

“From Past to Future”

a sermon by

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Text: “Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it on 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.” (Philippians 3:13-14)

One of the struggles that ministers share with congregations is the struggle to find the right words.

A number of years ago I had the opportunity to be a part of a preaching seminar with Dr. George Buttrick, who had served for a number of years as the minister of the Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City and also as the Preacher of the Harvard Chapel at Harvard University. He was generally regarded as one of the great preachers of his generation, and it was both a joyful and intimidating occasion for me to be with this great man for a few days.

One morning we talked about the comments that people often make at the end of a worship service, if they happen to go to the front door of the church where the minister usually stands to greet people. Dr. Buttrick noted that for some people it was a kind of awkward moment. Most ministers usually get some kind of comment like “nice sermon” or something to that effect. Dr. Buttrick remembered a time when after worship service a man spoke to him and said, “Dr. Buttrick, every sermon you preach is better than the next.” In was only later in the afternoon he said, that the full impact of her words took effect on him. On another occasion, he told us a woman came up to him after a worship service and said, “Dr. Buttrick, since my husband lost his mind, your sermons have come to mean a great deal to him.”

I.

The Memorial Day Weekend is one of those occasions when I think all of us who preach struggle to find the right words.

On the one hand, we are living in a city and in a nation that is deeply troubled today. In Charlotte our county government is facing a terrible challenge to fund some of the most basic

human needs in a time of diminishing resources: funding our schools, funding our libraries, funding the basic needs of food and shelter that keep some people alive.

Many of us are worried about our nation. We seem more divided than ever between red and blue, black and white, and rich and poor. Even as we gather this morning, there is a terrible oil slick the size of New England hovering off the shore of the Gulf Coast, threatening to present us with the most horrifying ecological nightmare that one could imagine.

And yet, in spite of whatever fears the future might present to us, we also are reminded of the many things for which we are grateful. On Memorial Day weekend we are all reminded that this is not just a holiday weekend to celebrate the end of school and the beginning of summer. It is a holiday that is set aside to remember the women and men who have sacrificed their lives and health in places like Afghanistan and Iraq, in Viet Nam and Korea, in World Wars, in Cold Wars—the list goes on.

Several weeks ago I came across a piece in the New York Times by David Brooks on the future that he entitled “Relax, We’ll Be Fine” in which he noted that 60 percent of the American people, when polled, believe that our country is headed in the wrong direction. The same percentage of people thinks that the U.S. is in a long-term decline. Our political system is dysfunctional. A fiscal crisis looks unavoidable. Brooks, however, goes on to point out that by almost all available data the future of the United States looks very bright. Citing the work of a well known geographer, Joel Kotkin, in his book *The Next Hundred Million: America in 2050*, Brooks observes that the demographic growth in this country is quite high. The American fertility rate is 50 percent higher than Russia, Germany or Japan, and much higher than China. Americans born between 1968 and 1979 are more family-oriented than the baby boomers before them and are having larger families.

Kotkin goes on to note that in spite of the current debate about immigration, half of the world’s skilled immigrants come to the U.S., and between 1990 and 2005 immigrants started a quarter of the new venture-backed public companies.

In terms of economic competitiveness the United States already measures at the top or close to the top of nearly every global measure of economic competitiveness. A comprehensive Rand Corporation study found that the U.S. leads the world in scientific and technological development. In sum, the U.S. is on the verge of a demographic, economic, and social revival.

To be sure, we have a lot to be thankful for in terms of our past, but we also have a future that is very bright indeed.

II.

The tension between past and future is the subject of the New Testament passage that forms our text this morning. The passage from which we read in the Apostle Paul’s letter to the Church at Philippi chronicles his movement from Judaism to Christianity. That movement is captured in the verses that form our text for the morning:

“Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it on 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 Jesus Christ.”(Philippians 3:13-14)

Many people view this passage as Paul's denigration of the Jewish religion. Some view it as a typical "conversion" story where an individual laments how terrible his or her life was and then how that life suddenly became transformed.

That is not what is occurring here. Paul is not ashamed of his Jewish faith. He was a Jew and I don't believe he ever regarded himself as anything other than that.

Moreover, he was proud of his Jewish faith. He had every reason to be. He had fulfilled every dimension of the Jewish faith: "circumcised on the eighth day (according to the law), a member of the tribe of Benjamin, and a Hebrew of the Hebrews." (Philippians 3:5-6) As to the law, he was a Pharisee—the strictest sect of Judaism. As to zeal of his faith, he was a persecutor of the church. As to righteousness under the law, Paul could say what very few of his contemporaries could match, he was blameless.

For Paul it was not the case that his former religion was bad and his new religion was good. Rather, it was the case that he had found something so wonderful that it surpassed anything he had ever experienced before. He called it the surpassing value of knowing Jesus Christ, and a righteousness that came not from obeying religious laws, but from faith in Christ.

For that he was willing to count everything in his former life as refuse—as rubbish.

Paul was able to let go of the past to embrace a future that was filled with joy, wonder, hope, and love. And that is something that speaks to every one of us.

III.

It is certainly true in our religious life. Some years ago Harry Emerson Fosdick preached a sermon that he entitled "The Church Must Go Beyond Modernism." One of the things that made that sermon so memorable was that it was preached by the man most people saw as the champion of the so-called "modernist movement." When Dr. Fosdick preached at the Riverside Church in New York City, he was the most articulate advocate for the church breaking out of the shackles of its past. He was an advocate for intellectual freedom in the church. He argued for the rights of women and blacks long before the mainline churches had even considered this. He opposed war and championed a church that was open, inclusive, and modern in every respect. In his preaching he made a great case for the church's support of scientific discovery, the theory of evolution, exploration and invention, the rising tide of economic welfare, the spread of democracy, the increase of humanitarianism. In short, he stood for every progressive aspect of modern religion.

But in his sermon he warns the church about the dangers of becoming so accommodating to the culture that it loses its own identity. Fosdick noted that Early Christianity went out from an old Jewish setting into a new Greek culture and would have never survived if had not assimilated into its faith the profound insights of Greek philosophy. So in the classic creeds such as the Nicene Creed, and in the writings of the Apostle Paul and the Apostle John, we see the great bridge that was built from the world of Judaism to the great world of the Roman Empire. But as Fosdick noted, it did not stop there. The Christian faith adapted itself to the Roman Emperor Constantine, to the licentious court of the Romans, to war, to the lucrative enjoyment of imperial favors, to the use of

bloody persecutions to coerce belief. And then, one by one, it threw away the holiest of things until the church was no longer distinguishable from the culture it lived in. “Lift up that history,” Fosdick said, “as if it were a mirror, in which to see the peril of the American churches.”

Somewhere along the way the church has lost its way. The mainline churches are rapidly becoming dinosaurs. We have chased every issue, every cause, and we have forgotten those things are dearest to us: prayer that makes God our unseen companion; faith that we came from God and are going to God; power and strength by God’s Spirit in the inner person; and personal devotion to the cause of Jesus Christ as the organizing center of life.

IV.

This truth also has meaning in the life of our nation. To be sure, most of us are focused on the present and the future and not the past. But there are aspects of our past that if ignored, will darken any future that is available to us.

In 1965 an Assistant Secretary of Labor by the name of Daniel Patrick Moynihan published what was then a very controversial report that he entitled “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action.” In that report Moynihan, who later became a United States Senator from New York, wrote of what he called a “tangle of pathology” that was damaging low income black families: out of wedlock births, fatherless households, high rates of crime.

This decline of the family is certainly not limited to African American families. It affects every ethnic group in our society—including whites. It is a reminder to all of us that nothing that we call progress will ever be a reality unless there is an emergence of something very old: unselfishness in love, purity, self-control and decency that are the backbone of our character.

On this Memorial Day weekend it should be clear to us that if we are going to go forward, we are going to have to also go back—back to some things that are old but true, familiar but fundamental—but absolutely key to the quality of life that has made our country what it is today.

As a young minister, I think I believed that Christian ethics should be positive, and that there was nothing more important than Paul’s ethic— “Love is the fulfilling of the law.” But I take that back. I think I know something about human nature that I did not know then. I think we need to recover what is often called the Moral Law:

- Thou shall not kill.
- Thou shall not commit adultery.
- Thou shall not steal.
- Thou shall not covet.

May God grant us on this Memorial Day the power of memory and the grace to move into the future with confidence in God’s grace as sufficient for all our needs.

Amen!