

Onward!

A Sermon Preached for Onward Sunday

By Jeffrey W. Gibelius, Pastor

Second Presbyterian Church,

Carlisle, Pennsylvania

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Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.

Matthew 16:13-18 NRSV

I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. 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. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press onward to the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

Philippians 3:10-14 NRSV

I'm so glad that the world didn't end yesterday as some predicted; if it had, we wouldn't be moving onward *today*. And we'd be missing the beginning of a new chapter in the history of our Second Family.

A reporter called me on Friday and asked how we as a congregation were getting ready for the rapture. I told him that we're not thinking about it much. Presbyterians figure that if we're helping others, visiting the sick, and

making disciples, any day that Jesus comes will be a good day. If we're doing God's work we've got nothing to fear from Christ coming back. Reminds me of the T-shirt I once saw, "Jesus is coming. Look busy!"

And to drive home my point that we're not worried about the rapture I told him that we are about to launch a three-year construction project at our church that will impact our community for decades. Instead of blowing our resources on one last party before the end, we're investing in the future.

Over the past few months I've witnessed God working in people's lives in awesome ways. Maybe you've seen it, too. I ran into a widow the other day, she was out of breath. "I just spent 45 minutes at the bank trying to figure out how to cash in part of my IRA," she said. "I want to give it to Onward." You would think she would have been frustrated or flustered; she was smiling. Another couple – they've both been out of work for months now – shared with me what they were doing. "We didn't know how we could give until we got our tax refund. It's not much, but it's all we have right now." Wow. And just this week someone else told me. "You know, we think we can increase our commitment. Do you have another card?" Miracle of miracles: *I just happened to have one available...* As different as each of these people are, they all had one thing in common. They were smiling, laughing, joking, and excited about what they were doing as part of Onward.

What makes this day so special to me is that people of all ages

- some who've been through at least half a dozen capital campaigns,
- some who were part of building this great sanctuary,
- some who are new members and are part of building our great ministries...

all of them are investing in Onward. Thank you for your prayers. Thank you for your sacrifices. Thank you for your vision. Thank you for your hope. Turn to someone, look them in the eye, and say, "Thank you!" We all benefit from the Holy Spirit working through the people around us. None of us does God's work completely on our own. Every gift is precious in God's sight.

In many ways, Onward has been our first major project together as a congregation and pastor. It has been a joy. It began with a vision statement that you folks prepared about four years ago. Part of my call was to help turn that vision into reality. And we're doing it, together. The renewal of our facilities, especially for children and youth is a key piece in the fulfillment of that vision. So is making it easier for volunteers to get involved. And reaching out to new members. Onward will help us with all of these priorities.

I have no idea what pledges we will receive today. I do know this

- If we have all prayed about our decisions...
- And if we have all asked, "Lord, what would you do through me?" – and waited for an answer...
- And if we have found that sweet spot of giving where we can say with confidence, "this is what I want to do, God, with your help; this is what you can do through me..."

If we have done all this, then God will provide the resources we need to do everything that God is calling us to do. Some have asked how we will measure the "success" of this campaign. If every person gives their all, is there anything more that we – or God -- can ask for? Isn't that the real goal of discipleship -- that we would all discover the joy investing in a purpose larger than ourselves?

Each commitment is like a "yes," a vote of confidence – in this family, in this enterprise, in what God is doing here. It's you and me and others saying, "Yeah, I see it, too, and I want to be part of it. Count me in."

We're saying, "yes," today while much of the world is running scared or saying, no. I hear the doomsayers. You probably do, too. "The economy is the tank: this is not a good time to be asking people for money." "Faith is declining: young people don't care about God the way they used to." "Congregations are closing: people's needs are being met elsewhere." The world is saying, "No, this isn't worth it."

We have made the choice to say, "Yes." Yes, God, we will build your kingdom. Yes, God, we will share our faith. Yes, God, we will make room for people of every age and condition. Yes, God, we will follow you to the grave and beyond.

Today, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we are writing a little bit of *history*. Much more important: we're *shaping the future*. The impact on our congregation – and even our community is going to be significant and lasting, but it will be felt one person at a time. What we're doing through Onward will make a difference to the War College family with a troubled teenager. What we're doing will matter to the widow planning her husband's memorial reception. It will matter to the young single professional who just moved to the area and is looking for a church family like the one he grew up in back home.

We won't see the full impact right way. It's going to take time. The work will proceed in phases as the dollars come in and as the projects are ready to go. In September we'll already have much to celebrate. But the ultimate impact will be over the next decade or two as a new generation of our Second Family comes into leadership.

In some ways what we are doing today takes just as much courage as what we did as a congregation forty years ago.

Then, moving onward meant leaving a familiar building that many loved for the outskirts of town. Now, we're in a quiet neighborhood. Surrounded by other congregations, many who followed our lead. Society is different, too. Forty years ago, you could take Christianity for granted. Now, children, youth, young families have more options both spiritually and socially.

Then, we had to build this building on rocky soil. Hundreds of pounds of dynamite were used to make room for this sanctuary. Now, the spiritual soil is just as hard. We have to work twice as hard to reach half as many people. It's harder to break through the fog of competing religions, the fog of competing media, the fog of materialism and secularism. Yes, the challenge is great.

But our God is greater still. And we have the promise that not even the gates of hell will be able to stop God's love from flowing everywhere. We are extremely proud of our past and rightly excited about the present. But God calls us onward into tomorrow. Today, we follow. Amen.

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