

St. Thomas's Episcopal Church
Newark, DE
Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost – October 8, 2017/Year A
Isaiah 5:1-7; Psalm 80:7-14; Philippians 3:4b-14; Matthew 21:33-46
The Reverend Paul W. Gennett, Jr.

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May my words reveal the greater glory of God.

AMEN

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We are experiencing a few “transitions” in our parish family life. Today there is the transition INTO the family of Christ’s body in the baptism of **Jack Henry Pugh**. Also today there will be the transitions FROM baptismal promises lived FOR US to baptismal promises lived BY US as we admit the 2018 Confirmation Class of **Jessica Diane Grieten, Sofia Elena Melloni, Jessica Rosa Miller, Aidan James Prendergast, Joey Daniel Tompkins** into their journey of a “claimed faith” ahead. And yes, there is that “other” transition AWAY we experience as I complete my ministry serving with you at the end of this month.

All these “transitions” lead me to the words we hear of scripture this day, and a story. The words from Paul to the church in Philippi – *“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.”*

The story is from the 2016 Summer Olympic Games in Brazil. Allyson Felix was attempting to become the most decorated female athlete in U.S. track and field history in the 400 meters. After trailing Shaunae Miller from the Bahamas for the most of the race, Felix began to gain on her coming down the final 100 meters, This led to the amazing photo finish with Miller diving for the finish line. Her dive led her to win the gold medal by .07 of a second.

Here’s my question to the parents and godparents of Jack Henry, and to the 2018 Confirmation Class, your parents and your leaders this morning. **Is this the kind of effort that you will be giving in your faith journey to become more of Jesus living and moving in you and through you?** Actually, I am asking this question to EVERYONE gathered this day!

Two words will guide us all into and through these transitions, and ALL transitions that life will bring before us in life – **PRESS ON!**

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The city of Philippi was located in Macedonia which is northeastern Greece today. Paul had established the church on his second missionary journey around 49 AD. A little over a decade later, Paul wrote his letter to the people of that church most likely from a Roman prison. It is important to keep in mind at the time he wrote that letter, Paul had been a disciple for Jesus over

30 years and had spent the last 15 years establishing and building up churches all around the region of the Mediterranean Sea.

Paul gives a guide to how each and every disciple of Jesus can approach their spiritual growth, and it is wrapped in those two words **PRESS ON!** Without need to define what Paul meant, it seems to me that Paul is making it clear there are no shortcuts to a journey into spiritual maturity and a living faith. As any teacher would do, Paul gives a couple of “pointers” to our **PRESS ON** faith development.

First, **BE HUNGRY!** Self-satisfaction is the biggest barrier to growth in any aspect of life. Almost every invention over time was the result of someone being dissatisfied with the ways things were in life. The same is true with spiritual growth. Being satisfied with where we are today may be the biggest obstacle to growing in our relationship with God and Christ.

If there was ever anyone who could have been satisfied with their spiritual maturity, Paul might lead the way. Can you think of any other person in Christian history who did so much for the kingdom of God in such a short time and whose life is a clear manifestation of what an intimate relationship with Jesus looks like and is lived like. Yet as Paul nears the end of his life, he is still hungry to grow his relationship even deeper because he is not satisfied with where he was in his spiritual journey. **Do you have dissatisfaction where you are in your relationship with Jesus in your spiritual journey today? Are you hungry enough to join Jesus in relationship and go forward in faith wherever it might lead?**

Next, **BE HUMBLE!** Now the idea of humility and Paul in the same sentence can be a challenge for some. Yet sprinkled through many of his letters to his missionary communities we find words like those we hear to the Philippians today – *“Not that I have already obtained this ... Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own ...”* In Romans, Paul wrote that sanctification, the process of becoming more like Jesus in our life and living, does require our participation, but first and foremost it is **the grace of God to us.**

Paul acknowledges the reason he desires to press on in his relationship with Jesus is out of gratitude that Jesus had embraced Paul as his own and is still working to multiply his spiritual life more and more every day. We cannot begin a relationship with God and Jesus without the humility to admit our own sinfulness and inability to do anything about “missing the mark” of Christ’s desire for our life in relationship all on our own power. We are called to remember and acknowledge this on a daily basis. As my favorite line from Leonard Cohen’s song **Anthem** proclaims, **“Forget your perfect offering. There is a crack in everything. That is how the Light gets in.”** We are facing a deep crisis of meaning in our days – a crisis of hope that drives us in an empty, frenetic scramble for external power, perks, and possessions. **Meaning ALWAYS comes from within, by God’s grace, together.**

Finally, **BE HARD WORKING!** Notice that Paul writes that he **presses on** TWICE in this passage.. The verb that Paul uses here in Greek was to describe **a hunter eagerly pursuing prey.** So it could be used in either a positive or negative sense depending on the context. For instance, Paul uses that same verb in verse 6 when he described himself as a *“persecutor of the*

church". Now Paul no longer pursued disciples of Jesus for the purpose of harming them, but he now pursues the deeper spiritual life in Jesus for the purpose of knowing, loving, and serving him.

When Paul wrote about "*forgetting what lies behind*", he didn't mean that those things had been completely removed from his mind. In the sense that Paul uses it here, forgetting conveys the idea of **no longer being influenced or affected by our past**. He did not allow his relationship with Jesus to be controlled by his past failures, like the persecution of the church. It is just as important that Paul did not allow his relationship with Jesus to be controlled by his past successes either. No one could have really blamed Paul if he just decided to retire and rest on his laurels. But Paul wasn't satisfied to just "retire" and let somebody else do his spiritual work.

BE HUNGRY ... BE HUMBLE ... BE HARD WORKING ... PRESS ON!

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Shaunae Miller won that Olympic race for **two reasons**. Even though she clearly perceived that Allyson Felix was gaining on her, **she never looked back**. If she had done that, for even for a moment, she would have undoubtedly come in second place. She also won because she had a single minded focus on that finish line and **strained to reach it** with all that she had left in her, right then and right there, in that moment.

So, to **Jack Henry** and your parents and godparents ... to **Jessica, Sofia, Jessica, Aidan and Joey ...** to EVERYONE this day, all our days ...**BE HUNGRY ... BE HUMBLE ... BE HARD WORKING ... PRESS ON!**

AMEN