

## **Sermon: Press On Toward the Goal**

(Preach by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles Ottawa, on April 6, 2025)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Running a marathon, of a full 42.195 kilometres, is an incredible physical and mental feat. It takes months of training to condition one's body to endure fatigue, muscle soreness, cramps, and other challenges. The mental side of the battle is no less strenuous, including needing to overcome negative thoughts, self-doubt, and the infamous 'hitting the wall' that can cripple one's body and morale.

To even finish a marathon is already an accomplishment in itself, for anyone. So why are we seeing more and more men, getting down on their knees, at the finished line, proposing to their girlfriends who have just completed a gruelling race? Such public proposals are nothing new, dating back over a decade ago. These moments captured in videos are often joyful, amidst a cheering crowd, a shocked runner, a ring, and an embrace. And it's not limited to marathon runners, as we have seen a rash of similar proposals during the Paris Olympic of 2024, in badminton and sailing.

However, there appear to be push-backs as well, not from the female competitors themselves, but from the general public. One viewer of U.K. runner Sarah John's viral TikTok video, commented, "I mean, clearly she's happy but nah, this is so selfish. Any other moment, any, but he chooses this moment to make himself the focal point."

Point well taken and I agree: marathon proposal is about a man stealing the spotlight at the moment when a woman accomplishes a major personal goal. It is, in my view, a selfish act, designed to elicit maximum publicity, and most of all, it is incredibly distracting for the runner. It distracts her from enjoying the accomplishment of running and finishing the race, and in the case of Sarah John, after the proposal at the finished line, the man had to remind her to turn off the stop watch on her wrist, so as not to corrupt her personal running time. The way I see it, marathon proposal is a distraction that is simply not cool.

In our Lectionary reading today, for the fifth Sunday of Lent, particularly Philippians 3, the Apostle Paul boldly proclaims, "I press on toward the goal, toward the prize of the heavenly call." The goal and the

prize for Paul is none other than God in Jesus Christ. It is of an utmost, highest, and worthy call, needing to endure and overcome multiple distractions. Allow me to summarize them in three categories: the distraction of the flesh, the distraction of the past, and the distraction of the masses.

In the first distraction, of the flesh, Paul readily admits that he has no confidence in the flesh. He is not talking about desires of the body, though that could also be very distracting. Paul is actually referring to a blind obedience to the Law, the Torah, without fully understanding the spirit of the Law. On that front, he readily admits in verse 4, “*If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more*”, for he had indeed much to boast about.

He was born a Hebrew, of the tribe of Benjamin, and circumcised on the eighty day in accordance to the custom of Israel. He was a Pharisee, an ardent student of Gamaliel, the famed rabbi of 1st-century Judaism. Paul learned from the best, and he did his best as a zealous persecutor of the church. He was blameless and righteous under the law; his self-proclaimed-righteousness was undoubtedly undisputed. No one else can boast, nor any one else could have more confidence than Paul, in the matter of the flesh.

Yet, in light of his encounter with Jesus, the resurrected and living Christ, on the road to Damascus, as recorded in Acts 9. And upon much reflection and repentance, Paul came to appreciate and formulate a new kind of righteousness, not claiming righteousness of his own that comes from the Law, but one that comes through faith in Jesus Christ. To such a righteousness that can only come from God, Paul boldly proclaims, “I press on toward the goal, toward the prize of the heavenly call.”

Which brings us to the second distraction, the distraction of the past. Everybody has a past. The past is not something one can ever escape from. Whenever I have the opportunity to work with couples looking to tie the knot, I always insist on taking them through pre-marital counselling, with a set of material that is loosely based on the ‘Family System Theory’. It is a theory that sees an individual as a complex being operating within a family system composed of interrelated parts.

With regard to marriage, I would invite the couple to reflect on their parents’ marriages—what’s good, what’s bad, and more importantly, what they wish to carry forward into their own union, and what they hope to leave behind.

Jesus himself taught, in Luke 9:62, *“No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”* Of course, who could forget that horrible story in Genesis 19, whereby Lot’s wife was turned into a pillar of salt, for looking back while fleeing a certain doom. She was warned ahead of time not to look back, but the resulting end is still shocking us.

Here is a theological truth: the past may influence us, but it need not define us. For whoever is in Christ, there is a new creation, the old has pass, the new has come. Christ is the great equalizer. Christ is the key that enables us to forget what lies behind, and strain forward to what lies ahead.

So the Apostle Paul boldly declares in verse 13, *“I press on, to lay hold of that for which Christ has laid hold of me.”* Paul readily admits not that he has obtained this, nor having already reached the goal, yet he presses on toward the goal, toward the prize of the heavenly call.

Which brings us to the final distraction, the distraction of the masses. The journey of faith is a long road through a narrow gate, not everyone is fit to travel, and the temptation to compare is often just as distracting, as grass is always seemingly greener on the other side of the road.

I recall having pastoral conversations with parishioners who were envious of lavish life styles of others, of those who have no regard for the Lord, or having to counsel young people who are eager to embrace the challenges and opportunities offered by the world. In those conversations, I always remind them to separate what is imperishable from the perishable. For much of what this world can offer is perishable and is in deed perishing, be it money, jobs, fame, titles, or securities.

Have you ever wonder why we call financial instruments securities? It is an oxymoronic to call stocks, bonds, futures or mortgage-backed securities secure. We should really be calling them insecurities, for they may add to one’s wealth (50-50 at best), but they sure compound one’s worry, concerns and anxiety (and that’s 100% percent guarantee).

Coming back to the Apostle Paul—he is not concerned about the pursuits of others, for whatever gains there are, he has come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, says Paul in Philippians 3:8, *“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.”* So he presses on toward the goal, toward the prize of that heavenly call.

As we come near to the end of Lent, I invite you to take stock, and reflect on your relationship with God, and with Christ's church. I invite all of us to take time, to let the Holy Spirit work in us in order to reshape and remold us into the image of God, as individuals and as the community of faith—the body of Christ. During this time of Lent, we look again at what molds our identity, what shapes our security, and what is truly imperishable.

Knowing Christ Jesus is Paul's ultimate goal, as he presses on toward that goal. Knowing Christ is more than gaining information or obtaining knowledge of Jesus, though that endeavour is worthy in itself. Knowing Christ is to wholly embrace Jesus, his suffering, his death and his resurrection, with the hope of sharing in his glory. Knowing Christ is to believe with your head and to trust with your heart, that Jesus has got your back.

I love this story, illustrating the huge difference between belief and trust. Charles Blondin, the 19th century French tight rope walker made his fame performing unimaginable feat before cheering crowds. On July 15, 1859, he hung a rope across the Niagara Fall, and as his fans looked on with shock and awe, Blondin crossed back and forth seemingly with ease while carrying a pole, then in a sack, then on a bicycle, then pushing a wheelbarrow. After demonstrating his mastery with the wheelbarrow on the tightrope, while the crowd watched with 'oooohed' and 'aaaaahed', Blondin asked his audience, "Do you believe I can carry a person across in this wheelbarrow?" Of course the crowd shouted yes, they believe! It was then that Blondin posed the follow-up question: "Who is brave enough to get in the wheelbarrow?" Of course, none did. Evidently, Blondin's cheering fans believed, but had not trusted.

To know Jesus, is to believe and to trust, that in a turbulent journey of life, Jesus is calming the storms. In a gruelling marathon race, Jesus is running ahead of us while beckoning us to follow. He is the living bread that fuels us, he is the living water that heals us. Without Jesus, we have no confidence in finishing the race.

So let us press on toward the goal. Let us not be distracted by the flesh, by the past nor by the masses. Let us keep our gaze upon Jesus, just a few steps ahead of us, while we press on toward the goal, toward the prize of the heavenly call.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**