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# Press On

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A Sermon By  
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May 21, 2017  
Grace Episcopal Church  
Silver Spring, Maryland

*An audio version of this sermon can be found on the Grace Church website at*  
<http://graceepiscopalchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/2017-05-21-AWW.mp3>.

**Press On**

1Peter 3:13-22

John 14:15-21

The Rev. Andrew W. Walter

Grace Episcopal Church

The Sixth Sunday of Easter

May 21, 2017

I am going to start off in a slightly different manner, by preaching on the readings we just heard through the lens of another scripture passage, and specifically, through one section of Paul's letter to the Philippians.

Beginning with the 10<sup>th</sup> verse of the 3<sup>rd</sup> chapter in that book, Paul writes:

*I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death... Not that I have already attained this, or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved... 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.*

*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.*

I press on. I keep going. I don't let up. I don't stop. It doesn't matter what happens. It doesn't matter what comes my way. I'm gonna keep going. I'm gonna keep moving. I'm pushing ahead. I press on.

We can almost hear Paul singing that old hymn:

*I have decided to follow Jesus.*

*I have decided to follow Jesus.*

*I have decided to follow Jesus.*

*No turning back.*

*No turning back.*

Paul was writing a few decades after Jesus' death and resurrection. For years, he had travelled around the Mediterranean, to cities in Greece, and Macedonia, and Asia Minor, preaching about the risen Christ and nurturing small communities of followers, and it wasn't easy work. Paul covered thousands of miles in his travels, sailing by ship when he could, but walking by foot when he had to, trekking across mountains and barren terrain, along roads that really weren't roads at all.

And, Paul also got into a lot of trouble with what he was doing. His message about Jesus was not always welcome, and sometimes, the crowds and city officials turned hostile. Over the years, Paul was beaten, arrested, run out of town, thrown into jail, and it was during one of those imprisonments, maybe in Ephesus, maybe in Rome, that Paul wrote the community in Philippi:

I press on. This doesn't matter. Yes, I'm in jail right now; and, things aren't looking too good; but, I'm gonna keep going. I'm gonna keep working. I'm gonna keep telling people about Jesus. I'm gonna press on.

Paul was not only writing to update the people of Philippi on his situation, but also to offer words of support and encouragement to other disciples, other followers who were having their own struggles, their own difficulties.

We all know what it is to need a little support sometimes – someone who provides us with a word, or a gesture, to let us know they're behind us, they're with us, they believe in us. It could be a family member or friend, or even someone we bump into at just the right moment, someone who lifts us up and gets us back on our feet, so we can keep going to face the next minute, the next hour, the next day. When we are struggling, it doesn't take much to make a huge difference in our lives.

Last Sunday, my wife, Susan, and I attended our son's college graduation. As we all know, graduations are important milestones, representing a significant commitment of time and energy and effort, and, as such, they are big accomplishments, worthy of celebration. But, graduations are also kind of long, and they can be pretty boring. You stand there for 3 hours, listening to people ramble on, waiting for those few seconds when your child walks across the stage, and you have to work your way to the front at just the right time, so you can get that picture of the big moment, when your child receives the diploma, because that is the whole reason you're there: for that one instant, that one moment.

Since this was our third graduation, we had a sense of what they were like, and so, after our son had that big moment last Sunday, Susan and I left the chapel where commencement was taking place to wait outside until it was all over. As we stood there in the sunshine, we realized this was an important milestone for us, as well, because our youngest son just graduated from college. We did it! We had raised three boys, put them through school, and successfully launched them into the world. They were healthy, happy. They all had jobs. And, as that realization swept over us, Susan and I looked at each other, feeling like: we're kinda done here. We did our job. The bank of Mom and Dad is now closed. It's Susan and Andrew time.

But, as we stood there, we also thought back to the journey we'd been on, and how difficult it was at times. It's not easy becoming a parent, and it's not easy being a parent. There are moments of doubt, questions, frustrations, and uncertainties, moments when you don't know what you're doing, moments that will drive you crazy... What made the difference for us, though, was all of the other people in our lives, the family and friends who said:

“You can do this.”

“It’s going to be alright.”

“You’re doing a good job.”

“Your kids are great,” even though we didn’t think our kids were great.

That support and encouragement meant everything to us because, at times, we didn’t know if we could do it. We didn’t know if it would be alright.

The disciples and other early Christians felt exactly the same way during the first few decades of the Church.

Jesus had commissioned the disciples to continue his work and ministry. At their Last Supper, Jesus told the disciples, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments... [and] they who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me.” So, that is what the disciples did: they shared Christ’s love with each other, and those around them, devoting themselves to Jesus’ teaching, to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to the prayers. All of the followers who were together, and they held everything in common. They would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. And, they did it, because that is what Jesus taught them to do.

The early Christians ran a social revolution, challenging the cultural expectations and norms of the time, and living differently from everyone else around them. They cared for the young and the old, the poor and the sick. They treated women with dignity and respect, even had women in positions of leadership and authority. And, they resisted violence, strength and power, at a time when they were cardinal virtues, preferring, instead, to see the world through the eyes of a loving God who only sought healing and justice and wholeness.

But, despite all of that, or maybe because of all of that, those early followers were persecuted. Like Paul, they were hunted, attacked, detained, arrested, imprisoned, beheaded, and crucified. They lived in constant and fear, not knowing when the authorities might break through the door, and yet, in the face of all that, the early Christians continued to share God’s love with everyone they met and anyone who would listen.

They pressed on. They kept going. They didn’t let up. They didn’t stop. It didn’t matter what happened. It didn’t matter if they were hunted. It didn’t matter if they were jailed. It didn’t matter if they were killed. The early Christians loved the Lord their God with all of their heart and with all of their soul and with all of their mind; and, they loved their neighbors as themselves. They had decided to follow Jesus, and there was no turning back, no turning back.

As I think about our Grace Church community, I think of all the people, us, who are trying to live good and faithful lives. We have people who are working to turn their lives around and take them a positive direction. We have people who are trying to raise children and be the best parents they can be. We have people who are working on their relationships with their partners or spouses. And, we have people out there trying to change the world. We have people working to end gun violence, and people working to provide healthcare to the poor and uninsured. We have people working for racial justice, people working on behalf of immigrants, and working to help those in Africa. We have people working to save the oceans, the animals and the environment. And, all of that can be hard. When you are trying to do the right thing, there are hindrances and impediments, stumbling blocks and obstacles, disappointments and setbacks.

But, today, we hear Paul telling us to press on. Press on. Keep going. Don't stop. Don't give up. It doesn't matter what happens. It doesn't matter what comes your way, because God is with you. So, go out there and share God's grace. Help make the world a better place.

Amen.