

October 15, 2017

*"Press On"*

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Romans 5:3-5; Philippians 3:12-14

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I think most of us here would agree that Mahatma Gandhi had a deep and wise understanding of life and the world. And he identified seven social sins that, if not resisted, could crush and destroy both persons and countries. Let me read that list for you.

- Politics without principle.
- Wealth without work.
- Commerce without morality.
- Pleasure without conscience.
- Education without character.
- Science without humanity.
- Worship without sacrifice.

Let me read those for you again. (Repeat)

And isn't it true, we live in a world in which these sins flourish at least as much today as they did in Gandhi's time. Perhaps even more. Because I could give you recent examples of every one of them. Politics without principle comes immediately to mind. We see examples of that nearly every day now. Pleasure without conscience reminds me of all that's happening in the entertainment industry with Harvey Weinstein and his cohorts. But rather than belabor it any further, suffice it to say we don't have to look too far to measure how these sins have negatively affected our society and culture, and probably most importantly, our own attitudes and outlook for the future.

Then last week, our guest preacher, Rev. Ed de la Cour, spoke on Psalm 46, where God is our refuge and strength. He talked about the evil perpetrated by the Las Vegas shooter, the many natural storms that have recently caused death and destruction in the US and Caribbean, and those fearful medical diagnoses many of us have heard from our doctors. Then, this week we were shocked again by all the fires in California that have destroyed both lives and homes. So I think it's important to remind you again what the psalmist declares in Psalm 46 - that God indeed, is our refuge and strength, a very present help in times of trouble. Because in truth, who else in this life can we turn to?

So today I'd like to expand on this theme a little further. How faith and trust in the Lord is really a prerequisite for every Christian, until that time comes when, "God will wipe away all tears, and there will be no more grief or crying or pain." That's exactly why the words of St. Paul we heard today are so relevant. "This one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind, but instead straining forward to what lies ahead. I press on toward that prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus." And that's what we need to do! Let's not get mired in the sinking sand of this world, but instead "press on" with faith and trust, following the words and teachings of our Lord. For you see, it's this kind of positive attitude that can give us both a purpose for the present, and a hope for the future. Because "pressing on" focuses our thoughts, our energy, our outlook on God, on how God is calling us to live, and on the joy that ultimately awaits us.

But I know, sometimes this is difficult and it's easy to backslide. Especially when we allow the issues and troubles of the day to get the best of us. When we allow those things Gandhi spoke about crush us, grind us down and pressure us. When we find ourselves getting depressed and negative about life and this beautiful gift of creation God has put us in. For those of you who attended Old Time Gospel night, you'll remember that one of the songs described this creation as a garden so fair. And that God would return to his garden if we kept it pure. Yet, as we look around, is it any wonder we get depressed.

But you know, it's almost easier for us to get carried away thinking only of those external conflicts we see everyday. We become obsessed with watching the news and talking about all the horrible things that are happening. But here's another important thought. If we stop to think about it, some of the most difficult conflicts we have, are those that occur within ourselves. Isn't that true? Who we are, what we've become, what is, and what should have been. The ghosts we live with, the pain from the past that haunts us.

That reminds me of a poem by Donald Langford:

“A fellow walking down the trail, kept looking way behind,  
Cause he had some trouble backaways that wouldn't leave his mind.  
See, way back down the trail somewhere, he had stubbed his toe.  
And it caused him pain and suffering, and his mind just wouldn't let it go.  
So he kept looking at the pain and hurt back there,  
And though the trail ahead was beautiful, he missed out on his share.  
And while he was looking back there, fretting about the other end,  
He came upon another log, and stubbed his toe again.

That's why, pressing on, pressing forward, in Jesus Christ is really the only way we can live each day to the fullest and look ahead with hope. Not by trying to make it on our own, and definitely not through the wisdom of the culture. We can only find real hope through the One who reminds us to, "Be still and know that I am God." The One who will help us move forward because he "knows the plans he has for us – for good and not harm, to give us a future with hope." Listen to what author Max Lucado has to say, "As long as Jesus Christ is just one of many options for us, He is really no option. As long as you can carry your burden alone, you don't need a burden bearer. As long as you don't admit your grief, you will receive no comfort. And as long as you can take Him or leave Him, you may as well leave Him because He won't be taken half-heartedly. But when you mourn, when you get to the point of sorrow for your sins, when you admit you have no other option but to cast all your cares on Him, and when there is truly no other name you can call out, then cast all your cares on Him, for He is waiting for you in the midst of the storm." Yes, he is waiting for you in the midst of your storm. So press on! Press on in Jesus Christ.

And here's an interesting metaphor about how something wonderful can come out of our struggles. The transformation process to make beautiful perfume, comes from squeezing the essence from a plant. Quality olive oil is made by pressing it out of an olive. Fine wine comes from crushing grapes. And in the same way, we can be transformed when we turn our cares, our struggles, over to Christ. No matter how insurmountable your difficulties may seem, they are never beyond the reach of God's love and power and grace. Our Lord understands us, and knows our deepest needs even when we don't. Because just listen to the promises he has given us: "Be strong and courageous! Do not tremble or be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go." "Trust in the Lord with all your heart. In all ways acknowledge him and He shall direct your path." "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for thou art with me." "Come to me all who are heavy laden and I will give you rest." "In this world you will have troubles, but do not fear, I have overcome the world." "I am with you always, even to the end of the age." And consider this - during his life, St. Paul was imprisoned, flogged five times, beaten three times, he was stoned, shipwrecked, left homeless, hungry, cold, and more. And yet, we heard him say today, "We can boast in our suffering because suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character and character produces hope for us. And hope does not disappoint because of God's love for us." Yes, as the Bible says, "God does cause all things to work together for good to those who love God and are called according to his purpose."

And so, let us resolve to press on. To accept that evil and trouble in this world is a reality. But then let us use it as an opportunity to exercise our faith and trust in God, and go out and do more good, become kinder and gentler and more humble people, to show more compassion, so that we can change things in our own small way. And so, press on to transformation. Press on to overcome our past, and to move forward with hope. Press on to a better future with Jesus Christ leading us. Leading us all the way to that heavenly prize. Amen.