

**Philippians 3 (selected verses) “Getting Out of the Way”
Second Presbyterian Church**

**July 12, 2015
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... Yet 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, in order that I may gain Christ 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, the righteousness from God based on faith.

I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

Not 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. Beloved, 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, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

There are times in life when we recognize that God is far, far greater than we are and that in order to be the people God wants us to be (that we were meant to be), we have to get ourselves out of the way.

In the context of Richard Rohr’s “Breathing Underwater” and our Summer Sermon Series Theme, this morning we consider what it means to be ready to have God remove the defects of our character from us.

This is the sixth of the necessary Twelve Steps of A.A. In order to ‘do the steps’- and as a reminder for us; we need to 1) Admit our powerlessness over our current situation, 2) Believe in a Power Greater than ourselves to restore us, 3) Decide to turn our will and our lives over to God, 4) Make a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves, and 5) Admit to God, ourselves and another person the exact nature of our wrongs. Whew. After we’ve done all that, it may well feel like we need to take a break. That seems like a lot of work, doesn’t it?

Well, in some ways, this is what Step Six is — a break from our working at it, a respite from our efforts- a release from what it is that is pulling us down.

As Rohr puts it, the process is in it’s very nature paradoxical and in some ways unnatural; for us to ‘get out of the way and let the soul take its natural course.’ While it is

very hard to do, at the same time, the reality of paradoxes is more common, at least in our religious lives, than we normally acknowledge.

We say that Jesus is human and divine at the same time. We speak of communion as Jesus' body & blood, sealed in the bread and the cup. We speak of God as Father, and Mother – and yet have never seen nor touched this origin of our birth.

But before delving into the deep mysteries of the universe, there are more practical aspects about this paradox that need tending. What Rohr claims is 'the supreme insight of the Gospels' is that it is through 'letting go' that we receive the fullness of God's grace. That is, God's Amazing Grace is all-sufficient. We don't need to do anything to receive God's grace; there is no need, and more importantly, there is no way to earn it; just to open up and receive it is enough. It is strange giving up of control to receive a free gift and find a new kind of gift of love- with yourself no longer fully in charge.

The trick, as Rohr illustrates it, is similar to what the famous photographer Ansel Adams learned (who gained his reputation for his fantastic photos of nature, in Yellowstone National Park.) He would wait days and hours for the perfect circumstances and light to arrive to take his iconic photos. 'Chance favors the prepared mind,' he said. "Waiting on the Lord," is the Biblical version of this. In the words of the writer of Lamentations, as we shared together earlier: **"The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, "The LORD is my portion," says my soul, "therefore I will always have hope."**

It's also like the Apostle Paul puts it- **"Not 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."** Paul didn't say that "I have made Christ my own..." but rather that he was brought to Christ by Jesus' choosing, not his own. (Which makes a pretty huge difference, when it comes right down to it.)

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Now of course, when do we all begin to search for the mercy of God, unless we find ourselves in need? Just ask yourself; when have I had need to turn it all over to God? – What are those circumstances that bring us to that place? – Alcoholism and

addiction, yes— and Cancer, bankruptcy, divorce, family illness... you can fill in the blank for yourself, surely enough...

As part of a profound commentary written on the book of Lamentations by Walter Bruggemann, he writes this: “the hope of God’s compassion must first come to terms with the obviousness of it’s current lack.” Those are wonderful words. There’s paradox for you.... again.

Somehow, God continues the work of grace, sight unseen, and often against the tide of the way life seems.

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If there was one thing this chapter of Breathing Underwater was short on, it would be a good story. Richard Rohr takes us to the edge of glimpsing at what all this means, but he doesn’t give us a chance to get into the skin of it.

Last week, while I was at Montreat Conference Center, I happened into the Presbyterian Historical Center where I spent some time studying a new exhibit of ‘great Presbyterians of American history’ (a not-unexpected find in such an auspicious gallery.) One of the individuals featured that caught my eye might not first come to mind when thinking about great Presbyterians (Woodrow Wilson, Ronald Reagan, John Wayne, Dwight Eisenhower, David Letterman, Pearl Buck). There was a small section on Samuel Clemens, aka, Mark Twain, and the influence his Presbyterian upbringing had on his writing. You probably didn’t know that Clemens was raised Presbyterian, and that much of his youth- and his writing, his whole life long- was in some fashion related to his religious upbringing. Maybe his most famous quote has the real, down to earth feel of a Presbyterian about it (maybe it’s the most American of religious quotes, when it comes right down to it: “Faith is believing what you know ain’t so.”) This is likely nowhere better illustrated than in his book, Huckleberry Finn, in the moral climax of this once very controversial book, where the unlikely hero, after a good wrestling match with himself and his religion, decides to accept his fate in hell. He ‘let’s go’- and gets himself out of the way to do the right thing, come hell or high water.

As background, if it’s been since Jr. High since you read the book, the the runaway slave, Jim, who Huck has befriended, has been betrayed to be sold back into slavery. Jim is now locked in a shed, where he awaits his return to his owner for a \$200

reward. Huck goes back to the raft to figure out what to do next, and there he gets to thinking about the lessons he learned in Sunday school about what happens to people like him who assist runaway slaves. (This the 'thinking picture' on the bulletin cover.)

“People that acts as I’d been acting about [Jim],” he’d been told, ***“goes to everlasting fire.”*** (After all, the Bible is clear: “Slaves obey your earthly masters”- Ephesians 6:5.) Huck feels genuine conviction regarding his sin and, fearful of his certain fate in hell unless he changes course, decides to write a letter to Jim’s owner, Miss Watson, to tell her where Jim can be found:

I felt good and all washed clean of sin for the first time I had ever felt so in my life, and I knowed I could pray now. But I didn't do it straight off, but laid the paper down and set there thinking- thinking how good it was all this happened so, and how near I come to being lost and going to hell. And went on thinking. And got to thinking over our trip down the river; and I see Jim before me, all the time; in the day, and in the night-time, sometimes moonlight, sometimes storms, and we a floating along, talking, and singing, and laughing. But somehow I couldn't seem to strike no places to harden me against him, but only the other kind. I'd see him standing my watch on top of his'n, stead of calling me, so I could go on sleeping; and see how glad he was when I come back out of the fog; and when I come to him agin in the swamp, up there where the feud was; and such-like times; and would always call me honey, and pet me, and do everything he could think of for me, and how good he always was; and at last I struck the time I saved him by telling the men we had smallpox aboard, and he was so grateful, and said I was the best friend old Jim ever had in the world, and the only one he's got now; and then I happened to look around, and see that paper.

*It was a close place. I took it up, and held it in my hand. I was a trembling, because I'd got to decide, forever, betwixt two things, and I knowed it. I studied a minute, sort of holding my breath, and then says to myself: "**All right, then, I'll go to hell**"- and tore it up.*

It was awful thoughts, and awful words, but they was said. And I let them stay said; and never thought no more about reforming. I shoved the whole thing out of my head; and said I would take up wickedness again, which was in my line, being brung up to it, and the other warn't. And for a starter, I would go to work and steal Jim out of

slavery again; and if I could think up anything worse, I would do that, too; because as long as I was in, and in for good, I might as well go the whole hog.”

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Sometimes we just have to let go. In a moment of true moral courage, complicated as it was by the laws of the day, the Bible as it was understood at the time, and the pickle he had gotten himself into, Huck Finn was entirely ready to let God do the job that needed to be done.

He assumed he'd suffer for it, sooner rather than later. Instead he finds that he himself, somehow- amazingly – has become a vehicle for God's grace. Sin never gets the last word. God's grace refuses in the end to admit defeat. All evidence aside, circumstances notwithstanding, the gift of faith that we receive that gives our lives meaning asks for our response. Our lives then become a testimony to a living hope given to us by God.

Letting go may seem very hard, yet it may well be the best thing you'll ever do.
Amen.