



Poland Presbyterian Church

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A Lenten Sermon by Brent J. Eelman

The Grace of Absent-Mindedness

Philippians 3:4b-14

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: ⁵circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

⁷Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. ⁸More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. ¹⁰I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, ¹¹if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

¹²Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. ¹³Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

There is a story about a retired and somewhat absent-minded preacher who was sitting in the pew one Sunday. The preacher was a recent seminary graduate but had a reputation as an engaging speaker. The young preacher stood up in the pulpit and began his message by saying, "I have a confession to make. I have spent the best years of my life in the arms of a woman who was not my wife."

The congregation gasped when they heard this and every eye was riveted on the young man in the pulpit. He paused for a while and then continued: "She was my mother." A sigh of relief came over the congregation.

The retired minister was quite impressed by this story and the way it captured the attention of the congregation and resolved that he would use the story the next time he preached. A couple of months later he was invited to preach in a nearby congregation. He stood up in the pulpit and said to the congregation, "I have a confession to make. I have spent the best years of my life in the arms of a woman who was not my wife." Sure enough... the congregation gasped and every eye was focused on the retired preacher. He paused for effect and then began... Stuttering, and dumbfounded... "She was... She was... She was... for the life of me, I can't remember who she was...."

Absent-mindedness can have its consequences. We forget where important things are, like our keys, an important paper, our wallet. I can remember returning home from a flight and spending over an hour trying to remember which parking lot I had parked my car in at the airport.

Absentmindedness has its consequences, but it may also be a gift. There are things we would like to forget. There are moments in our lives, embarrassing, foolish, perhaps when we have done something wrong, that we would like to forget. These are the events of our lives that haunt us. They eat at us. They wake us up at 3 a.m.

The good news of the gospel, the message today, is that these events, these memories, need not control our lives. They do not determine our future. This is the grace of absent-mindedness.

I

Do you remember the major league pitcher, Al Downing? On April 8, 1974, he surrendered the 715th homerun to Hank Aaron. That homerun broke one of the longest standing baseball records, held by Babe Ruth. I suspect this moment is what most of us will remember about Al Downing. We have forgotten that in 1967 he was an all-star pitcher. He was the top rookie for the Yankees in 1961, joining the team right out of college. After a few injury plagued seasons, he was named the “comeback player of the year” in 1971. Yet, in spite of all these accomplishments, he will always be remembered as the pitcher who gave up the record breaking homerun. It was his defining moment in baseball history.

Defining moments can be oppressive, especially if we let those moments control our self-identity. They have a way of beating us up and throwing us into depression. Yet often, we define ourselves by our mistakes, our sins, our failures or the times we have been a victim.

But there is the flip side of that. We also take our self-identity from those big moments in our lives: the “resume moments”. They are the moments about which we boast: the “Kodak moments”, the trophy moments. They are the events in our lives that we want others to know about. They are the ones that we put on our resumes. But are they really us?

Then there is self-definition by pedigree. Pedigree offers some wonderful advantages. But it is also oppressive and psychologists tell us that one of the primary psychological tasks is individuating from our pedigree; that is defining ourselves apart from our parents. As some of you are aware, my father was seminary professor who taught homiletics, (preaching). There have been some wonderful advantages that have come from this for me, but I will also say that the major struggle in my professional life has been finding “my own voice” as a preacher and pastor.

It is interesting the things that define us:

- Our failures and shortcomings;
- our moments in the sun and times of triumph;
- Our pedigree, our family heritage.

What is the problem with these? They are all about us (me)! Ultimately they have the potential for a great deal of self-deception and misery.

II

In the 3rd chapter of Philippians, the Apostle Paul shared his resume. He listed the things that might define who he was. It was the usual list.

His pedigree: “circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews.”

His major accomplishments: “as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.”

Although he did not list his shortcomings and failures, the Acts of the Apostles did: Paul was present, giving nodding ascent to the stoning of Stephen, the first martyr of the church.

But then, after sharing his glowing resume, Paul made one of the most amazing statements in the Bible: “Whatever gains 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. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish.”

Paul stated in unequivocal terms: “It is not about me.” This is the problem with our sense of self. We think it is all about us. We own our successes and our failures and often let them dictate our self-worth and even determine our behavior. But the truth is they both emanate from our egotism. The unique part of Paul’s declaration was he disavowed his accomplishments. He wished to forget them. Why? Because they were in the way of knowing and loving Christ. They obscured his relationship with Christ. They distorted his self-perception.

In a few moments we will sing the Hymn, “When I survey the wondrous cross” We will echo Paul’s confession:

*My richest gain I count but loss,
And pour contempt on all my pride.*

This is the grace of absent-mindedness; the gift of forgetting. It is the gift of letting go of all the things in life that charm us, but also control us. It is the gift of freedom offered through the cross of Christ. The sinner, the one who is branded as ‘less than worthy’ finds freedom in this promise.

We are not defined by our mistakes... we can forget them; they needn’t control our futures. Nor are we defined by our trophies. They too are left behind. We are able to re-center our lives, not on our gains and losses, but on Christ. Christian faith does not glory in its past and its accomplishments. It lives in the moment, with its vision firmly affixed on the future, pursuing the prize; pressing forward in freedom. The defining moments in our lives are not our mistakes, nor our accomplishments. The defining moment in our lives is the cross – the moment that Christ died for us.

III

Grace is a gift, and forgetting is an important part of that gift. An athlete, regardless of the sport, has to completely forget the last play, the last mistake, so that she can fully concentrate on the next moment. In the words of Paul, “forgetting what lies behind, and straining forward to what lies ahead.” Absent-mindedness; forgetting what lies behind is an amazing gift of freedom. It is truly a gift of grace. It tells us that life begins now. It wipes clean the slate. It enables us to focus on the future. It gives us the opportunity to reprioritize. In short, the cross of Christ, God’s grace has the power to re-invent us. It places us back in the race of life and enables us to *press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus*. This is the good news. Amen.