

PRACTICING JOY ON THE JOURNEY

PASTOR CHARLIE BERTHOUD

PHILIPPIANS 3:12-14

Sunday, May 3, 2026

“Practicing Joy on the Journey” | Philippians 3:12-14 | Pastor Charlie Berthoud

Quiz time! On the Wisconsin state logo, there is one word at the top of the image, floating over the badger. What is that word?

It's not cheese and it's not Bucky. It's **FORWARD**, and that is our state's one word motto, adopted in 1851, shortly after statehood, with the intention of celebrating a focus on innovation, progress, and moving ahead.

That idea of moving forward is the theme of our Bible reading today.

We have been reading and reflecting Philippians in this season of Easter. The little letter of Paul, which he wrote from prison, emphasizes joy. Paul stretches our understanding of joy, to be an optimistic outlook on the future, even if current circumstances are challenging.

So in this Easter season we're reflecting on practicing joy, cultivating joy, being people who can say with confidence: “This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.” (Psalm 118:24)

Today's reading from chapter 3 shows Paul's determination to keep moving forward, despite the challenges.

In chapter 2, Paul wrote about humility and encouraged the church at Philippi to “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.” (2:5). He thinks Christians should think like Jesus and act like Jesus, and he recognizes that he's not there yet, but he's trying to move in the right direction. Listen for God's word.

“¹² Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal, but I press on to lay hold of that for which Christ has laid hold of me. ¹³ Brothers and sisters, I do not consider that I have laid hold of it, but one thing I have laid hold of: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal, toward the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.”

In my seminary years, I spent several summers leading trips with teenagers from a YMCA camp in Connecticut. One summer involved three bike trips on Cape Cod in Massachusetts.

With about 12 teens and co-leader, we got dropped off at Woods Hole and took the ferry boat with our bikes to Martha's Vineyard, and then another ferry boat to Nantucket, and then to Hyannis.

Each of those first few days, we biked 10-15 miles. From Hyannis we biked 20 or so miles to Orleans, and the next day we went another 20 up to Truro.





The last day of the trip was the big one—from Truro to Woods Hole, 55 miles—where the van would meet us, assuming we made it.

I made that trip three times that summer, and on each trip, the kids were pretty nervous about that big day of 55 miles. I was nervous too, as I'd never ridden more than about 20 miles in a day before then.

But on all three trips, we made it. We built our confidence and our endurance over the early days of the trip, and on the day of the big ride we got up early, had a big breakfast, and stuck together on the bike paths of the Cape Cod rail trail. If we got a flat tire or other mechanical issues, we fixed them. If we got tired or anxious, we took a break and ate good more food. (On those trips, I discovered the nutritional delight of Oreos with peanut butter.)

We encouraged and supported each other on the journey.

That trip experience feels to me a little like the Christian journey. It's long and sometimes challenging, but when we keep moving forward, one day at a time, one pedal stroke at a time, one prayer at a time, the journey is possible.

When we stick together and support each other through the hard times, the journey is possible.

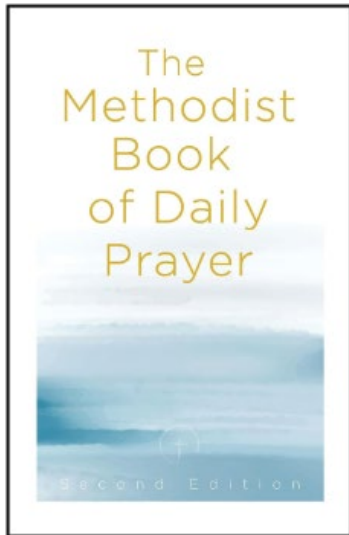
But the Christian journey is longer than a 10 day bike trip.

Being a faithful Christian doesn't happen instantaneously; it takes time and dedication over the long haul. In the same way, you don't learn a new language, or get in physical shape, or break a bad habit in just one day.

As the wise people in Alcoholics Anonymous say, "one day at a time."

The Christian journey is about taking on the mind of Christ, becoming more Christ like, learning how to seek and serve God's kingdom, God's reign every day.

When we consistently and faithfully open ourselves to God's transforming love, we are changed, and we do indeed become more Christ-like.



To help with that transformation, to continue forward on the journey, to help know and trust in that steadfast love of God, to help us stay on the right path we encourage repeatedly encourage regular habits of prayer and scripture reading, to intentionally connect with God, with the hope of growing stronger in in faith, and of changing ourselves for the better, and of changing the world for the better.

I try to make time for prayer and scripture every day. I use a variety of resources. In the last few months, I've been using *The Methodist Book of Daily Prayer*, which has a different theme for each week. Last week the theme is REPENTANCE, which, as I've said before, means turning around, changing one's mind, changing one's direction.

One of the daily reflections on repentance seems to fit with our them for today, that our faith is a journey, a long journey. The author writes: "True repentance and transformation is a process that takes time. Changing your life doesn't happen overnight. New direction is a choice one must make each morning and hold tight to each evening... There are no short cuts or ways to fast forward through this.... The full transformation that God is working in your life takes time. God is patient with us. Will we be patient with God?"

The Christian life is about the long journey of transformation. So we stick together, we encourage each other, we persevere, and we pray for God to be at work in us and in our world.

Listen again to Paul's words for us today, but from a different translation: *The Message*: "12-14 I'm not saying that I have this all together, that I have it made. But I am well on my way, reaching out for Christ, who has so wondrously reached out for me. Friends, don't get me wrong: By no means do I count myself an expert in all of this, but 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."

Remember, Paul wrote this from prison.

But he wrote with the knowledge that he wasn't alone, that others were with him on the journey. He wrote with trust in the steadfast love of God, the love that never lets us go.

This was the source of his joy, knowing that while things can be challenging on the way, he knew that eventually things would be ok.

When we find ourselves in literal prisons, or in the prisons of despair, in the dark and scary places of life, in the challenging situations where there seems to be no way out, I think Paul can be an inspiration for us: trusting in God, leaning on community, remembering that we are never truly alone.

As the saying goes, if you're going through hell, keep going.

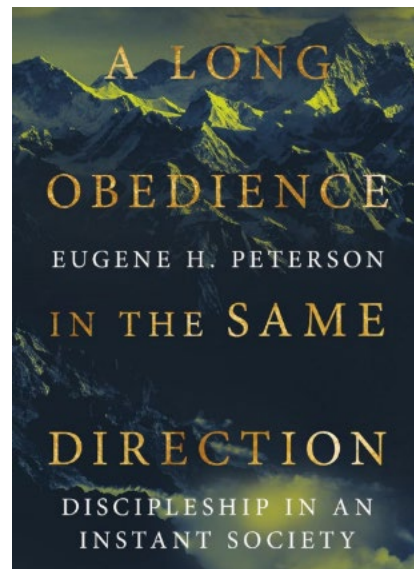
So, we encourage each other on the journey of faith, the journey of life, one day at a time.

Presbyterian pastor, Eugene Peterson, the one who wrote *The Message* paraphrase of Scripture written by a who life is an example of faithfulness on the journey.

One of his books captures this idea: *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society*. In that book, he writes: “Joy is not a requirement of Christian discipleship, it is a consequence. It is not what we have to acquire in order to experience life in Christ; it is what comes to us when we are walking in the way of faith and obedience.”

So, we’re striving for joy on the journey.

Last week, we welcomed five teenagers into membership through our Confirmation program. They seem to understand that faith is a journey, on which we have to persevere. They spoke in worship last Sunday, sharing how, like the rest of us, they are still working on what it means to be a Christian. And they each wrote a statement of faith, reflecting the idea of Christian faith as a journey. I want to share a couple of excerpts:



- I am still here to learn.... I want to be a part of [this community] and learn with and from everyone in it.
- I know everyone here will help me stay on the right path. I hope I can continue to work with them in order to show God's love in many different ways.



Paul knew that the Christian journey takes time and perseverance. But he also knew that God’s steadfast love would never let us go. He knew that God wouldn’t give up on us and that God would always be with us. This is why he wrote in chapter 1 of Philippians: “There has never been the slightest doubt in my mind that the God who started this great work in you would keep at it and bring it to a flourishing finish on the very day Christ Jesus appears.” (Phlp 1:6, The Message)

The good news of the gospel is that God has not and will not give up on us, and God has not and will not give up on our world. In Jesus Christ, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, God continues to call us forward, lead us forward, toward a “flourishing finish”, on the journey together. Amen.