

Does Our Pedigree Matter?

*A sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on April 28, 2018
based on Philippians 3:4-17*

I've mentioned before that I grew up in Sacramento, just a half dozen miles from Sutter's Fort, the destination for many pioneers of California who made the long trek from St. Joseph, Missouri to the central valley of California. My great-great grandfather was a wagon master who migrated all the way from New York state to Sacramento, so the story of the gold rush pioneers is in my blood. As a small child I read about other pioneers who were not as lucky as my ancestor. I'm speaking of the Donner / Reed Party and the tragedy of how they were caught in the snows of the sierras.

In fact, the first bit of history I ever learned was about a little 8 year old girl named Patty Reed who came west with her family in that ill-fated company. You probably know that they came through this valley above the zoo and camped a few blocks away from where I now live near our downtown. It was from there they made a rush for California in their hurry to beat the snows.

When their wagons failed them in the Bonneville Salt Flats they abandoned them and Mr. Reed ordered his family to leave everything they owned in the wagons. By her own account, little Patty crawled into the back of their wagon and saved two things she felt deeply connected to: a lock of her grandmother's hair, and a little wooden doll with cotton clothing. These two things she stuffed into a pocket in the only dress she had.

Once the family stopped at what is now Donner Park, a little west of Donner Lake, her mother and father left Patty with people there they trusted, and went on to Sacramento without her, thinking that was the quickest way to get supplies and bring them back to the party.

The story of the parting of Patty and her mother is a remarkable one. Patty was very stoical, and accepted her parents' decision, believing she would probably never see her mother again.

Her parents made it to the fort, but it took much longer than they hoped for her father to get back to her. So many in the party had died in the meantime, but Patty survived. Once he had fetched her and they had made it over the sierras and were in reach of the valley, they rested and it was then, sitting beside a campfire, that Patty took the doll out of her pocket and told it everything that she had seen and experienced in her parent's absence. The image of that brave little girl captured my imagination when I was nine years old and it has touched my heart ever since.

I love her *hutzpah*. She decided she had to defy her father's wishes and collect two things that meant the world to her -- a connection with her late beloved grandmother, and a doll that was, in a way only children understand, her best friend.

If you wonder how an 8 year-old could have survived that horrible winter with next to no food at all, maybe it had to do with what she took with her to see her through, and the pluck it took to collect and then hide those things in the first place.

Now, I'm mentioning her story partly because it moves me every time I think about it, and partly because I feel a certain kinship with her through my pioneer grandparents.

But I also want us to consider it in context this morning with the Apostle Paul's asserted willingness to leave behind everything that meant the world to him in order to become a follower of Jesus.

Now I want to note that he doesn't do this in some overly dramatic fashion that might lead us to believe he is a narcissist who just wants people to look at him in awe. No, the Paul who wrote the letter in which he says these things is too serene for that. It's like he has reached an age or a level of maturity where he has found a joy in life that transcends any connection with material goods, or reputation, or even his very life.

I mean, look, he is in prison and he is likely to be executed soon by the empire, and yet the letter is full of love for the people he's addressing in the city of Philippi. They have been very good to him. He is in prison in Ephesus and they have sent him gifts, and instead of being full of grief and self-doubt, and worry over the future, he is full of love for these folk who have shown such love for him.

Their love reminds him of the love God showed in laying claim to him in the first place. In response, Paul says that he is using this last portion of his life to strive with the single-minded devotion of an athlete to lay hold of the prize to which God has called him, namely an unbroken relationship with God.

For Paul, this calls for a straining forward, a pressing on. But in order to press on, Paul indicates he had to first let go of something.

"This one thing I do," he says, "forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal."

Now, I have every reason to believe that Paul would not have judged little Patty Reed negatively for having chosen to claim a couple of precious belongings at a critical moment on their journey. Children are children and adults are adults.

The first step in moving forward spiritually for adults, he says, is letting go of what may be holding us back. And there *are* things that can serve us badly and hold us back in life.

Mark Twain is remembered for spouting some uncommon advice on this subject. He spoke once of knowing an adult woman who was sick and getting sicker by the day and who found no help in doctors. Here is his story ...

She had run down and down and down, and had at last reached a point where medicines no longer had any helpful effect upon her. I said I knew I could put her upon her feet in a week.

It brightened her up, it filled her with hope, and she said she would do everything I told her to do. So I said she must stop swearing and drinking, and smoking for four days, and then she would be all right again.

And it would have happened just so, I know it; but she said she couldn't give up swearing, and smoking, and drinking, because she had never done those things.

So there it was. She had neglected her habits. Now that they could have done her some good, she had none in stock. She had nothing to fall back on. She was a sinking ship, with no freight to throw overboard.

Why, even one or two little bad habits could have saved her, but she was just a moral pauper.

Okay, seriously, we all have struggled with leaving things behind us; things from our past that weigh us down. Some of us have regrets from the past; things we really wish we had done differently -- relationships, career choices, fiscal management, chances we didn't take, or decisions we wish we'd made differently.

To have regrets is to be human, but if we wallow in past regrets, they can, of course, hamper us from moving forward.

But what is truly interesting is that in today's passage, Paul is actually referencing our past *gains*; our *successes* – *these* are the things, he says, that most impede us.

Now, I find this compelling because this little church of ours is full of overachievers, overachievers like Paul, and so it's like he's meddling in our lives.

His story about having been a Pharisee among Pharisees challenges us to look at those things we are most proud of from our past; the things we have received a lot of accolades for. Paul says that it may, in fact, be these things that we need to let go of in order to move towards the life God wants for us.

Speaking for himself, Paul says, "Whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Him."

So, let me ask, in what way have you been a Pharisee among Pharisees? I know it sounds odd to put it that way, but I imagine many of you have, at one time or another, found yourself pegged as, in some unique way, outstanding in your field, whatever it is.

Maybe that's where you find yourself right now. So, let me pose questions implicit in Paul's assertions. Is what you are prized for enough? Does it satisfy you? Are you coasting on it, to a degree? Do you find yourself bored sometimes in your work? Is something holding you back from happiness?

In preparation for this sermon I looked way back to a time when I was in graduate school at the University of Oregon. I wrote some pretty good papers back then; some publishable stuff; work that got the attention of a favorite professor of mine who asked me to come see him one afternoon. In that meeting he laid out a path toward a PhD. He said he knew that I had what was necessary to reach that goal.

He told me what I could expect, what support I'd get, what kind of teaching I could do along the way, and when the goal could be achieved.

I was honored that he took the time to map that out for me and that he saw in me someone who could get over the hurdles necessary. I knew that achieving that goal would open many marvelous doors for me, but I was already growing tired of writing those kind of papers; stuff I could write in my sleep. There was something else percolating in me and I didn't have a clue what it was, but I knew that doing that PhD wasn't it.

That dissatisfaction led me to where I am now, but I had no idea at the time. I just knew that something that I had once wanted was growing cold for me, and I had a hunch something else more meaningful lay ahead. But I had little idea what that was. It was a hellish in-between time, and to follow my hunch I would have to give up something pretty beautiful; something I had worked hard for, in fact.

All I remember of that meeting was saying, "Bill, I need to get on with my life." Those were my exact words, and they didn't satisfy my professor and they didn't satisfy me either, but it was what it was.

All I knew was that I needed to let go of something that was becoming obsolete for me, so that I could begin moving toward a more appropriate future.

Now, I need to emphasize that this was one of the hardest decisions I ever made. I knew in that office that day that I needed to press on to another goal. But I confess that I looked back over my shoulder a thousand times or more after. I really did.

I had worked hard to get where I'd gotten. An alternative future was anything but clear. I was letting go of something I knew I could do and do well and that, with perseverance, would most likely provide a decent, respectable, interesting life. My parents were all for me pursuing it. But something else inside me was calling me to let go of it.

Maybe you know the feeling. Maybe you've done the same thing yourself. Think about it. Was there one life you left behind? Maybe there was more than one.

You know, living isn't about doing what we are necessarily good at, or even seem born for, or even have a passion for. I know that is counter-intuitive. But sometimes something just calls out to us,

And woe be to us when we respond with a Yes to something new. That often, if not always, takes us through a period of struggle. But it's not an uncommon thing, and more, it helps us realize that our lives are in some ways, bigger than we are. Not a bad lesson.

Let me repeat, plenty of people have found themselves on the horns of this dilemma. One American, above all others, is remembered for making a decision to let go of something he was a genius at. I'm speaking of George Washington,.

The libertarian historian, David Boaz, has written about our first president in a way that echoes the dilemma the apostle Paul is holding up for us this morning. Here is how David Boaz put it

George Washington is the face on the one-dollar bill and - these days - the smiling face of Presidents' Day sales. Most of us know he was the first president of the United States. But why is that important? What else do we know about him?

George Washington was the man who established the American republic. He led the revolutionary army against the British Empire, he served as the first president, and most importantly he stepped down from power.

In an era of brilliant men, Washington was not the deepest thinker. He never wrote a book or even a long essay, unlike ... Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and John Adams. But Washington made the ideas of the American founding real. He incarnated liberal and republican ideas in his own person, and he gave them effect through the Revolution, the Constitution, his successful presidency, and his departure from office.

What's so great about leaving office? Surely it matters more what a president does in office. But think about other great military commanders and revolutionary leaders before and after Washington – [think of] Caesar, Cromwell, Napoleon, Lenin. They all seized the power they had won and held it until death or military defeat.

And most notably, Washington held "republican" values - that is, he believed in a republic of free citizens, with a government based on consent and established to protect the rights of life, liberty, and property.

From his republican values Washington derived his abhorrence of kingship, even for himself.

The writer Garry Wills called him “a virtuoso of resignations.” He gave up power not once but twice - at the end of the revolutionary war, when he resigned his military commission and returned to Mount Vernon, and again at the end of his second term as president, when he refused entreaties to seek a third term. In doing so, he set a standard for American presidents that lasted until the presidency of Franklin D. Roosevelt, whose taste for power was stronger than the 150 years of precedent set by Washington.

Give the last word to Washington’s great adversary, King George III. The king once asked the American painter, Benjamin West, what Washington would do after winning independence. West replied, “They say he will return to his farm.”

“If he does that,” the incredulous monarch said, “he will be the greatest man in the world.”

Amen