

“Stuck in a Rut?”
Philippians 3:7-16 (NRSV)
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Preparing for next weekend away, visiting our son, daughter-in-law, and grandson in El Cerrito, California (next door to Berkeley), I have had trouble gaining any traction this week. I feel as if I've been spinning my wheels, engine racing in neutral. And when we return, I'll have the same trouble. The “getting-out-of-town miseries” and re-entry have always been difficult for me. How about you?

By this time in my life, I know this is only a temporary condition, but it is nevertheless somewhat anxiety-producing, because it reminds me of other stretches in my life when, for various reasons, I couldn't get it in gear—when I have clung to old behavioral patterns that prevented forward movement.

I comfort myself with the knowledge that I am not alone. It is the way of the world to get stuck in patterns and habits and ways of doing

things that resist change, to get entrenched. Consider this curious legend.

- The standard U.S. railroad gauge, the distance between rails, is 4 feet 8.5 inches,
- and exceedingly odd measurement for standardization.
- According to legend, it can be traced back to the measurement that was brought to the U.S. by English expatriates, who built the American railways the way they were built in England.
- And, tracing that history, we find that the same standard was copied by the English railroad people to match the pre-railroad tramways.
- That standard, in turn, conforms to the jigs and tools for building wagons, which used the same wheel spacing.
- And that spacing conformed to the spacing of old wheel ruts on old long-distance roads, because wheels and axles would be broken if they did not ride smoothly in the well-established ruts.
- And the ruts were developed through the use of these long-distance roads,

constructed by Imperial Rome for their legions and war chariots, which were built to standard specifications.

- So, the U.S. standard railroad gauge of 4 feet 8.5 inches is based on the original specifications for the Imperial Roman chariot.

One observer has delineated 11 different ways we get stuck. Here they are.

1. The Tunnel Visionary: blinded to new possibilities.
2. The Deflated Doer: feeling unmotivated.
3. The Drifter: feeling directionless.
4. The Waffler: unable to decide.
5. The Reluctant Adapter: resisting change.
6. The Idle Achiever: stalled by the details.
7. The Fuzzy Forecaster: unable to see the vision clearly.
8. The Ad Libber: operating without a plan, flying by the seat of his pants.
9. The Perplexed Planner: caught in "what is" instead of "what could be."
- 10 The Lone Leader: not asking for help
- 11 The Avoider: painfully procrastinating.

Any of these hitting home for you? Or maybe a little too close to home?

Another author, quoted in Getting Things Done, whose name escapes me, wrote that there are only two things that impede getting things done: Either you know exactly what you want, but don't know how to get it . . . or you don't know what you want.

My two children are examples of each. My daughter knows exactly what she wants. Sara, who turns 46 next month, wants nothing so much as a first child, retirement from professional life, and village life as a homemaker. But, she is probably beyond getting pregnant and, living in expensive Boston, she and her husband need two incomes to make it.

Living on the west coast, my son Grey, at age 42 already has a son to support, needs a better job to support him, but still doesn't know what he wants to do when he grows up. Both my children are stuck ruts. How they'll get unstuck,

they must figure out for themselves.

There is more. People who study change and our reactions to it point out that it's not change we resist. It's loss. We all push back against loss and grief. Of course we do! This is why, as we age, it becomes more and more tempting to get entrenched in ways of doing things, and become resistant to change. The older we get, the more losses we accumulate in our lives. The more losses, the harder it becomes to risk.

So, can you feel for Lot's wife as she looks back on Sodom, the city where she has lived? She evidently had a nice house—nice enough to entertain angels. Her husband Lot was a wealthy man, and she would have enjoyed the honors and privileges and social standing that came from being Mrs. Lot. And, as they left town in a hurry—you'll forgive me the pun—it was a "lot" to take in, and a "lot" she was being asked to let go. Never look back! Easier said than done.

So, get in touch with your fears, your losses, your regrets about what might have been, but now can never be. **This is step one in being**

able to get out of your rut. If you can name what you're really afraid of losing, then you are far down the road already.

If we can name our losses, we are better equipped to help one another grieve. And, who better to help in grief than a church? It's one of the things we're supposed to be able to do!

Step two: focus on the future. Remember what the Apostle Paul said. "Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus."

Focus on the future. Envision the future. Draw a detailed picture of what you see. Believe that what lies ahead is better than where we are now.

The prophet Joel wrote that old men shall dream dreams and young men shall see visions (Joel 2:28). There is a distinct difference between visioning and dreaming. Perhaps one of our problems is that most of us are old. We dream, remembering the good old days, the golden age of the church in the mid-1950s, of this church when the membership peaked at 575, with a Sunday School enrollment of 350. In our heart of hearts what we believe is that our best days are behind us. In many ways this church looks like the 1950s. That's less a criticism than an observation. In 1962 about 50 members of Salem moved out to help establish the Ellisville church. Many members are sure that is what started our decline.

Here's an exercise for all of us.

- Whatever age you are now, what would you like to have accomplished by the end of your next decade? What might God be calling you to have accomplished by that time?
- Write it down. We're much more likely to accomplish what we write down.

- Share it with a friend or a spouse or your children. We are much more likely to accomplish what we share with others.
- When you've done that, what about the next decade and the decade after that?
- You're 70 now; what will you have accomplished by the time you're 80?
- There is no decade in our lives in which we cannot or should not accomplish something. What is big enough, bold enough to be a God-sized vision?

Having a vision, focusing on the future, believe that what lies ahead is better than where we are right now: this is a necessary step to getting unstuck from our ruts.

I am saying that each of us needs to do this personally and we need to do it as a church. What time is it in your life? In mine? I am the first to admit that I am more prone to look backward than forward, to dream about what was. Some of those dreams are sweetly nostalgic; some are filled with regret for what I did or did not do; some are bitter-sweet. I can do nothing to bring back those I have lost,

nothing I can do now to repair old mistakes. Dreams are old men's work.

What I need to do more of now is to envision my future. That's a young man's work! Where would I like to be five years from now? **ALIVE** would be good, for openers! Healthy, active—definitely. What is the next action, the next step to make this happen?

And, as a congregation, are we more prone to dream about our past or to cast a vision for the future? Are we more focused on preserving or recreating the past or creating a future where we can meet the God who comes to us from the future?

I can tell you this right now. All we have to do is to continue doing what we now do, and this church will be dead in ten or fifteen years, because many of us will be. We should be visioning a ministry beyond ourselves. This requires an act of will, the armor of courage, and the stance of faith. We can do this if we truly believe that Salem's best days are ahead of us, not behind us.

Last, but not least, is to **take a step**. Some step. Almost any step. Martin Luther King said something like this. Moving into the future is like standing at the foot of a dark staircase. Just because we can't see the top of the stairs doesn't mean we can't take the first step. This is how we move through change, how we get unstuck. Step by step. One step at a time. Together.

Here's an idea on which the Ad Council would like your feedback. Several of us had a conversation in Ad Council and beyond about starting a regular Wednesday evening gathering, beginning with a light supper, followed by a brief devotional service, featuring alternative gospel music, a prayer, a scripture reading and a short message.

That conversation evolved into a different one. One that I like better. Here it is. One Sunday a month invite the community to join us for lunch after worship. We would break up our usual clusters and sit with our guests, engaging them in conversation. After lunch we'd return to the sanctuary for an informal service

featuring bluegrass gospel music and a message. The job of the congregation on that one Sunday a month would be to stay for the second service and sit with our guests. This service could be advertised free on radio station KDHX 88.1 FM, which plays bluegrass from noon to 2:00 PM each Sunday. The station might even provide a live feed for us. We'd also advertise the service on Facebook, on our website, on our electronic church sign, in print media, and (best of all) by word of mouth. Each of you would have a part to play! What do you think?

We might be able to get this up and running by the Sunday after Easter or shortly thereafter. What a great way to celebrate the resurrection during this 150th anniversary of the construction of Salem's sanctuary! What a great way to send me on my way and to welcome your new pastor!

With St. Paul, we could declare that we press on to make the future our own, because Christ Jesus has made us his own. "Beloved, we do not consider that we have yet made it our own;

but this one thing we do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, we press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus!"

