

5 Lent Year C April 6 2025

Restrain is strength

Philippians 3:4b-14

There are moments in life when I have found myself having different thoughts and expectations. **What seemed so important then is not much of a concern now.** My priorities have changed. **When this happens, I believe this is an indication that I am becoming mature.**

I have noticed that as I have gotten older my priorities have changed. **After I graduated from college I wanted to own a car.** My parents were gracious in giving me my first car as a graduation gift. **Four years later I became a restaurant manager.** One of the benefits of being a restaurant manager is that I was given a benefit called a car bonus. **I used that benefit to purchase a brand-new truck.** I think the corporate leadership was smart in providing that benefit for their top performing employees. **It is an effective way to retain top talent because once a person has a car payment, it is hard to leave and get another job.** And yes, it worked well for the corporation. **By having top level management who worked for them helped them accomplish their goals of being a profitable company.** They retained good management personnel because they found themselves committed to a 4-year car payment plan. **Because like most people how my transportation looked like was important to me, and I wanted my vehicle to look good.** Later when I started to raise children, my needs changed. **I was no longer concerned about how my vehicle looked like, but was my transportation reliable?** I am no longer concerned if my vehicle is older or has high milage, but what I am driving comfortable and a mechanically sound. **I have found that being content is a personal sign of being mature and this way of being is rewarding in my life.**

Another part of my life that I have made peace with is making goals. **Goals for me were not a measure of progress but a sign of failure.** I never seem to gain the ability to know how to set realistic goals. I read this on a poster during my senior year in high school. **"It isn't that you set your goals to high, and you missed, it is that you set your goals to low, and you hit."**

I find myself setting personal goals and expectations that seem too high for me. **There are also points in my life that I set goals too low.** When I accomplish those low target objectives or realize that I had set unrealistic goals, **it leaves me unsatisfied.** **Either my expectations were unrealistic or there wasn't enough of a challenge to tell myself that I did something worth the effort.** I recently noticed that I have given myself permission to wonder off the dedicated path toward my future for good reason. **When new opportunities present themselves, I make myself available to take advantage of those moments.** I am becoming a mature leader both in my personal life and in ministry.

Today's reading from Philippians gives me an insight of a mature leader who knows how to set goals that creates a life that is fulfilling.

Paul was doing his best to encourage a small church that he had established during his itinerate missionary days. He was now facing his own death, and yet he still was strong and confident about his mission and purpose. He was drawing on a power that was beyond his own strength. He had insight into the power of Jesus's resurrection that had changed his life. Paul understood at his core that what appeared as defeat was leading to a larger victory of love and hope.

Paul wrote to the Philippians wanting them to have courage to face the challenges ahead with hope and confidence that what they were doing for themselves, and others would change the world by making God's salvation more real. The members of this church were becoming a new people who offered a more excellent way to live. They understood leadership differently from the society around them. They would govern themselves in the spirit of servanthood rather than expect others to serve them. They would redefine what strength looks like, demonstrating that humility is a sign of maturity and not weakness.

Paul penned these words for the Philippians to embrace in their minds: "... Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, DID NOT REGARD EQUALITY WITH GOD AS SOMETHING TO BE EXPLOITED, BUT EMPTIED HIMSELF, TAKING THE FORM OF A SLAVE, BEING BORN OF HUMAN LIKENESS." – Philippians 2:5-7. Jesus didn't consider who he was as something to give him power **over others** but chose to offer his life as an example of a power of a living faith that defines what it means to be truly free from the fear of betrayal. Jesus sought to serve others and free them from fear of death.

Paul followed this line of thinking when he spoke of his own personal credentials. He didn't consider his knowledge, ability to lead, and passion as something to celebrate but to be used to help others gain their own grounding and personal strength in their faith. Paul believed that it wasn't who he was that gave him value but to whom he belonged. Knowing the heart and life of Jesus was more valuable to Paul than all the personal accolades he received from others. He didn't see his status as one of "the best of the best" of his religious tradition to be used for his own benefit but rather to help others. Paul was willing to exercise restraint so that others could be successful in their own right.

Dr. Morna Hooker, who is a professor of Theology and Fellow at the University Cambridge College in the United Kingdom, provides us this perspective to understand what Paul was communicating in his letter to the church in Philippi.

**(quote)**

A remarkable feature of this passage is the way it echoes what is said about Christ in Philippians 2:5-11. There, we were told how Christ abandoned his privileges and did not consider it appropriate to exploit what he had; because of his self-emptying and death, he has been proclaimed as Lord. Here, Paul tells us about the privileges he has abandoned, saying that he did not consider them to have any value in comparison with what he has been given in Christ. For Paul, "knowing Christ Jesus" his Lord means becoming like him; to have faith IN him (to trust him) means sharing his faith in God, and being prepared to trust God, even to the point of death.

**(end of quote)**

Paul was a zealot for his religious cause. He was willing to do what was needed to protect his Jewish tradition. He took pride in rooting out every message that would be considered contrary to his own training and formation. Paul was clearly on a mission to stamp out Jesus' message. Paul viewed Jesus' message as a personal violation of everything that he knew as proper doctrine. Paul was, in his own right, a successful leader. Then he had a transformative encounter with the risen Christ. That moment changed Paul's perspective and drive. Paul was no longer trying to accomplish his own personal goals of being the best of the best. But over time he used his talents and knowledge to help others to succeed in sharing Jesus' message for a world that needed hope and a reason to believe in the promise of love which supersedes all society and personal limits.

When Paul embraced in his faith in Christ and accepted Christ faith in him, he became a mature leader. Paul, like Jesus, understood of the strength of restraint. Jesus showed the world of true power of mercy does overrules the power of forced compliance.

What kind of leaders does society value today? Leaders are evaluated by their ability to accomplish goals. This is important. However, I believe it is important that the church be critical about HOW leaders accomplish their goals. I have encountered many bishops and other effective church leaders throughout my ministry. All the bishops and leaders I know have experienced success in their ministries. However, I pay closer attention about how they went about living out their ministry as leaders of the church. For me, and I think it follows the gospel message, it isn't the PERSON or leader who should be the primary focus, but the people themselves. What is more important? The leader's personal success OR that the people around leaders become better? I believe an effective leader is known by how others improve rather than having their own status elevated.

We have plenty of examples of leadership that implies that when an individual is doing well there is hope that their success will be translated to others. The thinking is that if the leader is doing well, by close association, others will experience the same satisfaction. I am suspicious of that line of thinking. I have seen individuals succeed in accomplishing their own personal goals and place little to no value in seeing others achieve their own success.

When leaders think only about themselves others suffer. I think that this is immature leadership.

This kind of guidance of personal self-focus does not align with Jesus nor with Paul's personal view of success in the church.

Immature leaders are concerned about themselves, mature leaders are concerned about serving others.

Immature leaders use the belief of personal strength as a device to accomplish their goals.

Mature leaders understand the value of exercising restraint to accomplish bigger goals that include others.

What kind of leader will we see this coming Easter?

Will we see the leader who uses the power of the state and all its glory and fear of death to keep order?

Or will we see Jesus who put aside his own status as Almighty God so that others can live?

Soon we will find out.