

As the season of Lent nears its end, those of us accustomed to a serious keeping of it inevitably reflect back upon what we have discovered in our self-examination and how well we've responded to the call to grow in our discipleship.

It is tempting to do this almost in a "score-card-like" fashion, tallying up the good things we have experienced in one column and toting up the ways we've failed to grow as we'd hoped or expected in the other.

It is interesting, judging from the Epistle we've just read, to consider how Paul might instruct us in this exercise of spiritual tallying. We are prone to believe that Lenten discipline, that is, living the Christian life, involves, as its primary element, the riddance from our lives of evil influences (or, as the Baptismal Covenant puts it, "the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God"). That's certainly true, as far as that goes. It *is* a process of trading in the evil *old* for a good and healthier *new* way of life.

But for Paul, it's not as simple as that. Paul considers the spiritual quest to be something that has some *very key steps* to it.

First, what makes it possible for Paul to move forward spiritually is the fact that **he has a goal**. "*I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.*" The goal for him is Jesus, the Christ. This goal is the defining spiritual purpose in his life, and it permeates all that he says and does.

How many of us are so goal-oriented in our spiritual development? We know – as Paul knew – how easy it is to flounder by *not* zeroing in on what's most important in life.

For instance:

- Success is not a Christian goal.
- Popularity is not a Christian goal.
- The acquisition of things and possessions...not a Christian goal.
- The pursuit of pleasure is not a Christian goal.

One-ness with Christ Jesus *is* the goal, and when we choose *that* goal, whatever its implications for our seven-day-a-week lives, we not only have something worthy of achieving, but the *very meaning of life itself*.

How many of us, in our Lenten journey, have *really* dedicated our talents, our time and our energy, to *this* central goal? If you're anything like me, you've probably gotten side-tracked. It's so tempting – and so easy – to let things of lesser importance become goals in themselves instead of *means* to this larger goal.

The second step Paul reminds us of is that, in order to move ahead spiritually, **we've got to put the past behind us.** “*Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead...*” Progress cannot be made by living in the past. Nor can it be beneficial to dwell on “what might have been.” Only when we turn our focus *forward* do we gain in Christ.

That's not to repudiate things that are of value, traditions and life-lessons learned at the hands of those who have gone before us. If we fail to *learn* from our past, as the old saying goes, we are doomed to *repeat* it. But it *does mean* that religious faith, spiritual life, cannot and must not be so wedded to old ideas, old practices, old traditions, old concepts, *a past that does not exist anymore*, that our faith cannot grow or change.

Where would we be today if Jesus were so wedded to the traditions of *his* past that he was unable to break new ground? No, the past is but *grounding* for the future. The tree takes strength from its roots, but doesn't *live* there – it lives by reaching out and up, ever stretching with new growth.

Finally, the spiritual journey, the spiritual quest, **does not come without hard work** to *make* it happen. We do not become spiritual people without discipline. Like a good athlete, we need to *train* to become more deeply focused, goal-oriented disciples. We become *practiced* at it by constant exercise. Reading, Bible study, prayer, *looking for ways to serve others*, doing it every day, repetition, over and over – it comes no other way. Not by wishing for it, hoping for it, longing for it – but by doing just what Paul did: keeping it up, keeping it going, day by day. Paul knew of no other way to live.

As Lent draws to a close, start taking a tally of where you stand with respect to these matters, and you will begin to focus in on your goal. Keep your eyes on the prize. Focus on that grace of God so freely given to us all and claim the emancipation it offers. The goal is Jesus. The goal is Christ, standing before us as our model, our friend, the one who comes alongside us and enables us to strain forward, to press on, to make Lent more than just a scoreboard of do's and don'ts.