

WHEN NOT TO PERSEVERE

Sermon, October 16, 2016

Texts: Acts 26:1-18; II Timothy 3:14 - 4:5

Paul wrote this second epistle to Timothy, his young protégé whom Paul had left in charge of the Ephesian church on his previous missionary journey. Paul had hoped to return to Ephesus, but was now in prison in Rome for what would be his final incarceration. Paul was writing from this prison, he is very soon to be executed, and he knows his end is near. It is in this context he goes on to write the verses just after the lectionary text this morning, *"The time has come for my departure. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith."* II Timothy has been described as Paul's swan song;¹ it's his final letter. Paul has persevered: He has indeed fought the good fight, and he has kept the faith, which throughout his thirteen epistles he had encouraged all his readers to do. Throughout the Pauline epistles, Paul calls Christians to **persevere**, to press on, to fight the good fight, to keep the faith.

And perseverance is a good thing, as long as one is persevering in the right direction. Perseverance is not a good thing, though, if one is persevering in the wrong direction. Fighting is a good thing, as long as it's the right fight (*and we are on the right side*). Fighting is not a good thing if we are fighting the wrong battles, and/or battles we should have no business fighting in the first place. Paul is not advocating that kind of perseverance. And he is certainly not calling us to keep fighting if we are engaged in the wrong battles. Paul is not encouraging his readers to keep believing if we are believing fallacious things. If you realize you have been heading in the wrong direction in life, don't be like the stereotypical male driver who insists he is not lost and just keeps driving, only getting himself more lost! It is never too late to change direction, set a new course, and persevere in *another* direction.

Paul himself certainly learned this lesson. In Acts 26, Paul explains before King Agrippa, *"I was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And that is just what I did in Jerusalem. On the authority of the chief priests I put many of the saints in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them ... in my obsession against them, I even went to foreign cities to persecute them."* Paul makes clear before this king that this Christian movement he is now leading, he formerly tried to destroy ... because he thought that was the right thing to do, even the religious thing to do. Many good people suffered because of Paul's well-meaning, but wrong-headed, perseverance in the wrong religious direction. He was persevering in what all his training and experience and conviction told him was the right thing to do ... until by grace, Jesus literally knocked him off his high horse on the road to Damascus and confronted Paul with the wrong-ness of his direction. We know the story; Paul retells it here before King Agrippa, and we can find the original account in Acts 9. As a dazed and blinded Paul is lying there on the ground, he hears Jesus say, *"Get up and stand on your feet."* Now, that's important, by the way! I love this part. It is not the ministry of Jesus to just stop us; it's not the ministry of Jesus to beat us down with guilt and leave us in the dust and dirt of our shame. Rather, it is the ministry of Jesus Christ to get us *back on our feet* and heading in the right direction, fighting the right fights and persevering for things that matter. Imagine Jesus saying, *"Yes, Paul, you are on the wrong road. Yes, you need to stop persevering in this direction. Yes, what you are doing may be well intentioned, but it is wrong, hurtful and destructive. Now, put that behind you. It is in the past. Don't let your past have a future. And get up! Stand on your feet! Stand tall! I have something far better for your life. I have something far better for you to do with your life!"*

And for the next three decades Paul did just that. He persevered in this divinely given direction and mission. For the next thirty-plus years, he traveled throughout the Roman Empire, preaching, teaching, debating, proclaiming this faith and establishing churches. That's three decades of living on the pioneering edge of the Christian movement. Thirty years filled with success and failure, thirty years filled with popularity and persecution, thirty years filled with joy and grief. And if I wanted to include a little political satire, I would add, *"Thirty years with no allegations whatsoever of inappropriately touching a woman ... until three weeks before the election."*

No, I'm not comparing Paul with either of the present presidential candidates, and I certainly won't misuse the pulpit to advocate one candidate over the other, but I do want to make this little aside ... for this is really the most divisive election in my lifetime, and all of us are just inundated with the vitriol and rancor coming at us daily through the news media. I do resonate with what Eric Metaxas wrote in Wednesday's Wall Street Journal. An excerpt:

Many say they won't vote because choosing the lesser of two evils is still choosing evil. But this is sophistry. Neither candidate is pure evil. They are human beings. We cannot escape the uncomfortable obligation to soberly choose between them. Not voting — or voting

¹ See <http://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/swan-song.html>

for a third candidate who cannot win — is a rationalization designed more than anything to assuage our consciences. Yet people here and abroad depend on voters to make this very difficult choice. Two heroes about whom I've written faced similar difficulties. William Wilberforce, who ended the slave trade in the British Empire, often worked with other parliamentarians he knew to be vile and immoral in their personal lives. Why? First, because as a sincere Christian he knew he must extend grace and forgiveness to others. Second, because he knew the main issue was not his moral purity, nor the moral impurity of his colleagues, but rather the injustices and horrors suffered by the African slaves whose cause he championed. He knew that before God his first obligation was to them, and he must do what he could to help them. The anti-Nazi martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer also did things most Christians of his day were disgusted by. He most infamously joined a plot to kill the head of his government. He was horrified by it, but he knew that to stay "morally pure" would allow the murder of millions to continue. Doing nothing or merely "praying" was not an option. He knew he must act.²

To be clear, what I'm about to say is the Word of Steve, and not the Word of God; Christians have honestly disagreed in good conscience on these issues. But I believe I have one vote, and I can prayerfully and responsibly use it in faith as best I know how to resist corruption and evil ... or, I can waste it, as Mr. Metaxas insinuates above. I might add our nation once allied with a brutal, thuggish and even murderous dictator ... Josef Stalin ... in order to resist and eventually stop what was at the time a greater evil in Nazi Germany; and thousands, if not millions, of innocents were saved because of that alliance. But enough ... that's about as political as I will get from the pulpit.

Let's get back to Paul. In thirty years Paul learned something of what it takes to keep going when the going gets tough. In thirty years Paul learned something of what it takes to hold on to faith when there seems to be every reason to give up in despair, while others around him frequently did just that. In thirty years he learned something of what it takes to cling to his convictions while others were doing their best to pry his convictions away from him. In thirty years he learned something of what it takes to be a faithful soldier to the end, when others around him all too quickly had abandoned the battle. And in thirty years, he learned something of what it takes to establish, strengthen and grow a church. It's in this context Paul writes to young Pastor Timothy and gives this admonition, "But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus."

"How from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures ..." One blessing of staying in one place for two decades is having the privilege of seeing young people I have held in my arms at their baptisms continue to embrace their faith into adulthood; on the back of our bulletin each week are listed names of three serving on staff positions in our church and two currently serving on the Board of Deacons. Many in this church have a "Timothy Testimony" ... that's the testimony of someone who doesn't remember a time when they weren't a Christian, a testimony of someone who doesn't remember NOT hearing (*I know that's a double negative, but it works*) the faithful teaching of the Scriptures at home and at church. Now, I know we all love to hear the dramatic testimonies of those who have returned to the faith after a time away, or those who came to faith later in life from lives of darkness, despair, dissolution or indifference to the faith. While it is good to celebrate with those who have a newly found faith, we would do well to remember such testimonies really should be the exception rather than the rule among those raised in the church. The children of the church, are to be raised like Timothy, who was faithfully taught the Scriptures from infancy and throughout his life continued in what he learned. This is how we in the church family want to raise our children, persevering in teaching them the Scriptures, helping them develop a faith that sticks.

One final thought: Paul writes in verse 16, "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." All Scripture is "God-breathed." That speaks of the divine inspiration of Scripture in the past, and it also speaks in the present tense of how God "breathes" through the words of Scripture right now to in-spire us and bring us to life as we read them! For Paul, the Christian faith is not a myth. The Christian faith makes the unique claim that God entered history by becoming human. For Paul, everything needs to be looked at in the light of that historical reality. In short, Paul's criteria for discerning truth, "Is this consistent with what we know about God as revealed in the Scriptures and in Jesus Christ?" In other words, is this what Jesus would say is true? Is this what Jesus would say is good? Is this what Jesus would say is right? Is this what Jesus would do, and if not, why in the world am I contemplating doing it?! This is how we discern right from wrong, truth from falsehood, light from darkness, good from bad. And we can only do that if we know the Scriptures. That was the secret of Paul's persevering power. That is what it took for him to keep going when the going was tough. That is what it took for him to hold to his faith when others around him were giving in to despair.

And that is what it took for him to cling to his faith and persevere ... to the very end.

² <http://www.wsj.com/articles/should-christians-vote-for-trump-1476294992>