

22nd Sunday After Pentecost, October 28, 2007, Liturgical Year C

ST. BARTHOLOMEW'S CHURCH IN THE TOWN OF TONAWANDA, NY

The Rev. Fr. Arthur W. Ward, Jr. + Rector

Scripture: 2. Tim. 4:6-8, 16-18

"How to Fight the Good Fight of Faith"

THE LAST LETTER OF THE APOSTLE PAUL

One of the privileges I have as a priest is to be present with families when they say good-bye to their loved ones in death. Whether it's at the bedside, or in the church or at the graveside, it is my responsibility to offer prayers, as well as words of comfort and solace. Of course, the One who is the True Comforter is the Holy Spirit. And the Holy Spirit always comforts us with the Word of God. We have such a word in our lesson from the second letter of Paul to Timothy.

Paul is in prison for preaching the Gospel. He is awaiting most certain death at the hands of the Roman Emperor Nero. And Paul writes Timothy, a young man that he had mentored and raised up in the faith, to encourage, challenge and warn him. He hopes Timothy who was in Ephesus (2 Timothy 1:18), can see him before things get worse or before winter sets in (2 Timothy 4:9, 21). But if not, then this letter would serve as Paul's last will and testament and would prepare Timothy for the work of ministry in Paul's absence. Even though Paul is lonely he takes comfort in what he's been able to accomplish and in where he is headed.

And so Paul writes these poignant words, ***"For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing."*** (2 Timothy 4:6-8).

If there was an epitaph that I would like for my life it would be what Paul wrote: ***"I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith."*** That my friends should be our goal in life shouldn't it? Fighting the good fight, finishing the race, keeping the faith. Paul was a man who understood his purpose on earth and so when it came time to face his own death, he was at peace and not afraid.

"Like a Drink Offering"

Now when Paul says he is being *"poured out like a drink offering,"* he is referring to an Old Testament ritual that accompanied certain sacrifices (Num. 28:24). The Law mandated that when a worshiper brought an offering, part of it was consumed upon the altar and part was given to the priest for his own use. When the offering was consumed by fire, the worshiper would sometimes pour a "drink offering" of wine upon the burning sacrifice. All the wine was to be poured out. None was to be given to the priest. As the wine hit the burning coals, it evaporated and a sweet smell arose from the altar. Since wine was a symbol of joy in the Old Testament, the drink offering was a symbolic way of saying I gladly give all back to God. So, in other words, Paul was telling Timothy, "I'm holding nothing back. All that I have, my very life, I gladly give to my Lord. When you hear of my death, don't think that Nero has executed me against my will. I gladly lay my life down. I gladly offer it to Christ. My own blood will be like the wine of the drink offering."

"The Time of My Departure Is at Hand"

And then Paul says, *"the time of my departure is at hand."* It is important to note that the word "departure" in verse 6 was used in a variety of contexts. It was the same word used to refer to a ship leaving the harbor and setting sail for a distant port. It was used to refer to soldiers breaking camp after a military campaign and leaving the battlefield to head for home. It was also used for the setting free of a prisoner. And it

22nd Sunday After Pentecost, October 28, 2007, Liturgical Year C

was used to refer to the farmer unburdening his oxen or cattle at the end of the day, when he removed and laid aside the yoke that had been on the shoulders of his animals.

That's what Paul was looking forward to – the time when he would be able to lay down his burdens, to be set free from prison and the curse of sin, to go home after fighting the good fight, and like a ship that set sail for another harbor, to leave this life on earth for the joys of heaven. You see, Paul understood where he was headed. He knew that death was not the end, only the beginning. That soon he would finally get the chance to go home to be with the Lord. That's why Paul wasn't afraid. That's why he was at peace. He understood the reality of death, but he also understood that it was not an enemy to the person who knows the living God.

Then as Paul looks back on his life on earth, he gives us the three descriptive realities or those things that should be true of our Christian life. He says, "*I have fought the good fight.*"

I HAVE FOUGHT THE GOOD FIGHT

Life is a struggle. We are born struggling, aren't we? In birth whether it is the chick breaking free from its egg or a mom giving birth to her child, there is pain and there is great effort. It is how God made us. All of life consists of this struggle.

In this world of ours, everyone struggles and fights for something. Some fight for their reputation, others to get ahead, still others for a job, a "nest egg," or a cause. There's always something to fight for. But what should we be fighting for? We are to be fighting for the truth and love of the Gospel. That's where our efforts are to be invested. You see there is a war going on. It is a war between good and evil, truth and falsehood, righteousness and sin, the Spirit and the flesh. Whether we like it or not we are combatants in this war.

Paul understood this and he gave of himself unto death. The truth is we might as well give all we have for that which is eternal and worth something. And there is only one thing that is eternal and that's the Kingdom of God and His righteousness. That's the good fight, that's what life is all about.

Then Paul says, "*I have finished the race.*"

I HAVE FINISHED THE RACE

Literally, it means a "race course," or in other words, a race that has a beginning and an end. The race that Paul refers to is the span of our life here on earth. We are all given a certain number of days on this planet of ours. And there is an end to our days. For some it is short, for others it is longer. But the finish line is out there. Doesn't matter what we do, it will come sooner or later. **Hebrews 9:27** tells us that "*it is appointed for man to die once and then comes judgment.*" It is an appointment no one will miss. I don't know when, where or how my time will come, but it is in God's book in heaven.

And there is something else we need to keep in mind. Running the race for Christ is a marathon not a hundred yard dash. In fact, the crown that Paul refers to receiving is not a "*diadem*" or royal crown but "*stephanos*," the laurel wreath given to the winner of a Marathon race. Too often young converts get excited about the Lord and get involved in a ton of Christian activities and ministries and then burn out. Or we expect something from God right away and then if He doesn't meet expectations we throw in the towel. The Christian life is not like that – it is not a sprint on a straight away track. It is a long cross country trek filled with peaks and valleys. Consequently, we need to pace ourselves and we need to understand there is a finish line, the last day we take our breath.

I HAVE KEPT THE FAITH

And then Paul says, *“I have kept the faith.”* If there is one thing that is consistent in Scripture and that is faithfulness. God is faithful and he expects us to be faithful to Him, to our commitments and to our loved ones. Jesus said in **Lk, 18:8**, *“When the Son of Man returns will He find faith on the earth?”* It’s a good question. Jesus said these words to remind us that He is first and foremost concerned about our faithfulness.

The Apostle Paul reminds us in **1 Cor. 4:2**, *“that it is required of stewards that a man be found faithful.”* We are all stewards of what God has given us – our very breath, our talents, our skills, our families, etc. In a world in which people break their commitments God tells us to keep the faith. Paul did exactly that and we are to do likewise.

BUT HOW?

How do we fight the good fight? How do we finish the race? How do we keep the faith?

Three ways. Paul tells us.

1) Rely on God’s Strength (The Holy Spirit)

Paul writes, *“At my first defense no one came to my support, but all deserted me. May it not be counted against them! But the Lord stood by me and gave me strength...”* (**2 Tim. 4:16-17a**). Reliance on God’s strength is the key to victory. That means relying on the Holy Spirit. To rely on God’s strength is to recognize that all our efforts to do what we’re supposed to do will never be enough. We need to trust in the Lord. In other words, recognize that He is in charge and that He will provide. That’s what Providence means – to see ahead of time and make provision. God sees ahead and makes provision for us. He gives us the strength in our weakest moments. That’s why the Lord says in **Psalms 46:10** *“Cease striving and know that I am God.”* and in **Ps. 127:2** we are told that *“God gives to His children even in their sleep!”*

You have heard me say before, if you are faithful in the little things God will take care of the big things. And it means having the right mindset when you are running the race. In fact, the other day I was reading about a professor at a Christian college, who along with his son, went on a 1,000-mile backpacking trip from British Columbia to southern California. Together father and son hiked through the mountains of Washington, Oregon and California. For many days they were alone on the trail, often camping above the 10,000-foot level. They faced every sort of discouragement—lack of food and water, danger from wild animals, days of rain and mud, incredible physical exhaustion, the very real possibility of physical injury, not to speak of loneliness, blisters, mosquitoes, and the extremes of heat and cold.

Before leaving on the trip, the professor discovered that over 90% of those who set out to hike more than 500 miles never make it. Fifty percent never get started and 40% quit after they start. Only 10% ever finish a long-distance hike. After studying the 10% who succeed, this is what he found. While certainly those who trained and prepared well had a distinct advantage, something else was true. He discovered that those who succeeded understood that the biggest obstacle was mental. They knew that their real enemy lay within, not without.

Those who succeeded made two important decisions: First, they decided they would finish the trip no matter what happened, and second, they expected bad things to happen and decided they would not be surprised or dismayed. So when the rains turned the trail into a quagmire, they didn’t quit because they weren’t surprised. When black clouds of mosquitoes descended like some Old Testament plague, they didn’t quit because they weren’t surprised. When they faced days of loneliness and nights of hunger, they didn’t quit

because they weren't surprised. In essence, the successful hikers adopted a certain mindset. They knew that the key was simply putting one foot in front of the other. You take a step and hit the mud. You take another step and your legs begin to cramp. You take another step and see a bear. It doesn't matter. You aren't surprised because you know this is part of the journey. So you just keep putting one foot in front of the other and eventually your journey is finished.

This was Paul's approach. No matter what happened to him, he just kept moving forward by the grace and strength of Almighty God -one foot in front of the other, one step at a time, one day at a time. He wasn't deterred by opposition because he knew it was coming eventually. Life is not easy, and the Christian life is not easy, it's not supposed to be easy. Today is the day of struggle, it is a day of combat, it will take our all, but God's strength is there. That's why we are told in **Isaiah 40:31** that "*those that wait on the Lord shall renew their strength.*"

2) Keep focused on the Message (God's Word)

Second, Paul did something else. He stayed focused on the Message. He writes, "*The Lord strengthened me so that through me, the message of the Gospel might be proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it.*" (**2 Tim. 4:17b**) Isn't that what we are to be about? The message of the Gospel. That's why we're here this morning. That's what gives us hope and meaning and purpose and encouragement and conviction. It's the message of the Gospel, it's the Word of God. Some time ago, I saw the following words on a sign of a local Lutheran Church: *We don't change the message, the message changes us.* That's why we need to know the Message and keep focused on the Message.

3) Remember and look forward to what you will receive (Your Reward).

And finally, how does Paul deal with his present incarceration and imminent death? Not only does he rely on God's strength and stay focused on the Message, He looks beyond to his reward. What's true of this reward?

It will be a **guaranteed reward**. It is "*reserved*" in heaven for Paul. As **Titus 1:2** says, God has promised us eternal life before the ages began and He does not lie! It will be a **glorious reward**. It is the "*crown of righteousness.*" It will be a day of celebration and awe.

It will be a **personal reward**. Paul will receive his reward from the Lord himself. Note how specific he is about this. It is *the Lord, the righteous Judge*, who will reward him. In a short time Nero, the unrighteous earthly ruler, will have him beheaded. But in "that day" the Lord himself will reverse Nero's earthly judgment. The Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of the Universe will weigh in on Paul's case—and His judgment will be final. And it will be personal. Paul won't be awarded his crown by mail and he won't receive it from a committee. He will receive it directly from Jesus Christ.

It will be a **future reward**. Paul will receive his reward on "*that day,*" the day Jesus Christ returns from heaven. It will be a **shared reward**. It is not just for Paul but to "*all who have longed for His appearing,*" Paul can "rest in peace" because he knows what awaits him. And that's what awaits us if we will faithfully serve Jesus Christ in this life.

So be encouraged, my friends. The Lord sees our struggles. He knows how hard the fight is, He knows that we are sometimes tempted to quit, but He also knows that we can fight the good fight, that we can keep the faith and that we can finish strong. So keep on fighting, keep on running, and keep on believing. The best is yet to come! In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen!