

Kirby Lawrence Hill
October 5, 2014
Psalm 19
Philippians 3:4b-14

Warner Memorial Presbyterian Church
World Communion Sunday

PRESSING ON

P. T. Barnum knew how to orchestrate publicity for his entertainment ideas. One instrument, so to speak, that he used to publicize his circus was a bandwagon, which would lead a parade through town to let everyone know the circus had arrived. When politicians saw his success with this method, they copied his promotional practices and started using bandwagons to encourage people to come to political rallies. Over time, the phrase 'jumping on the bandwagon' came to be used. It referred to those who were following the crowd for the excitement of an event rather than because of any firm conviction in or commitment to its direction.

I would have to say the Washington and Baltimore region has been in full bandwagon-jumping-on mode with the excitement of having the Orioles and Nationals both in the baseball playoffs. It is fun to see the energy and the way the success of a sports team can bring a sense of unity to a region. With two exciting wins, the Orioles may have more people jumping on, and with two excruciating losses, there may be many who are already jumping off the Nationals' bandwagon.

Today is World Communion Sunday, a day when we celebrate the unity in Christ experienced around the world. It is a time when we lift up the importance of peace and unity in our world. But the prospects for peace throughout our world don't look so bright these days and a lot of people have jumped off the peace bandwagon. Conflicts that have been going on for a long time do not seem to be slowing down. Some of the groups that have been a source of violence have morphed into new identities, goals, and tactics. It is more than a bit disheartening. It is a similar feeling to when there have been a number of natural disasters one after another and there is what some call compassion fatigue, as people see that their giving of time, energy and resources does not always lead to a quick fix for what has gotten broken.

If we were a business in a similar situation, perhaps we would call in a motivational speaker. Most motivational speakers seem to have a similar message - that they encountered adversity and because of their attitude and certain positive habits they developed, they found a way to success and others can too. Matt Foley was a motivational speaker character played in a hilarious way by Chris Farley on Saturday Night Live years ago. This character did not speak to large conventions, but instead he would be hired in perhaps by parents to get their teenage children motivated to do something beyond watching sports on television. He would seek to motivate them by telling them not to follow his lazy example. He described how badly his life had turned out, that he was living out of his van down by the river, and if they didn't get on the stick, that would be where they would end up as well - motivation by negative example.

The Apostle Paul wasn't living in a van down by the river, but he wasn't in the best place either. As he writes the church in Philippi, he is in prison. Early in life, Paul had all the credentials to be a respected religious leader. He had been born into the elite Hebrew tribe of Benjamin, his family had strictly carried out what they understood would put them in good stead with God. He diligently studied Hebrew law and became a meticulous adherent of it, a fiery defender of the purity of his religion. But rather than live as a respected religious leader in the faith tradition into which he had been born, he gave up all of that because of an encounter with Jesus Christ.

In another of Paul's letters, (2 Corinthians 11) he describes what had resulted from his decision to follow and proclaim the gospel. There certainly were those who were not receptive to his preaching. It had at times been a very rough road. Five times he had been whipped, three times he had been beaten with rods, once he had been stoned. There also had been three times he had been shipwrecked, and at times he went without food or adequate shelter in addition to the challenges of multiple imprisonments. And yet Paul did not regret the path he had taken and he did not give up. What motivated him? What kept him going?

I have to say that I am humbled and inspired by the example of people who faithfully press on in spite of what must be disheartening conditions. Twenty three years ago near the town of Nazareth, Nancy and I met Elias Chacour, a man who lives near Nazareth who follows a man from Nazareth. He describes himself as a Palestinian Arab Christian Israeli. He is a Palestinian and a citizen of the state of Israel, and as a person of faith, he daily he urges his fellow Palestinians and others to be committed to justice for the Palestinian people without resorting to violence against the people of Israel. He understands the existential fears that the Jewish people of Israel have, but constantly pleads with them to build bridges of understanding and peace with those who are their blood brothers and sisters.¹ As a result, he has been harshly criticized by both Palestinians and Israelis, but day in and day out, he continues to work for peace in that troubled land. He is preaching this morning at our sister congregation, National Presbyterian Church.

I also see people who as a result of their faith, fight relentlessly against hunger, even when it seems that the tide of the hungry never seems to go down. I see those who with little acclaim, dedicate their lives advocating for the rights and needs of those who are disenfranchised. I see people who unyieldingly work against significant resistance for planet sanity in the care for creation. I see people who day by day and night by night care for a seriously ill loved one. From where does the energy and hope come? For Paul, he could be bold in God because he had experienced the boldness of God's love for him and for others in the person of Jesus Christ. In him, he had encountered a God who came among humanity gently, lived wonderfully, taught truthfully. In the facing of human resistance, even threatening death, he did not turn back. Yes, he died violently, but he was risen triumphantly. As a result, not even death was a reason to give up hope. Paul was empowered by the same life-giving force that brought about the resurrection of Jesus Christ. In a sense, hope, purpose, and love had been resurrected in Paul, so he could press on even when discouraging events occurred.

There may be times when we are looking for the latest bandwagon onto which to jump. But the music of even the most entertaining bandwagon pales in comparison with the heavenly love songs to which we are called to march. As we listen for them and join in with them, we will be directed and empowered to press on in service of the One who embodied God's resurrecting love for the world. How could we be disheartened when we have been shown God's ever-beating, loving heart? When connected with the source of all compassion, we will press on with joy and hope. Our motivation does not come through just having the right attitudes and habits – no it comes in the person of Jesus Christ, God's very own transforming power at work within and through us, who even in the face of death, causes our hearts to sing "Alleluia."

¹ Elias Chacour, Blood Brothers, Zondervan, 1984.