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Philippians 3:12–14, ESV

¹² Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. ¹³ Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Isaiah 43:18–19, ESV

*¹⁸ “Remember not the former things,
nor consider the things of old.
¹⁹ Behold, I am doing a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?”*

Luke 9:62, ESV

⁶² Jesus said to him, “No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”

Proverbs 15:21, ESV

*²¹ Folly is a joy to him who lacks sense,
but a man of understanding walks straight ahead.*

1 Peter 4:7–11, ESV

⁷ The end of all things is at hand; therefore be self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of your prayers. ⁸ Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins. ⁹ Show hospitality to one another without grumbling. ¹⁰ As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace: ¹¹ whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything

God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

I thought I had left all this behind.

In my first job as a computer programmer after getting an undergraduate degree in Math, I worked in a subbasement with a low ceiling, with pipes running overhead and zero soundproofing. I heard the elevator rumble, feet clomping up and down the stairs, toilets flushing, the air conditioner whooshing, and people walking on the basement floor above me. There were, of course, no windows.

The big plus was that my boss virtually never came down there. I shared the space with a dozen other people; each of us had a cubicle that was about chest-high, provided no privacy, and regularly collapsed when we tried to move them. Eventually, we tore them down and piled them up in the corner. This was in San Francisco. Since it was too expensive for me to rent there, I lived on the south Peninsula, in a city called Pacifica. It was too expensive to park in San Francisco, so I drove my car to the subway, which was called BART, in Daily City, then I took BART into the city, then I took a cable car for a while, and then I walked the rest of the way. I could get to work in about an hour and a quarter – except for the day when the subway broke down under the bay; it was two hours before it started up again. My biggest memory of my job was how lonely it was. There was very

little time for us to talk. It was a high-pressured job: we had a lot of code to write each day. We were near each other all day, but we worked in isolation. However, I did enjoy building software. It could take months to put a program together, and when it finally ran correctly, there was a powerful sense of accomplishment.

Eventually, this first job out of college convinced me that I couldn't live the life of a programmer. I wanted to spend more time with people. So, I quit and went to graduate school. I got a Ph.D. and became a professor. I have to admit that I enjoyed teaching more than being a researcher, and in a big dollar research university like mine, focusing on teaching is strongly discouraged.

There was something else about this programming job in San Francisco, something that I didn't fully realize until I went to write this sermon, that was a great gift from God. One of the guys I worked with, we'll call him Tommy, had a medical condition, something I believe he was born with, that had caused him to develop legs that were misshapen. I don't remember the details. He was my age, and one day at the end of work, he told a bunch of us that he was going to have surgery done and that he would be out of work for a week. They were going to break both his legs and somehow straighten them out. He said that when he came back, he would have full length casts on his legs, and he would have to use a wheelchair. The subbasement was, of course, not wheelchair accessible. We all

promised to help him out. We ended up taking turns, with two of us at a time, carrying him up and down the stairs, with his two giant casts sticking out. Well, we were all young kids and we ended up having “Tommy races” where we would see which team of two could carry him down and then up the stairs the fastest.

Jumping ahead in time, after working at this job for a year and a half, I decided that I wanted to make a big change. I retired early and went to the seminary. I really enjoyed being back in school, and this time, instead of studying math, computing, and science, I studied liberal arts and theology. I was very happy when I was assigned to this church as its pastor. Then came the corona virus. And suddenly we had to be apart from each other. I found myself having no way to offer services – except by computer. The problem was that I had I thought that I had left all that technical stuff behind. I remembered how lonely it was doing computer work. Before we were back together in person, this was my workflow, which was spread out over the week: First, I wrote prayers and a sermon and chose Scripture passages. Then I recorded the pieces of the service with a camera and a microphone. Then I edited the video, and re-recorded pieces and did more editing, and then cleaned the sound. I generated a final video and uploaded it to a server. Then I updated the website to point to the new service. Then I uploaded the new version of the website. To accommodate people who

weren't comfortable coming to church in person, I have continued doing all this, except that I also get the joy of meeting with you in person. But the pandemic has kept me at my computer for many hours every week. It was depressing. Then, gradually, I came to realize something. It has to do with the Tommy races.

Let's look at our first Bible passage, from Philippians. It was written by Paul the evangelist to a church he had founded. Philippi was an affluent city in Macedonia, straddling modern day Greece and the Balkans. The purpose of the letter was to give the Christians in the city advice on how to deal with growing persecution, how to manage dissent among the members of the Church, and how to help that church mature spiritually. In our chapter - the third chapter - Paul warns us about people who put their faith solely in their worldly accomplishments. Our true citizenship isn't in the material world, it's in God's world. Paul teaches us about righteousness and the true path to salvation, and that is by never letting up, never thinking that we have reached the end of our spiritual journey. Our quote says: *But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.* We are to always strive to be more and more Christ-like.

During the early part of the Covid crisis, I missed the interpersonal part of being a pastor. I was in a one-way church. I spoke into a void. Notice that Paul

tells the Christians of Philippi that they have never finished the job of growing in their faith, and that there is always more hard work to do.

Our second quote is from Isaiah. The prophet Isaiah delivers a message of social justice, faith in God, rewards for those who follow God, and judgment for those who do not. The Book of Isaiah was very popular with early Christians. One reason is that Matthew repeatedly references Isaiah, and so gentile (non-Jewish) Gospel readers learned about Isaiah through the story of Jesus. In the part of Isaiah that we are looking at, Isaiah is telling us about Israel's special relationship with God. The people of Israel have nothing to fear, as God will never abandon them. As a bit of context, Isaiah is writing to the people of Israel during a bleak period in their history, when they are in captivity. They have lost everything, their land and freedom, so they are questioning their faith. Isaiah says:¹⁸ *“Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old. ¹⁹ Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?* He is inspiring his people to forget their current problems, to not dwell on what has happened, and instead to look to the future. The Israelites need a new vision. They must have faith and courage - and the willingness to do new things as they strive to honor God.

Let's move on to our third passage. It is from the Gospel of Luke, the companion of Paul who wrote the Book of Acts. It says: ⁶² *Jesus said to him, “No*

one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”

The context of the passage is that people are giving Jesus excuses for not immediately serving God. One tells Jesus that he would help, but he has to bury his father first. Jesus sarcastically says that the man should let the dead bury itself. Another person says he would follow Jesus, but first he has to go say goodbye to the people back home. Jesus says to that person that if you are busy looking backward while you're plowing, you're going to lay down crooked lines. If you want to serve God, if you want to follow in Jesus' path, don't be worrying about the past. Look to the future and do what needs to be done now. Plow in straight lines.

Our next Bible passage is a proverb with a similar message. Solomon is often credited with collecting these pithy sayings into the Book of Proverbs. Ours says that that *a man of understanding walks straight ahead*. A person who is knowledgeable, who is wise, is someone who looks ahead and isn't blind to what needs to be done. I began to realize that I needed to accept the fact that I have to be flexible if I want to serve God. I can't be rigid and decide that I am in control of the future. I have to let God create my future. I must listen and respond.

Here is our final quote, from the fourth chapter of 1st Peter: *⁷The end of all things is at hand; therefore be self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of your prayers. ⁸Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude*

of sins. ⁹ Show hospitality to one another without grumbling. ¹⁰ As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. Although this letter is attributed to Peter the great Apostle, it's believed it was written by a follower of his. The letter was written to people in what is now part of Turkey; it was called Asia Minor. It was this passage that I remembered when I had my revelation. I had to come to terms with once again being a lone technical guy, monkeying with computers late into the night, all by myself. Our quote begins by saying that the end of all things is at hand, and we should indeed always remember that life on Earth will end. I certainly don't believe that the pandemic is a sign of the End Times as some people do, but interestingly, it is a very dramatic event that does make us think of the signs of the end. 1st Peter also tells us to show love to others, to not grumble. I am to use whatever gift I have received from God to serve my fellow faithful. When I realized this, I was suddenly filled with the warmth of knowing that the pandemic had caused me to use my past to serve God, and to realize that God does indeed have a plan for me, that my past is a tool I can use for the future. God made it very obvious that this was true. Each week far more people view the videos I post than

can be accounted for by the size of our congregation. God used the pandemic and my past life – which had I wanted to leave behind me – to serve God’s people.

Remember the Tommy races? My partner and I did not win the competition. But because of Tommy’s surgery, and because he had to wear those huge casts for eight weeks, we all ended up bonding. We would carry him down to the subbasement in the morning and up out of the subbasement after work. And in the middle of the day, we would stop a couple of times and have our Tommy competition. Because of this, a group of lone programmers down in a subbasement became a tight group of friends who, after that, enjoyed work a lot more.

We are on a predetermined path. Each step, each stumbling block along the way, has a purpose for the future. For me, God hardly asked anything from me. A little bit of technical work, a small hassle each Sunday, making a video and putting it online. God could easily have asked far more of me. God will plant opportunities in our lives to serve. Often, we cannot look forward enough to understand the full implications of what God wants us to do. Often, we give something very little and something much bigger comes from it. Please remember this: God wants us to live in joy – and by the way, there is great joy in knowing that we have just made life better for someone, and if we introduce someone to God and that life that we make better is an eternal life – the joy we feel is truly amazing. And for me, I got a very

special joy out of writing this sermon because it made me think of the fun time I had competing in the Tommy races. And in case you are wondering, no, I don't remember any of us ever dropping Tommy and letting him roll down the stairs. Please pray with me.

God, we are never too old to serve. We are never done serving. Help us keep our eyes and our hearts open. Please send opportunities to help our fellow humans. Let us never forget that all people on Earth are made in your image. Let us feel the joy of serving and let us feel it over and over and over. Amen.