

"Rejoice & Press On Toward the Prize"  
October 4, 2020; 10:00 am  
Philippians 3:4b-14  
Congregational UCC, Buena Vista, CO  
Rev. Rebecca K. Poos

Philippians 3 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

**3** Finally, my brothers and sisters,<sup>[a]</sup> rejoice<sup>[b]</sup> in the Lord.

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: <sup>5</sup> circumcised 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; <sup>6</sup> as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

<sup>7</sup> Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. <sup>8</sup> 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, in order that I may gain Christ <sup>9</sup> and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ,<sup>[c]</sup> the righteousness from God based on faith. <sup>10</sup> I want to know Christ<sup>[f]</sup> and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, <sup>11</sup> if

somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

Pressing toward the Goal

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

### **I. GREAT EXPECTATIONS SERIES**

Today we begin a new month, a new Fall season, and a new series:

**“Great Expectations—Of God & One Another in Love.”**

I hope you'll join us every Sunday—whether on YouTube on Sunday or *any* day, and in person if at all possible. Explore with me in this turning season, as the natural world changes its color and activity, anticipating what's next in hope and careful prep.

What *are* our “great expectations”—in life, in ourselves, in our homes and congregation? What can we expect from each other?

What can we expect of God? Of our pastor? Our leaders? Of all in our Body of Christ?

## **II. PRESSING ON TOWARD THE PRIZE**

The Apostle Paul has great expectations for the church in Philippi that he started, and the beloved believers there. That they come to know who they are; to Whom they belong, what their mission and purpose are.

And, he expects them to keep pressing on toward the goal—even if it takes a lifetime!

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So, what IS this prize we press on toward? What is the goal in all we do as followers of Christ? Some would say it's the “eternal reward”—that we get into Heaven. Go someplace nice when we die, rather than the “other direction.”

But, what if it's not that at all? I don't think that's what Paul has in mind.

“I want to know Christ.” In my bones. Down deep in my soul. To know Whom I have believed. And to know that he is faithful. Trustworthy. A guide and Friend till the end and beyond the end of this temporal life.

And when we keep on pressing on, says Paul, knowing the One we have believed is faithful, that knowing deep

down in our souls will bring us to community in Christ; to Unity and communion of spirit.

## **III. EXPECTATION CONFESSION:**

In order to reach the goal, claim the prize of true unity of spirit and purpose, we look back and **honor** what is past and bring the learnings and insights, the stories and saints, forward into the present light and life, leaving behind, as Paul says, what is *not* helpful, is in fact hurtful, and serves no good purpose.

As we press on, in community, striving forward in faith and love to what lies ahead, we reflect on our expectations—past and present—for one another.

I want to look back for a moment at the past, and make a confession, so we can move forward in healthy and honest ways. I know I have not always lived up to your expectations, and I ask forgiveness. When I've let you down as your pastor, I have grieved; I still do.

I also know that *crazy* rumors continue to go around—things I am said to have done or not do. I can't expect you to trust me if those stories are still there, festering. I wouldn't trust me *either*! And, we have not had enough of a chance to sit down together, around the table, and share our hearts, memories and perspectives.

As we move forward in Covenant, I have the hope that we can rise to one another's expectations, and talk honestly and openly, without triangulation, about what it means to be church together; what our core identity and values truly are, and what we might expect to discover together about who we are and

what and where Spirit is calling us in this crazy new world as Church.

You can trust me to keep bringing my authentic self—with all my human frailties and shortcomings; strengths and gifts. My desire to be ever-seeking greater awareness, see my blind spots, and open my ears more fully—listening with ever-greater depth.

I bring my Call to minister as God leads me, with my whole heart, conviction and conscience. Preaching Gospel Love as best I understand it and have found it to be true, in Scripture and in my own faith experience. And, you can count on me to keep encouraging us *all* to live into our Covenant—with God and one another. To continue to listen to each other, work toward the same goals and forgive one another when those expectations fall short.

As we move forward together in faith, remembering and honoring and bringing forward the traditions and identities of our past—even 140 years' worth of heritage! As we move prayerfully together in faith, hope and love. No matter where we are on the journey. No matter who we are in this profound moment in history. No matter what happens in the world around us!

#### **IV. WORLDWIDE COMMUNION SUNDAY**

And, speaking of the world around us, I always experience excitement and great expectation when Worldwide Communion Sunday comes near! I grew up celebrating this with my family in my American Baptist church, and then continued in all the denominations I've found myself in and with. A truly ecumenical

Feast, which we don't have enough of!

Sharing communion all around the world. A focus on unity and rich diversity among humanity. Does it get any better than that?!

It may feel like there's not much unity in our world, and even in the Body of Christ right now. But, ironically, neither was there when this famous Sunday was created.

#### **History of Worldwide Communion Sunday**

“Back in 1933, when the day was first conceived in one lone Presbyterian church, the world was as fractured as it had ever been. That year saw Adolf Hitler's rise and consolidation of power in Nazi Germany, and a second great war in Europe was becoming more and more inevitable. It was also the worst year of the Great Depression, with Americans and people around the world in financial despair. By 1940, when the day was officially approved, the war had begun in Europe. World Wide Communion Sunday was begun in *hope* for unity during an extremely turbulent time.

Despite our differences in denominations and faith traditions, despite the hard times in the past and present; whether in places of great diversity or very little, around this Table on this day we can bring all our differences as well as shared core values and keep that hope alive for unity and celebration of diversity. Jesus expects that we will set another place at his Table. Pull up another chair. Go into the highways and byways and invite people in. People that haven't felt welcome before. Ones who have been told that

they don't belong at the table. Dear ones who can't bring their whole and healthy selves.

Worldwide Communion Sunday isn't just about celebrating with people from different countries—some sort of romantic notion from Disney's "It's a Small World" display. It's about celebrating, truly communing, with people who are different in our OWN culture and country.

About rubbing elbows with those we don't feel so comfortable with. Learning how to be at the Table when it IS uncomfortable. When the conversation turns to religion and politics. That forbidden pair! (Spoiler alert: Politics IS about religion. For Politics is simply: "How we order and organize our common and sacred life together!") And religion is what we SHOULD be talking about around the church and around the Table!

Jesus *expects* us to have Conversations that Matter! Perhaps the "goal," for us as Christians, as The Church Universal" IS to be universal! Perhaps that's what Paul was striving for, hoping against all hope about when he told us to "press on, keep your eye on the prize!"

When the United Church of Christ was formed in 1957—a joining in covenantal partnership in a profound way—of four denominations, who were themselves formed of mergers from predecessor bodies, they chose the symbol of the cross over the orb of the world, with the engraved words: That They May All Be One. Jesus' words to his Father in prayer on behalf of ALL his disciples.

Covenant, not hierarchy, but unity in essentials—the Love of God and neighbor. That's what the UCC was founded upon. And that's what we pray for every year on Worldwide Communion Sunday—not that we'd all be thrown into the same cultural and theological soup and lose our unique identities, but quite the opposite—that we'd bring all the breads and fruits of the vine; traditions and cultures, skin tones, life and faith experiences, and all the spiritual gifts of our unique selves to the Table. And all would be Welcome; from all around the World. That is a source of joy! Of great rejoicing. A foretaste of the heavenly banquet—spread for all!

Finally, my brothers and sisters,<sup>[a]</sup> rejoice<sup>[b]</sup> in the Lord.

God expects us to rejoice, whatever the circumstances. But! And it's a big but! God doesn't tell us to do that on our own. God HELPS us. The Spirit moves in us with sighs and groans too deep for words. With tears and fears; laughter and anxiety—moves IN us; is with us; walks alongside us in every mood and moment. That's the kind of holy rejoicing we are called to—not "put on a happy (and fake) face for the world to see.

Rejoice in the Lord always, and again, I say rejoice! Rejoice in our sharing in ALL things in Christ; in Christ's Body and Spirit—in joy, in sorrow. In abundance, in scarcity. In community, in quarantine, in person, in Zoom. In life, in death, in Resurrection. We are One, and work and pray fervently for the Day when all will truly be One. One in Love, in God. Amen.