

Look Where You Want to Go

[Hebrews 12: 1-13](#)

Rev. Curtis Bablitz

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A few years ago, there was a television show called “Canada’s Worst Driver.” The show gathered the worst of the worst from across the country – from speed-obsessed teenagers from Vancouver to little old ladies from Halifax and everyone in between, all nominated by their friends and families, and they all came to this facility somewhere in Ontario where they were trained in proper driving techniques, parallel parking, reversing, using your turn signals, everything. At the end of every episode, the most improved driver was sent home, until there was only one driver left – Canada’s Worst Driver. I don’t know if they won a prize – maybe a bus pass. It was a pretty entertaining show, but it was also very educational – watching these terrible drivers slowly improve made you a better driver as well. One of the lessons that I still remember is they taught that when you are driving, if you see an obstacle that you want to avoid – a fire hydrant, a pedestrian, a coffee shop – if you look at that obstacle, and focus on that obstacle, and tell yourself, ‘don’t hit that coffee shop! Avoid the coffee shop!’, you actually make a collision with that coffee shop more likely. Your brain subconsciously steers you towards whatever you are looking at, whatever you are focusing on. So they told these drivers over and over again – DON’T LOOK AT THE COFFEE SHOP. Look at the big empty space NEXT to the Coffee Shop. It’s called a ‘road’. Don’t look at the obstacles. Look where you want to go. Look where

you want to go. It's an incredibly simple idea, but it's amazing how difficult that is to actually follow. Don't look at the obstacles. Look where you want to go.

And I think that this is true, not just when you're driving. Today we are celebrating the 65th anniversary of Richmond Presbyterian Church – 65 years of worship and ministry in this city. Any time we celebrate an anniversary, we are looking back, looking at the history of this church. We are looking at all the people who served Jesus Christ faithfully in this place, helping to build the kingdom of God, helping to proclaim the gospel and share the love we've been given with the world. And I think sometimes when we look back, and we see all the wonderful things that were accomplished, all the hard won successes, all the triumphs and persistence and faithful endeavours, some part of us wants to go back to those moments, those times in our history when being the church seemed easier somehow – you didn't have to hustle quite so much to get things done. We look back at times when the church was a respected pillar of society – when people paid attention to our opinions on current events, when everyone was here on Sunday mornings because there was literally nowhere else to be – we were the only game in town because Soccer hadn't been invented yet. We look where we want to go, and so when we look back, it's natural to want to go back, to recapture the things that made the church great and successful, to wonder why things are so different now, and how we can get back to what once was.

This kind of nostalgia for the past is understandable, and it's a normal part of any anniversary celebration, but I don't think that's the reason why we celebrate the past. I don't think that's why we look back. In our scripture reading this morning, the author of the letter to the Hebrews has just finished looking back. All the way through Hebrews chapter 11, we see the long history of God's faithful people laid out from creation to the present day, all the greatest heroes of the faith. We see all the wonderful things that were accomplished, all the hard won successes, all the triumphs and persistence and faithful endeavours. It is an incredible list of deeply faithful, courageous people who persevered through every kind of challenge and persecution, and kept their faith strong. But the point of this list of heroes of the faith, the point of looking back at the history of God's people, is not because that's where we want to go. The author of Hebrews isn't telling the church that they should go back, they should become more like these heroes of their past. Instead, we should look back at these heroes of the faith to see where they were looking, to see where they wanted to go. All of these heroes mentioned in Hebrews chapter 11, all of these people who accomplished amazing things for God, they were all looking forward. They were looking towards a future that they only dimly understood, a future where the promises of God had been fulfilled, where the kingdom of God was real and concrete here in this world. All of these people are witnesses, a great cloud of witnesses, and witnesses never point towards themselves. Witnesses always point somewhere else, they look somewhere else, they serve to draw attention

away from themselves and towards the thing they are witnessing to, towards the one they are witnessing for. And all of these heroes of the faith, all of the men and women who served God so faithfully in the centuries past, Hebrews tells us that they are all witnesses for Jesus Christ. This great cloud of witnesses is pointing towards Jesus Christ, towards the one who will fulfill God's plans for humanity, the one who will bring the kingdom of heaven to earth, once and for all. The reason we look back at this cloud of witnesses is so that we can see who they are looking at, so we can follow their line of vision and see what they see, so that we can look where they were looking, look where they wanted to go. The cloud of witnesses that went before us from the moment of creation right up to the present, they were looking to Jesus Christ, because that's where they wanted to go. That's who they wanted to be with. That's the one they were witnessing to. The heroes of the faith that Hebrews tells us about, they looked where they wanted to go. They looked towards Jesus Christ, and through their witness, they invite the church to do the same. Look where you want to go. Look towards Jesus Christ.

That's the same reason we are looking back today. We don't look back because there is some golden time in the past when everything was perfect, because that just isn't true. In preparation for this anniversary weekend, I actually read a bunch of Tony Plomp's old sermons. Tony's family very generously gave me the entire collection of every sermon Tony ever preached, and the amazing thing about this collection of sermons is that, at least of the ones I read, there was never a single Sunday where Tony stood up

in front of this church and told this congregation, “Everything is great this week. We have no problems. I’ve got nothing to say, so just keep doing what you’re doing, and we’ll check in next Sunday.” That just did not happen. In each and every sermon, from Tony and Gordon, Frances and Victor, each and every week this church honestly wrestled with the challenges of their world, the perils and problems they were facing. There has never been a time when it was easy to follow Jesus, when it was easy to be the church. Every generation has faced some kind of struggle and challenge, and looking back helps us understand that – looking back helps us see that when we face challenges, this isn’t something new. The hardship and challenges we face as followers of Jesus are meant to train us and discipline us and sharpen our faith, to bring a harvest of righteousness and peace, so that our feeble arms and weak knees will find strength. And looking back and realizing that the church in the past has always faced challenges helps us realize how they faced those challenges, how they endured all the struggles and hardships they experienced. They endured because they were looking to Jesus Christ. They were looking to Jesus Christ, looking to how he struggled and suffered and endured the cross for our sake, and seeing how Jesus endured helped them endure, helped them overcome every challenge and trial that the world had to offer. The church looked where they wanted to go – they looked to Jesus Christ, and they witnessed to what following Christ made possible here in the world.

And that is the same task we have been given, the same call we have received from God. Today we look back at the history of this church, 65 years of ministry here in Richmond, and when we look back at the people who have gone before us, we can see all the struggles that they endured, all the pain, all the sorrow, and we can see that all throughout their history they witnessed to the love and grace of Jesus Christ, they pointed towards Jesus with every word, every gesture, every sermon, every bible study, every Sunday school lesson and camp retreat, every choir concert and community meal, all of it, all of it is pointing towards Jesus Christ, because that's where we want to go. That's who we want to be, That's who we want to be with. We look back to that great cloud of witnesses that has gone before us so that we can look forward to Jesus Christ, the pioneer and perfecter, the start and goal of our faith. Everything we do, we do for Jesus Christ. Everything this church has ever done, since the very first day this group gathered together for worship, has been for Jesus Christ. And we are called to fix our eyes, not on the obstacles, not on the troubles, but on Jesus Christ. We are called to look where we want to go – lift up our eyes from hardship and persecution, from our worries about the past and our fears about the future, and look where we want to go. We want to follow Jesus. We want to walk the same road he walked, to love as he loved, to keep our eyes fixed on him, the one who started our journey and the one who will bring us home. We want to go with Jesus, so we look where we want to go.

And when we do that – when we keep our eyes fixed on Jesus Christ, ignoring the obstacles that stand in our way and the pain and trouble that tries to slow us down, and we focus only and always on the one we want to follow, then we become witnesses. We join in that great cloud of witnesses that went before us and that will continue after we're gone, because when we look to Jesus, others who see us will look where we're looking, follow where we're pointing, and they will see Jesus because they see us. Just as others have helped us on our walk with Jesus Christ – pointing us in the right direction, modeling the love of Christ for us through their words and actions – we can do the same for others, for those who will follow after us. All the saints and sinners who have filled these pews and this pulpit for the last 65 years, they have all been part of a community that collectively points to Jesus Christ – not always perfectly, not always clearly, but through the grace of God and the power of the Spirit, Jesus Christ has led us each and every step of the way, and because of the faithfulness of those who went before us, we can be witnesses for our world today. We can use everything God has given us to point to Jesus Christ, to tell the world around us to look where you want to go, look towards Jesus Christ and find there the love and life that can carry you through every obstacle, every trial, until you reach the kingdom of God. Today and everyday, may we be witnesses to the love and grace of Jesus Christ. May we look where we want to go, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. In the name of Jesus Christ – Amen.