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4/3/22, Year C, Lent 5, Philippians 3:4b-14 "Keep Going!"

Sunday is always a special day for me. Today is particularly special because Brynlee and Everlee are the first people I've baptized at First Parish Church. Someday, I hope the two of them will understand they were baptized in the oldest continuously operating church in the state of Maine.

This congregation began in the early 1630s as an Anglican church. In 1636 funds were raised to build an Anglican chapel close to the mouth of the York River. In 1652 York "submitted" to Massachusetts becoming subject to the laws of Puritan Massachusetts – not England. That led to this church becoming Puritan rather than Anglican.

After 30 years in the first building, the congregation wanted to move to a new meetinghouse following the population as it moved inland. In 1677, the town contracted with a millright to construct a new church building on Lindsay Road, probably near the entrance to today's hospital.

This second meetinghouse survived the Indian massacre of 1692. From 1694 to 1697, the pastor was John Hancock, the grandfather of the John Hancock who was the first signer of the Declaration of Independence.

In 1710, the meetinghouse was deemed too small and unsafe for the growing congregation. A third meetinghouse was built roughly where the church stands today. During the colonial period, all town business was done in the church. All public meetings were held in the church. In 1719, the Second Parish of York was gathered in the Scotland area of York (out on Route 91), and with that development this church became First Parish as it is known today.

With the growing congregation, in 1744 the town voted to build a fourth meetinghouse. The new church was completed in 1747. That church is the basis for the church you see here today. In fact, the 1747 date is in huge numbers over the front doors.

In 1882, the congregation decided the church should be rotated 90° to face south, as it is today, toward the main road. The steeple bell the deacons ring every Sunday to call us to worship is, in all probability, the same one the Deacons rang here in the 1700s.

Today, Brynlee and Everlee were baptized into a community of faith that has been a central and integral part of York's history since the 1630s. When I received the call to come here, I joked with my friends that the pressure was on. I don't want to be the senior minister to break the streak of being the longest continuously operating church in Maine.

Many of you have memories of events here at the church that have happened in the not-so-distant past. Maybe you were married here or had a child baptized. Some of you look back fondly at the days when there were two worship services on Sunday and the pews were full.

Perhaps some memories aren't so pleasant. There are many in our community carrying wounds from congregational conflict or from one heartbreaking situation or another. It's fascinating and meaningful to look back at the history.

However, our baptisms today are a reminder, to me, of the importance of what we do today. In this time of decline in organized religion, decline in resources, and decline in church goers, how do we go forward?

Allow me to share with you the words of the apostle Paul again. He wrote, "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own..."

For Paul to say those words is pretty astounding. He started numerous churches around the Mediterranean region. Fourteen out of the twenty-one letters in the New Testament were either composed by him or composed by one of his followers and attributed to him.

Paul traveled extensively and suffered enormously in order to spread the good news of Jesus Christ. He was stoned. He was shipwrecked. He was jailed and placed in shackles numerous times. We would be hard-pressed to name someone, besides Jesus, who has had a greater influence on Christianity.

Nevertheless, Paul indicated he had not yet done enough. He wanted to keep going, because he had not yet reached his goal. He writes, "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."

I don't know about you, but I sometimes need that reminder to keep going. We need that reminder as a nation. If we're honest, we would have to admit we have not reached perfection. We've come a long way. We have a lot, in this country, for which to give thanks. But we have not yet achieved the ideals upon which this country was founded. Like Paul indicated for himself. We have not yet reached our goal.

Years ago, I went out to Washington state to climb Mount Rainier with two of my buddies. On the day we summited, the altitude was getting the best of me. I had a splitting headache. My stomach was churning. We were high up on the mountain, but I got to a place where I had to stop. I felt like I couldn't take one more step.

As we were standing on the glacier, another group was coming down from the summit. They said we were only a short distance from the top. I had pretty much decided I would let my buddies summit and then grab me on the way back down.

But my friend said, "You drove all the way across the country. You've climbed the hardest part of the mountain. Do you really want to stop here?" I managed to plod along slowly, and with my friends patience, we got to the top. I'm so glad they convinced me to keep going.

Paul wrote, "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."

Do you know what Paul's goal was, what he believed was the goal of the Christian life? Do you know what he considered reaching the mountaintop? It was to be like Jesus. That's why he continued to press. He knew God's desire was for each person to exude the compassion, the forgiveness, and the love Jesus exuded. That's God's desire for the world. I want to suggest, the purpose of the church, at its core, is to form Christlike people. I don't believe there is anything that brings God greater joy than to see people committed to peace and love.

The Bible says, "Beloved, we are **God's** children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when Christ is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is (1 John 3:2). That's the goal of life. That's why we worship and serve and gather in community and study the Bible. That's why we keep going. We don't give up.

Are you in the middle of something awful and you feel like giving up? Maybe two years of pandemic has gotten you to the place where you want to throw in the towel. Today, I encourage you to keep going. Maybe you're battling cancer and the chemo or the radiation or the surgeries seem like more than you can bear. Keep going! If a loved one died and life just isn't the same anymore, keep going.

If you've been wounded by something someone said or did in the church, I know what that's like. There is no hurt like a church hurt. But I encourage you to keep going. Keep showing up. Keep praying. Keep your discipleship of Jesus Christ a priority. If you are among the more senior members of our community and you think your best days are behind you, keep going. God may have more in store for you than you know.

For 400 years, folks in this faith community have been striving and sacrificing. They struggled with many of the things with which we struggle. We belong to a community that does not give up. We keep going. We strain forward to what lies ahead.

Do you know what happened to me when I reached the top of Mt. Rainier? My headache seemed to go away. My stomach felt fine. All I felt was joy! We press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus, because there is joy in overcoming. There is joy in reaching the goal.

I'm overjoyed Brynlee and Everlee are joining us on the journey.