

## Kingdom Taglines: Press on toward the goal

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Matthew 21:33-46, Psalm 80 (*Sing the Story 6*), Philippians 3:4b-14

### We will rock you

*Slap, slap, clap. Slap, slap, clap.* Does anyone know what's next? "We will, we will rock you!" *Slap, slap, clap.* Everybody! "We will, we will rock you!" *Slap, slap, clap.* One more time! "We will, we will rock you!" *Slap, slap, clap.* <sup>1</sup>

Certain sports taglines, including "We will rock you," aggressively diminish the opposing team. "Tiger cats...eat 'em raw!" "Our blood, our sweat, your tears." The belittling cry of Yale fans when Yale plays anyone other than their traditional rivals, "Harvard sucks! Harvard sucks! Who the heck are you?"

Fortunately, others slogans herald the higher aims of sport. "Faster. Higher. Stronger" Is the Olympic motto. The motto of the Special Olympics is, "Let me win. But if I cannot win, let me be brave in the attempt." Even the ubiquitous, "Let's go [insert the name of your favourite team here]. Let's go!" is more upbeat.

Taglines, slogans, and cheers are crucial in sport. They succinctly communicate encouragement...or discouragement. They capture the mood of the team in moments of challenge or triumph. They bring together a crowd with Rider Pride or form the Sens Army or Habs Nation.

For the past few weeks, Don has been exploring the letters of Paul through a series of taglines: "No judgements, full accountability;" "When in Philippi...do as the Romans do;" "Same mind, same love, full accord." Today I add another to the list: "Press on toward the goal."

### The race of faith

When I told my family I was going to be speaking about sports, they were skeptical. Admittedly, I have never been a particularly gifted or enthusiastic athlete. But even I feel the coiled, athletic power of Paul's words:

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. <sup>2</sup>

The Message paraphrases:

I've got my eye on the goal, where God is beckoning us onward - to Jesus.  
I'm off and running, and I'm not turning back. <sup>3</sup>

This is not the only place in scripture where we hear the life of faith described as a race. <sup>4</sup> Hebrews 12: "let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith." <sup>5</sup> Isaiah 40: "Those who hope in the Lord... will run and not grow weary." <sup>6</sup> These are only two instances among many others. This morning let's explore together Paul's take on rules of the race of faith.

<sup>1</sup> Queen. "We will rock you." <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-tJYN-eG1zk&ob=av3e>

<sup>2</sup> Philippians 3:13-14. NRSV.

<sup>3</sup> Philippians 3:13-14 The Message.

<sup>4</sup> 1 Corinthians 9:24-27, 2 Timothy 4:7 are two other favourites.

<sup>5</sup> Hebrews 12:1-2

<sup>6</sup> Isaiah 40:31

## 1. What is the goal?

Let's start with the obvious: what is the goal? What goal are we pressing toward? How do we win? According to Paul, "knowing Christ" is the goal and "everything else is loss."

## 2. What does it mean to know Christ?

So.....what does it mean to know Christ? Asking how to know Christ is like asking how to run. It's simple and intuitive yet also far more complex than you would expect.

Watching my mother learn to walk again over the past few months after a stroke has revealed to me that propelling oneself forward in an upright position is not as easy as you might think. It involves a complicated series of flexing knees and ankles, adjusting hips, moving shoulders, aligning feet, and, eventually, taking careful steps. Perhaps the process of knowing Christ is similar. Knowledge of Christ grows and changes over time, with lots of adjustment and realignment along the way.

### ***Knowing Christ is a relationship***

Knowing Christ is more like knowing a person than a list of facts, more like knowing a friend, or partner, or acquaintance than familiarizing oneself with a concept. Knowing Christ is a relationship. At times it may be characterized at times by companionship and comfort, while at other times it may be marked by anger, sadness or distance.

The Psalmist expresses frustration and grief to God in Psalm 80: "How long will you hide from your people?"<sup>7</sup> and pleads with God, "Let your face shine, that we may be saved!"<sup>8</sup>

The goal of, "being made Christ's own," and "making Christ one's own," to use Paul's words, is not about an absolute standard of knowledge, but rather a gradual process of learning to know one another.

### ***Knowing Christ is a way of life***

Knowing Christ is more than a personal relationship. It is a way of life. According to Paul, to know Christ is to become like Christ,<sup>9</sup> to share Christ's calling. Jesus articulated his calling through the words of the Hebrew Scriptures:

The Spirit of God is upon me,  
because God has chosen me  
to preach good news to the poor.  
to bind up the broken-hearted,  
to proclaim freedom for the captives  
and release from darkness for the prisoners.<sup>10</sup>

This is not a to-do list with a corresponding point system. It is rather an orientation of compassion. It is about how to run the race rather than a description of the finish line.

The first and only race I have run was the Run for Relief at the Mennonite Central Committee Relief Sale in New Hamburg in 2008. About six weeks before race day, I went running for the first time in my adult life. Going into the race I had one goal: to run 5km without walking. It would have been faster to alternate between walking and running as I realized when other runners passed me, and then I passed them, and then they left me in their dust. Sometimes, when I

<sup>7</sup> Psalm 80:4.

<sup>8</sup> Psalm 80:3, 7, 19.

<sup>9</sup> *New Interpreters Bible*. 527.

<sup>10</sup> Isaiah 61, Luke 4:18

run, it even feels like it would be faster just to walk quickly! However, I decided that this race would be about the journey rather than the destination.

How would your daily race change if you pressed toward the goal of knowing Christ, and living Christ's call of compassion? Would you slow your pace to take more time to notice those around you? Would you incorporate volunteering sprints into your usual stroll? Would you stop and stretch your spiritual muscles through prayer or study? Would you find the courage to keep moving, to press on through one more day, when having compassion on yourself is challenge enough?

### **3. Teamwork is encouraged**

Let's review the Rules of the Race so far: 1) The goal of the race of faith is knowing Christ, and 2) We run this race by being in relationship with Christ and living Christ's way of compassion. The third rule: in the race of faith, teamwork is encouraged!

A few years ago my family participated in the family division of the Mindemoya Classic, a small scale "run, paddle, peddle" triathlon on Manitoulin Island. There were many things that made us different from one another—age, gender, athletic ability, training, enthusiasm for the event—and yet we were all on the same team, all part of the same family, all pressing toward the same goal.

In Paul's race of faith, the things that made him different from his companions—circumcision, being an Israelite, a Hebrew, a Pharisee of extreme zeal blameless under the law—mattered less than what united him with his team: the shared goal of knowing Christ.

In the race of faith, the things that make us different from one another—nationality, denomination, education, experience, lifestyle, language, age, and more—matter less than what unites us: the shared goal of knowing Christ.<sup>11</sup>

In the race of faith, teamwork is encouraged.

### **4. Underdogs are favoured to win**

A fourth, perhaps unwritten, rule of the race of faith is that the underdogs are favoured to win.

In the parable we heard earlier, Jesus says, "The kingdom will be taken away from you [Chief Priests and Pharisees, the favourites for victory] and given to people who produce the fruit of the kingdom [the underdogs pressing on toward the goal of knowing Christ and living Christ's way]."<sup>12</sup>

We are also advised to bet on the underdogs in Philippians. Paul emphasizes that whatever gains he had because of his background he has come to regard as loss.

Imagine a Mennonite version of this text:

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: baptized at 13, a member of First Olive Branch of Peace Mennonite Church, of the tribe of Yoder, a Froese-Harder born of Neufelds; as to the law, a graduate of CMBC, Conrad Grebel, and Goshen College; as to zeal, a dedicated volunteer with MCC, MVS, MDS, and MMN; as to

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<sup>11</sup> *New Interpreters Bible.*

<sup>12</sup> Matthew 21:43

righteousness under the law, careful interpreter of all acronyms involving the letter M. *Yet whatever gains I had these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ.*

There is nothing inherently wrong with this background. In fact, there are many, many, good things about it. Yet when it distracts us from the goal of knowing Christ, or separates us from our teammates, it is a loss. It is a disadvantage. It distracts us, sending us jogging off in circles through the suburban maze, rather than pressing on toward the goal. Perhaps this is why Paul encourages us to: “forget what lies behind and strain forward to what lies ahead.”<sup>13</sup>

### 5. Everyone can win

Even though the underdogs may be favoured to win, the fifth rule in the race of faith is that *everyone* can win! We are not in competition with one another. We are all pressing on toward the goal of knowing Christ. We genuinely hope we will all move toward it together.

Now, even though everyone *can* win, I’m sorry to say that *no one* has won yet. Paul writes: “not that I have already obtained this, or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.”<sup>14</sup> With Paul, we are *all* still straining forward. We are *all* still pressing on.

### 6. Have fun

There’s one last rule in the race of faith. It’s reminder that rings through the letter to the church in Philippi: Rejoice! Celebrate! Have fun!

When my brother lived in residence at Conrad Grebel University College, he was part of a rain running club. Whenever there was a torrential downpour, everyone would meet in the cafeteria, kick off their shoes, rip off their shirts, and go sprinting off across campus barefoot and shirtless until the pouring rain stopped. There was no winning or losing. There was no pre-set course. The only purpose was to make the most of the weather, to revel in the rain, to play in the puddles, to have fun!

The race of faith can also be fun! Rejoice!

### We will, we will press on!

Let’s review Paul’s take on the race of faith.

Press on toward the goal of knowing Christ, of being in relationship with Christ, of living the way of Christ!

Press on, in unity with those around you!

Press on, betting on the underdogs!

Press on, encouraging the victory of all!

Press on, knowing the race is far from done!

Press on, and don’t forget to have fun!

We will, we will press on!

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<sup>13</sup> Philippians 3:13

<sup>14</sup> Philippians 3:12