairos document in our church in Santa Fe and that we are now contemplating action steps.

How gratifying it is that you as a congregation have kept pressing on, faithful to your vision of peace and justice for all Gods' children and to diversity and inclusiveness in Christ's name.

It is a particular joy this community to greet the new Spanish-speaking contingent here. To them I say, Bienvenidos, bienvidos, queridos amigos en Christo. Su presencia aqui como parte de esta congregacion me alegre mucho.

You may be interested to know that our little multicultural Presbyterian church in Santa Fe includes lots of Spanish in every Sunday service. You might also like to know that last fall Jan and I spent two months in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico, where I served as visiting minister to the new ecumenical Community Church of San Miguel . . . and that we have been invited back there again next year.

Now . . . to my sermon. I begin with a few quotations. These are words that point to a vision of ministry, of the church, of the Christian life that has guided me now through fifty years of ordained ministry, back to August 26, 1962 when I was ordained by the Presbytery of Cincinnati.

A quotation from the Rev. John Robinson who, in 1620, said in his farewell message to the Pilgrims as they were pressing on for the New World: "God has yet more light to break forth from his holy word."

From James Russell Lowell, 19th century poet, words inspired by the Civil War by the over how scripture show guide Christians regarding the issue of slavery, especially since there are some passage of scripture that seem to condone slavery: "New



occasions teach new duties, time makes ancient good uncouth; They must upward still and onward who would keep abreast of truth.”

Then, from either George Burns or Gracie Allen, 20th century radio comedians: “Never put a period where God has placed a comma.” And here’s a little bonus quote from George Allen: “The marks of a good sermon are a good beginning, a good ending, and in between as little as possible ”

Finally from Jesse Jackson, 20th and 21st century prophet: “Be patient with me. God isn’t finished with me yet.”

Our scripture readings this morning point us in the same direction as these quotations. They say our faith calls us on a journey of life-long growth, moving on, not standing pat, looking forward, not backward.

Our reading from Isaiah is truly astonishing. Here are Isaiah and the Hebrew people in the midst of captivity in Babylon. Isaiah tells them to look forward to their liberation and return to Jerusalem, a deliverance the prophet foresees coming imminently. It’s truly astonishing because, while Isaiah recalls the exodus, the liberation of the Hebrews from Egypt many centuries before, he says to his people: “Forget about it. That’s past history. God is now doing something new, a new deliverance, not a path on dry land through the waters of the Red Sea as before, but this time a path through the dry desert sands where God will make springs of water gush forth on all sides as God leads us back to our homeland.”

Isaiah’s astonishing “forget about it” is virtually heresy for the Hebrews who were forever saying, “Remember, remember, remember.” Isaiah says instead: “Remember the past only to draw hope for the future. There’s a future deliverance coming. Look forward now to the new thing that is God about to do. God’s deliverance is not just a thing of the past. Our God is a God who keeps on delivering. God is not finished with us yet.”

Our passage from Paul’s letter to the Philippians is equally astonishing. Here is Paul in captivity, in prison as he writes this letter. He does not know what lies ahead. He might remain in prison to the end of his days. He might be executed. Yet he speaks of continuing to press on in his life of faith. He does not claim spiritual perfection. He does not consider it to have been over and done with in his conversion on the road to Damascus, or even with all his mission accomplishments since then for the young Christian church.

In fact, Paul says he’s looking forward, not backward. He’s forgetting what lies behind. He’s pressing on to what lies ahead. I take this to mean that he is continuing to learn and grow in his faith. God has yet more light and truth and love to share with him. God is not finished with him yet.



Paul writes here, as he does in many other places, about suffering, dying, and rising with Christ. From his conversion forward, Paul had found that to let go of his old way of life—his old certainties, securities and sources of pride—was exceedingly painful; it was soul suffering. It was like dying; dying to his old self. Paul points his readers to this reality again and again in his writings because he has learned from experience that the self is transformed through a sort of spiritual death and resurrection.

When Jan and I took a group from our church in Evanston, IL to India, back in the 1980s, our Indian guide led us into a Hindu temple and pointed out that worshippers were bringing coconuts as an offering. The coconut, she explained, is a symbol of the self. The self, she said, like the coconut, has to be cracked open to get to the meat inside.

Christians would agree. And we might add this, I believe, with Paul: The self is indeed hard-shelled. The self is inherently self-centered, ego-centric. That's how we're born, as infants, totally focused on our own needs. It's normal. It's natural. But life's challenge is to grow beyond the ego-centricity of infancy and childhood. It is a huge challenge. Sometimes it takes a cracking open for that process to begin, for us to get immersed in the love of God and neighbor, rather than in the love of self only. That's the cracking open Paul had begun to experience on the road to Damascus. It was spiritual death, and resurrection.

Now Paul understands this not to be a once-and-for-all conversion experience that is over and done with. There are those, of course, who can name the day and the hour of their salvation and require that the rest of us do the same. Often, it seems, it all begins and ends there for those folks. It has cast them into a hard and fast mold of unbending faith.

Paul could name the day and the hour of his conversion experience. I can name the year and the season of mine when I was only fifteen. But for both Paul and for me this was just the beginning . . . just the beginning of a life-long process, the ongoing transformation of the self.

For me, over the decades, it meant letting go of my old political and economic persuasions for another point of, one more in accord, I believe, with my Christian faith. Eventually it meant letting go of my old understanding of God in exchange for a new one. Now my old convictions, of course, were near and dear to me. So these were long and painful years of dying to an old life to be raised up to a new life, a life more rooted in love, I believe, in compassion.

God is not finished with us yet. The life of faith is a life of adventure. We're never quite sure what lies ahead for us around the next bend when we're open to letting God's Spirit lead us and work on us. In this life our journey is ongoing and lifelong, progressively opening the heart and mind to new comprehensions of God's truth and love.



As we grow in faith, as we progressively transcend ourselves in the love of God and neighbor, I believe we will become less and less hard-shelled about our own points of view, and more and more open to a variety of ways of understanding and loving and experiencing, and worshipping God. As we find a relationship with God through love, grace and humility, we will begin to relate to others with love, grace, and humility.

I believe that as we transcend self, we become better and better listeners. We become less and less inclined to dominate conversations. We become more and more eager to hear from and to understand others, their different life experiences and insights and wisdom, their wants and needs and preferences. We become more and more open-minded, empathic and compassionate.

Obviously, there are many different applications of these insights within our faith communities. At the heart of it all, however, I believe there will be an attitude, as there is here at ELPC, of affirming diversity and variety of belief and practice, a desire to understand and to meet a broader rather than a narrower range of needs, wants and preferences. So we use all the imagination and creativity we can muster to accomplish this.

This is what is especially sad, I believe, about the divisions today within our own and other denominations over issues of sexual orientation and ordination. Regarding scripture and slavery, Christians came to see that new occasions teach new duties; time makes ancient good uncouth.

There is more than one way of expressing loving, faithful sexual relationships. Besides, if we want to take our cues from Jesus about what is most important, he talked far, far more about what we do with our pocketbooks than what we do with our private parts. And because I have tried to take my cues from Jesus, sexual orientation is also a subject about which I have changed my own mind over the years.

In one generation Christians defend slavery. In another generation they draw a line against drinking, dancing, and playing cards. Then we move on and in the next generation the hard line is drawn against the ordination of women. Then we move on and in the next generation the hard line is drawn against the ordination of gays and lesbians. Then in the next generation many of those who think this way today will likely either be dead or perhaps have changed their minds.

Probably their children and grandchildren will think differently than they did. And perhaps they will look back with sadness that their parents and grandparents could not bring themselves to listen to and understand the life experiences of those who loved in a different way. Maybe they will be sad as well that they needlessly divided the church by putting a period where God had only placed a comma, by failing to see the new light breaking forth from God's word, unable to see that God was doing a new thing.



Pressing on in our faith keeps us from thinking things are ever “my way or the highway.” So one final point here. I don’t believe that in terms of conversion and spiritual growth experiences that it’s Paul’s way or my way or the highway. Nor, as precious as it is to me and as much as it has shaped and formed me, do I believe that it must be the Christian way or the highway. If love is the be-all and end-all of the spiritual journey, then it really doesn’t matter so much how we arrive at what Jesus called the two great commandments, loving God with all our being and our neighbors as ourselves. Or as Paul himself says, “Faith, hope and love abide, but the greatest of these is love.”

AMEN

