

The Federated Church of Hyannis – February 7, 2021

Sermon: New Beginnings Part 5 – Reverend Derek White

Scripture: Philippians 3:13-21

Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. All of us, then, who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. Only let us live up to what we have already attained. Join together in following my example, brothers and sisters, and just as you have us as a model, keep your eyes on those who live as we do. For, as I have often told you before and now tell you again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.

INTRODUCTION:

Welcome to Part 5 of our series on New Beginnings. To recap;

Week 1: We discussed Revelations looking how it is not a book about the end times but a book about a new beginning.

Week 2: We looked at the words of Dr. King and the need for change.

Week 3: We looked at why the Lord might do a new thing.

Week 4: We looked at each day being a new beginning.

Today we will look at new beginnings along the journey. The best journeys are often filled with many new beginnings.

PART 1: Historical Background of Philippian Church

The apostle Paul writes his letter to the church in Philippi near the end of his life. It is at least ten years after he had helped establish the church in Philippi. We know from the Book of Acts that this is the first Gentile church that Paul founded. And the church has grown and is well rooted. But a problem has arisen

and there seems to be some division in the church, so he writes a letter to the church encourage them to focus on a theme of unity.

If Paul were able, he most likely would have returned to visit the church. However, he appears to be under house arrest at the moment for preaching this new teaching of Jesus. And his missionary journey plans is to travel east towards Spain which would have been the opposite direction of a return to Philippi which is 800 miles east of Rome. And despite the challenges the church in Philippi is facing and the challenges Paul is facing with health and being under house arrest, he still shares an optimistic message that it is his calling to press on towards the final goal.

He describes that goal as being heavenward focused and makes the metaphor of achieving citizenship in heaven. Philippi was a Roman city and would have had special legal rights as a colony of Rome. Those who owned land in the city would have been Roman citizens, meaning that they legal protection and rights any place they traveled in the Roman empire. To receive Roman citizenship was a significant thing. Non-Roman citizens would have paid exorbitant taxes to do business in a Roman city. So the benefits of citizenship would have been huge. And here we see Paul talking about heavenly citizenship, because those living in Philippi would have connected immediately to the benefits of citizenship. The goal for many of them in moving to Philippi would have been to gain Roman citizenship. But now Paul is talking about the next goal to work towards is heavenly citizenship. It would have motivated those in the church in Philippi to work towards.

PART 2: Working Towards Goals

It is good to have goals, no matter what stage of life we are at. Paul is not a spring chicken and yet he is enthusiastic about this goal of pressing on towards the prize of heavenly citizenship. Grace was paid for by Christ, but the cost of citizenship is high. Citizenship is connected to ownership, and that comes with responsibilities and sacrifices. My grandfather used to tell me nothing comes free. He was a World War II veteran who was a POW. He was also a 100% disabled veteran who lost the use of his hands in the war. Because he was a citizen, he was subject to the draft. He knew the price of citizenship. There is no greater glory than to be a citizen of the kingdom of heaven. Yet like any other citizenship it comes with a price requiring responsibility and sacrifice.

The apostle Paul was a Roman citizen. It was one of the reasons he was taken to Rome and placed under house arrest while awaiting a trial before

Caesar. He would most likely have been killed if he didn't have the protection of that Roman citizenship. Roman citizenship was the most valuable citizenship a person could have in the Roman Empire. Not everyone in the empire had it; they could live and work in the Empire but they had to pay exorbitant taxes for the privilege of doing so. For Paul, if he had Roman citizenship then he had made it. He would have been viewed as having the best kind of citizenship there was at the time. But Paul says there is a greater goal to work towards, better than Roman citizenship. He is pressing on towards the goal of heavenly citizenship, the only citizenship that is eternal. For Paul it is a goal worth pursuing after many around him would have said, "Paul, you made it so why don't you slow down a bit". But Paul did not want to slow down, he wanted to press on.

PART 3: It is Good to be Useful

It is good to be useful. Over the years working in Chaplaincy with individuals facing limitations, I have seen how depression can easily set in when a person feels they can no longer be useful. As a Chaplain I often work to help people find a purpose. Feeling useful and having a purpose is an important part of our human condition. Paul felt God had a purpose for his life and he still had the ability to be useful in spreading the message of Jesus Christ. Even when he was recovering from injuries, stranded by shipwrecks, or in prison he still carried on in ministry. That is the beauty of becoming a mature person of faith, there is always the opportunity to mentor someone new to help them come to Christ.

I want to share something important here. Just because someone knows about Jesus doesn't mean they know Jesus. Let me emphasize that - just because someone knows about Jesus doesn't mean they know Jesus. Once upon a time it seemed like everyone went to Sunday School and learned about the teachings of Jesus and the Bible. But today there are many who know about Jesus but they haven't been raised with a knowledge of who Jesus is. They have a beginners knowledge about him, but not an understanding of his teachings. And Jesus was a teacher, so to know Jesus requires knowing what he taught. In Matthew 7:12 where Jesus teaches "*do unto to others and you would have them do unto you*" Jesus explains that this is the narrowest of the teachings about the law of God revealed through the prophets. It wasn't something new Jesus taught; it was already known as the most basic knowledge the people Jesus was talking to about the requirements of the law. But Jesus goes on to say after the "do unto others as you would have them do unto you" this: "*Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is*

the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the way that leads to life, and only a few find it” Matthew 7:13-14. In essence, Jesus says everyone has a broad understanding of the law, but only few can find the narrow gate that leads to eternal life.

Friends, if you are like Paul and you have spent a lifetime searching for the narrow gate, then help others find it too. Share something that is useful rather than what is generally known.

Conclusion: Make the Complicated Path Simple

Friends, I will leave you with this. The path to citizenship is not an easy path. I know people who have been waiting over 10 years for US Citizenship. They want to be citizens. They work hard towards becoming US Citizens. I know many who have done it, and they deeply value that citizenship because they had to work for it, oppose to many who take it for granted because they were simply born on US soil. They often come because they want a new beginning and a better life. Citizenship matters. It is a privilege to have, not something to be taken for granted. Paul had Roman citizenship, the gold standard of citizenship at the time. But it wasn't the best. He wanted to become a citizen of heaven. And because of that goal he was willing to work hard for it.

Like most things, beginning something new can be hard. Over time it can become even harder. But eventually with enough practice and patience it becomes natural. Paul knew the process of how to become a citizen of heaven, he learned it from the disciples, who learned it from Jesus. And it is the same path today as it was back then. Even in old age Paul was willing to begin something new because he saw the value of it. And he was willing to share what he learned with others. All this is to say, the world today needs more mature people of faith like Paul to help others begin their journey.

When we help others with a new beginning, we experience a new beginning too.