

Face Forward
Brenda Halbrooks Installation
Three Chopt Presbyterian Church
November 4, 2007
Stacy L. Ikard

Jeremiah 29:11-12

Phillipians 3:12-16

Good afternoon! It is my joy to be with you today to share in this wonderful occasion. Brenda and I have been friends – best friends- since forever. Before kids, before ordinations, before graduate degrees, before the need for eyeglasses, and exercise regimes, we were friends. For 25 years, through good times and not so good times, the birth of five children, seven installations, countless joys and trials – Brenda’s friendship has been a constant in my life, and I am thrilled to be here and to be a part of this new beginning for Three Chopt and for her. Thank you for this opportunity. Let us pray.

I have the best office in my church. It isn’t the largest, or the most opulent, and it isn’t in the best location, but what I DO have is a huge picture window – floor to ceiling – overlooking the children’s playground. Around 10:30, the children from our school go out for P.E., and I have a front row seat to the activity. This week – the P.E. teacher started a new unit – teaching the 5 and 6 year olds how to run foot races, and I kid you not – it has been full time entertainment. All week I watched that patience young woman line these little ones up on a starting line. I watched her talk to them about starting positions and about running a race. Then I watched the little

ones try to run races. “O.K.” She’d say. “Get ready” She’s say. Then every time, before she could say go, some little one would break the line, turn around, or wonder off. “Face Front” she would cheerily say, as little Jimmy turned around to watch a bus go by, and little Jane bent down to pick a blade of grass. “Face Front” she would pipe, as little Bobby walked over to talk to his best friend three people down the line, and little Ben turned 180 degrees around to look between his legs. She had the patience of a saint. And when she finally began the race, it didn’t get much better. From my vantage point, above the playing field, I could see the racers – sometimes looking over their shoulders, sometimes running sideways while talking to a friend, sometimes stopping in their tracks to look at a flower or an insect. “Face forward” the teacher kept saying, coaxing them back into the race. Late in the week I found that teacher in the parking lot – and I asked her about the races. “What’s the point?” I asked. “They are so small and easily distracted – aren’t they too young to run races?” The teacher grinned and said, “Oh, I’m not really trying to teach them to run races, they will learn that later. I’m only trying to get them to face forward – I am teaching them that when you start something new you must begin with the correct posture, and all athletic events begin with facing forward.”

I have been pondering that P.E. teacher’s words this week. Pondering what it means to begin a new thing – and the importance of beginning new things with the correct posture. When was the last time you began something new? Perhaps you started in a new school, or you have entered a new job. Perhaps you have retired, or dropped your last child off at college this fall. Perhaps you have started a new relationship, or made a significant

change in an old relationship – all of these are new things – uncharted territory, and such experiences call for the correct posture. New beginnings, like getting married, becoming parents, sending kids off to college, relocating to a new community, even visiting a new church for the first time can feel like trekking into the unknown, and just like those little children on the playground were so easily distracted, so easily lost their face forward posture, each of us – when faced with the unknown, with the new, can be distracted by a voice, somewhere deep within our psyche, which says to us, “Go back. Go back to where you’ve been. Go back to what you know. Go back to what has worked for you in the past.”

The Apostle Paul understood that little voice of doubt – the human tendency to glorify and to focus on the past. As his letter to his beloved friends in Christ in Philippi continues, Paul addresses the church with a warning from his own life. Paul had a past – a past he often talked about in proud terms. He had been born a Jew – a Jew among Jews. He had adhered to the law in every aspect. His family history, and personal life a flawless example of Jewish piety. But when Paul Met Christ on the Damascus Road, Paul started a new path – a new race – facing forward – away from Jewish piety – a march – or walk – or race – of faith in Christ. Paul wants the Philippians and you and me to understand the importance of focus – pressing on, leaning forward – “forgetting what is behind, and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the heavenly prize.”

Paul knew that for the Philippian church to be healthy, it must not focus on the past, or look down at it’s feet. It must not waste energy on people in the stands or on the sidelines. It must position itself like a runner

in a race – relaxed, confident, muscles straining, heart and lungs pounding – and here’s the most important part of all – eyes forward – eyes forward on the goal, the finish line, the purpose of the race.

The bottom line – the Apostle Paul encourages the people of God to press on, to keep moving forward. “Forget what lies in the past. Behold, God is doing a new thing. Press on to what lies ahead.” Paul never says that we shouldn’t treasure our memories, or that we should ignore the lessons history has to teach us. But Paul does tell us not to live in the past. Don’t dwell on what has been. Don’t glorify your history and don’t deify your traditions. Fight the human tendency is to stay within the neat and safe boundaries of what we already know, of what we have already experienced, of what is already on our maps. A mediocre person, or for that matter, a mediocre church, will always stay within the boundaries of its past. But a person or a church, of great faith, who trusts in God, and is willing to be led by the Holy Spirit, can and will face forward and run a new race.

A wise old preacher once said “there’s a fine line between preaching and meddling”. At this point I am going to come dangerously close to crossing that line. I really don’t know you as a congregation very well. I never met any of your former pastors, never worshipped here before this morning. But I do know that today marks the beginning of a new race, a new chapter and a new period for the life of this congregation. And no matter what the past has been here at TCPC, today let me remind you to face forward. No matter what has happened before, let me remind you to look ahead. No matter what your challenges and possibilities, strain ahead to God’s future.

You have a good pastor, my friends. A faithful pastor. I should know, I know her very well. And she is poised, eyes forward, on a new race of faith as your pastor, with the posture, the heart and the ability to be a wonderful spiritual leader for TCPC. She's not perfect – and sometime, in another place I'll be happy to share more of that with you – But she is ready – face forward and to be your pastor. . For this church to reach it's potential – for this church to be faithful – for this church to move into God's future will take all of you – working together, loving together, and being mindful together of your call to serve each other and the community God has given you as a charge. All of you facing forward.

A foreign dignitary was visiting in Washington D.C. when his cab happened to drive past the National Archives, you know the building were they keep the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution on display. The foreigner noticed that on the cornerstone of the building were engraved the words, “The Past is Prologue”. Not understanding what that meant he asked the cabbie, “My good man, what does this mean, ‘The past is prologue’? The cabbie thought for a minute and then looked back over the seat and explained, “What that means is, man, you ain't seen nothing yet!”

My friends, I believe that about this church. Man, you ain't seen nothing yet! Your best days of mission and ministry are yet to come! God is doing a new thing in this place, challenging you to focus yourself like never before, to run a new race of faithfulness not yet finished. This is a

great congregation, and with the guidance of God's Holy Spirit, you are capable of accomplishing great things in the years to come.