

October 12 2014

Isaiah 25:1,4,8-9; 26:3-4

Exodus 32:1-4, 7-8,11-14

Philippians 3:4b-16

Sermon *Target Practice*

I once heard the story of a young pastor who preached his first sermon in his brand new parish. After the sermon, he asked the members of his congregation to bow their heads for the pastoral prayer; he almost fell out of the pulpit from surprise because immediately every single person in the church from the oldest down to the youngest turned completely around and faced the blank wall of the nave in the church to pray. After the service the pastor had to find one of the elderly members of the church to explain what was going on because not one of the younger members knew why they did that. When asked, he replied, “Well, you know pastor, up until 50 years ago when we remodeled the church each wall had a stained glass window where the sun would shine during the service in honor of Jesus resurrection on sunrise on Easter Sunday we would always turn and face the window for our time of prayer. So it seemed in the 50 years since, nobody had ever questioned the fact of praying toward that blank eastern wall in the church.

I think it is important that from time to time we examine and reexamine the theological underpinnings of our faith so that we don't become locked into formal ways of doing things like this congregation. It might not make sense in the context of our present day situations. If I have learned anything during the course of my short life on this earth is that one of the keys to living a Christian life is to be open to rethinking my assumptions of what it means to be truly Christian in the world, and to being open to adjusting my behavior accordingly. As one of the hymn writers once noted, “New occasions sometimes teach to new beauty” in the process of all of this. Every Sunday morning, you know this as well as I do, during worship, each of us have an opportunity to do some reexamining of our own Christian faith often times during the time of silent prayer or during the time of confession in the service we all have

an opportunity to confess our shortcomings and to reflect upon the state of our spiritual lives. And to borrow an expression from archery we all the opportunity see our aims to live a good life the week whether we have missed or whether we have hit the target that we are aiming for.

I did hear of one person who never did miss the target, he was something like I was this morning. He got a bull eye every single time in fact. There was a man who was driving along small winding road in New England and he came upon the sight of a barn with five bull eyes painted on the side of it. And right in the middle of one of those was an arrow perfectly placed in the center of the bull eye. The man had to drive past the barn a number of times during the course of the week and finally his curiosity got the best of him so he drove off the road; he got out of the car and went into the house near the barn to meet whoever it was that was such a great marksman with the bow and arrow. Well the farmer who lived near the barn was surprised that anyone would take an interest in the marksmanship and he invited the man outside for an exhibition of his shooting skill with his bow and with the arrow. He carefully loaded the bow and quickly shot the arrow into the sides of the barn and then he went inside the barn and came out with a paint brush and a can of paint and he carefully and meticulous painted a target around the arrow making sure the arrow was right in the middle of the bull eye. It was plain to see, you know.

That's the way you would never miss the mark. That is the way to always hit the target. Do whatever you wanted to do and then decide whether what you did was absolutely the right thing. Act in any way that you want to act and agree your behavior is acceptable. Agree with yourself do what feels good to yourself and do what prosper you and it will hit that darn target every single time.

The apostle Paul in our passage from Philippians chapter three, it makes it clear spiritually speaking, he is just that kind of giant in his life of faith. He also painted himself right in the middle of a beautiful bull eye in the way he described his former life If anyone could claims he is someone who hits the target every time it would have been Saint Paul. "If any other man thinks had reasons in confidence in the flesh", he wrote, "I got more than they do"; but then something happened then St

Paul met Jesus on the Damascus road and turned his life over to Jesus. "For Jesus' sake I have suffered the loss of everything and counted it as refuge" he said, "In order that I might gain Christ and be found in him. And not have a righteousness of my own based on the law but that which is true in faith in, the righteousness of God depends on faith And after his experience on the Damascus Road, Paul no longer painted his own bull eye around his life behavior but being like Jesus in the way he walked the roads of life instead. Now instead of claiming to have reached perfection under the Jewish law, Paul confesses not that I have already obtained that I am already perfect but I press on to make it my own because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Paul knows he will never reach perfection through faith in Jesus for there was only one who lived a perfect life on this earth and that was God's Son. There was only one that walked on water that was God's Son. There was only one healed the sick and who raised the dead and that was God's Son. There was only one that went about doing good all of his life and who loved his enemies all of his life and he modeled God compassion every place that he went and that was God's Son. Which is to say that you and I always, always will somehow missed the mark. We will not always hit that bull eye in life spiritually speaking; and we have to learn with that frustration in ourselves and in those around us. When we fall, God forgives us and God says get up, keep going. We would like perfection but we will have to live with the fact that we are like the bridges of San Francisco. Remember this story the highway engineers thought designed a double decker bridge in 1970 on route I80 on the Oakland approach on the Bay Bridge. We learned that even perfect bridges are not perfect when 80 people came home from work and loss their lives as that bridge collapsed. While we seek perfection the scriptures remind us that there was only one perfect human being and we are encouraged to follow him. You know theological speaking imperfection comes with the territory in our fallen world and if this imperfection which we call sin is the act of somehow missing the target of life. We can sort of look at life as being sort of target practice knowing full well we will never consistently hit life's bull eye That is where God forgiveness comes in and we place our lives in God's hands we acknowledge that there is sin; we acknowledge

that there is imperfection in ourselves and in those all around us. We also realize that there is grace, there is forgiveness and there is the ability to be pardoned and the one who died to forgive each of our imperfections. You know, sometimes in life we mark head-on and sometimes we miss the mark completely. Sometimes I don't even hit the target all in what I am trying to do; but St Paul nevertheless give us a great deal of hope for this great archery competition that we call life but one thing I do, he said forgetting the life behind and going forward to what lies ahead; I press on the goal ahead and prize of the upward call of God in Jesus Christ.

I hope you are still pressing on to that upward call; that you haven't given up; you haven't stopped; you are moving forward. And together we say Amen