

**Title: Keeping Your Spiritual Life Sizzling This Summer****Text: Philippians 3:4b-16****A Communion Meditation preached by The Rev. Randolph T. Riggs, D.Min.****Sunday, June 1, 2008****First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, PA**

Yesterday morning (May 31, 2008) the streets of downtown Lancaster were filled with runners. It was the day of the Red Rose Run, and for avid runners, this is the marker point for the beginning of summer. Tonight in Long's Park, the outdoor concert series begins. The Barnstormers were on a winning streak until last night, and they return to Clipper Stadium later this week. For most of our local school districts this is the last week of school. Pools are open, and families are planning their vacations in spite of the record price of gas to get there.

Summer is finally here, and we have concluded our series on the Invitational Church. Before we begin our summer series on I Thessalonians (The Ultimate Challenge) and later on the Minor Prophets (Living with Imagination), the staff asked me to take a few moments and address the change of our program year to answer this question: How are you going to keep your spiritual life sizzling this summer? How are you going to continue to grow in faith during these lazy, hazy days when all too often people take a break from the routines of regular worship, study and service?

For our answer we turn to the Apostle Paul's letter to the Philippians. In case you have forgotten, Philippians was one of Paul's favorite communities of faith. He found them to be the most responsive to his needs as well as the most attentive to their own spiritual journey. He made three (3) trips to Philippi to help the church grow. What he liked about them was they did not seem to have an edifice complex. They did not focus

on church buildings. Instead, they focused on ministry. Chapter 3 is Paul's exhortation to always remember what is important when it comes to faith.

He begins by reminding them of his credentials; that if anyone had a right to boast, it would be Paul. He was a Jew; one of the chosen people of Israel. He was a priest; he came from the tribe of Benjamin. He was a pious man; he belonged to the political party of the Pharisees who were the spiritual athletes of Judaism. If anyone had the right stuff spiritually, it would surely have been Paul. However, he counts all of his credentials as rubbish (Peterson translates it as "dog dung") compared to the honor it is to know Christ and to make him known. Listen again to what he says:

*12Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. 13Brothers, 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, 14I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.*

There is Paul's prescription for a sizzling spiritual life this summer: Take Stock; Forget the Past; Press On.

### **Take Stock**

The first thing I would urge you to do is to take stock of who you are and where you are in your relationship with God as we have experienced God in Jesus Christ. In verse 10 Paul underlines that even though he has all the right credentials for being considered a man of faith, he counts them as rubbish when it comes to his relationship with Jesus Christ. His only goal now is to be found in him and know him.

Do you know where you are in your own relationship with Jesus Christ? Relationships are never meant to be static affairs, are they? If you are married, I would venture a guess that your relationship with your spouse is not the same today as it was

when you were dating each other or when you were first married. If you have children, I would venture a guess that your relationship with your children is different today than on the day they were born, and as we grow older our relationship with our children changes over and over again. What is it about our relationship with Christ that makes us think it can stay the same as the day when we first made our commitment?

A few years ago I read a book entitled *Go Out in Joy* (John Knox Press, 1977; reissued in 2003) by Nina Hermann. She was a chaplain at a children's hospital, and her work caused her to seriously doubt how she could answer the question of a good God and the suffering of the children she saw every day. She wondered, "*Where is God in all this?*" Then one cold winter night, when she was alone in her cozy apartment, the mother of a former patient, who had just readmitted her daughter to the hospital in an emergency, called and insisted that Nina come to the hospital immediately.

She didn't want to go. It was cold and snowing. However, she said yes, and headed out through the snow walking to the hospital, feeling some responsibility and still plagued by the problem of suffering and the goodness of God. It turned out to be a false alarm. When she arrived at the hospital, the child was all right, but instead of returning home immediately she sat down and talked with the mother. In that conversation it happened. The suffering of Christ finally hit home. The meaning of her work clicked and began to make sense, and as a result of that conversation, the mother received new hope and new courage to face her ordeal. Here is what she wrote:

*"I had read about Christ participating in the human experience, participating in the suffering, knowing rejection, knowing aloneness and pain and fear, knowing anger; even anger at God. I had read it, but it never made sense to me until that moment...."*

*Reading about these problems is vital, but it is not enough. Meditation on written words is good, but it is not enough. Do when you don't want to do. Go when you don't want to go. And when you least expect it, you may glimpse through an open door a revelation."*

This summer, why don't you take time to take stock of your relationship with Jesus Christ? Don't ignore the questions you may have. Do when you don't want to do. Go when you don't want to go, and be prepared to discover a new dimension of God's love for you and for all of humanity.

### **Forget the Past**

The second thing I hope you can do this summer is to forget what lies behind you—forget the past. Without rewriting scripture, let me try to say that another way: *Deal with the past. Let it become its proper size for you.* Whenever the past dominates us, be it for good memories or bad memories, we need to place it in a proper perspective and move on. Why?

First, because living in the past distorts the present. How easy it is for us to see ourselves as better than we actually are because of some achievement or accomplishment we have in our lives. The reverse is also true. We can see ourselves as worse than we actually are because of something we have done in the past.

Paul says that our personal achievements or our personal failures are not measures of who we are in the first place. We are not as good as our best achievement nor are we as bad as our worst failure if we claim to be part of the Christian family. Jesus Christ is the one who gives us legitimacy in the sight of God, not our successes or our failures.

Allow me to speak personally. Twenty one years ago I received my doctoral hood and the three bars I wear on the sleeves of my robe from San Francisco Theological

Seminary. It was one of the greatest days in my life. It was something I always wanted to accomplish; felt I needed to accomplish in order to find some legitimacy in my sense of call. Next to the day I got married, the day our children were born, it was the best day I can ever remember.

Two years later I was receiving treatment for my addiction to alcohol. It was one of the lowest moments in my life, but it was not the end. I don't know where I might be had it not been for the grace of God, the love of my wife and the support of my family, but I know I would not be your pastor.

Today I know, at a visceral level, that my identity is neither in my degree nor in my disease. My identity rests in the grace of God which I have experienced in Jesus Christ. Degrees and positions and bank accounts are all important vehicles to accomplish what God is calling us to accomplish in life, but they are not an end in themselves. The failures in our lives--divorce, addiction, business failure, and the failure of other significant relationships--are all significant events which help to shape us, but they are not the end. We need to set the past, both its successes and its failures, in proper relief, learn from them, and move on if we are going to be used by God. This summer I pray that you will forget the past. Better yet, set your past in proper perspective. Recognize that you are neither as great as your greatest achievement nor as bad as your worst failure. Anchor your identity in the grace of God, and move on.

### **Press On**

Finally, I want to encourage you to press on toward the high calling of wherever God may be calling you to use the gifts and talents which God has given you.

Several years ago I was privileged to be part of the first class of the International School for Christian Communication on the campus of the Crystal Cathedral. Both Don and I have benefited greatly from that week long experience.

What was so special about being part of the first class was the opportunity to have one-on-one time and small group discussion with Dr. Robert Schuller, the founding pastor of the church. One day our class asked Dr. Schuller to give us in a nutshell the philosophy behind his ministry. He said it was simple: *Find a need and meet it. Find a hurt and heal it.*”

That has stuck with me for years now. I really do believe that this is the high calling of God to which Paul was pressing on. And I wonder: if we took that as our calling, each and every one of us, I wonder what we might accomplish as the church of Jesus Christ.

Stop and think about it. If you and I were to really believe that God was in charge of the world, and our calling was to discover where we were to join God in the world, can you imagine what might happen to the world in which we live? How might that change our vision of what needs to be done? What is it that breaks God’s heart and what might God be calling us to do about it?

Would it change the way we view people who do not have a church home and cause us to be bolder in reaching out to them? How might it change the life we live in our families? Might we be more concerned about people who are raising their children as single parents? What might we do about the racial stereotypes in our community?

### **Conclusion**

This summer I hope you will pay attention to your spiritual life. Begin by taking stock of your relationship with God in the person of Jesus Christ. I hope you will find time to put the past in its proper perspective. And that you will press on to discover the high calling God has for you as you continue your journey of faith.