

The Crown of Righteousness

2 Timothy 4:6-18

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The Apostle Paul had what can truly be described as an incredible life. Early on he was an enemy of Christ and of the church. His life was turned upside down, and as he would so boldly proclaim, turned right side up, when he had his Damascus road experience. He immediately began to preach Christ Jesus as Lord and Savior. Acts tells us when the church in Antioch was fasting and praying the Lord told them to set apart Barnabas and Saul (Paul) to the work which I have called them. (Acts 13:2) That work was to be missionaries, so Paul set out on the journeys which brought the gospel to Asia Minor, crossing over into Europe as churches were planted in Philippi and Thessalonica, Berea, Athens, Corinth, back to Ephesus, until he made it at least as far as Rome. It was to the church in Rome that he wrote the words that described his particular calling, “It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known...” (Romans 15:20) His ambition to share Christ was so heartfelt he told the church in Philippi, “For me to live is Christ and to die is gain.” (Philippians 1:21) Now, apparently, all that has come to an end. As he brings the second letter to Timothy to a close Paul writes, “I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time of my departure is near. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.” (II Timothy 4:7)

We’re not sure how Paul knows his time on earth is nearing its end. But as that time approaches he says I gave it my best shot. Even though there is much we could explore about the end of Paul’s life and ministry, I am going to set that aside this morning. Instead of focusing on the finish line, instead of trying to sit where Paul is sitting, what I want to explore is how we might live now, today, while we are alive, so that when we do come to that point when our lives near the end, are at the end, we might join Paul in saying, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.”

The importance of living our lives now in preparation for that day when we do reach the finish line so that we might say I have fought the good fight and kept the faith, that all hit home for me the first time I heard Billy Graham preach. The first time I heard Billy Graham preach was almost the last time I heard anyone preach. The first time I heard Billy Graham preach was almost the night I reached the end of my life. I was only 21 at the time. I was seated with 17,000 other college students in a huge coliseum. Our seats were in the upper deck of this huge coliseum. I was in the front row of the upper deck, leaning out to get a good view of Billy Graham. It was late at night, and even though it was Billy Graham speaking, I fell asleep. When Billy gave the altar call he startled me, and I almost fell right over the railing. Fortunately, a friend next to me grabbed the back of my sweatshirt and prevented me from making what would have been a dramatic...but disastrous...leap of faith.

How could you ever forget a night like that? What really made that night unforgettable is what I did hear Billy Graham say. He told a story about his nephew, Sandy Ford. Sandy was about the age of most of us at the conference. Billy told how Sandy had a heart for God. He was an ambassador for Christ at his college campus. He traveled in the summers sharing the gospel in Europe. He was a leader in his church youth group. Sandy Ford was committed to Christ, was living for Christ, and wanted to serve Christ in all he said and all he did. Sandy had a bright future as a young man with a heart for God.

Sandy also had a bad heart. The wiring on his heart was faulty. It would start racing and not stop. They decided to do surgery on Sandy to snip the faulty wires. He was put on an operating table. He was put under anesthesia. Something went wrong. Sandy never woke up. They could not get his heart started after the surgery. His young life was cut short. His physical heart was not trustworthy. What Billy Graham was saying to all of us, kids who were 21, 22, 23 years old, was that life can be fleeting. If you want to come to the end of your life and say, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith," then you had better be doing it right now. You never know when the end of the race will come, and it might come soon. Many of us left that night committed to living like Sandy, to being young men and women who had a heart for God. If the end came early for us, we wanted to be prepared. We wanted to be living for Christ, so that we could say, "I fought the good fight."

But it turned out for most of us, that we ended up living longer than 21, 22, or 23 years. Most of us have lived into our 50s. And as important as it was to say at 21, 22, 23...that we were fighting the good fight, it wasn't enough to say it then. God left us on this earth many more years, and there might well be many more. We haven't reached the end of the race. So the call is to keep running the race...to keep fighting the good fight...to keep the faith, so that when we do reach the end, whenever that may be, we can say, "We fought the good fight...we finished the race...we kept the faith."

What might it look like to fight and run and keep the faith?

Julie was working with an organization in Houston named Interfaith Ministries, and true to its name the organization was working with the many faith groups developing programs for seniors like Meals on Wheels, resettling refugees, facilitating interfaith dialogue, and she even organized a Day of Service for the whole city of Houston, a day when Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindu, Buddhist, and more came together to join in acts of service and compassion that brought a great deal of help and a great deal of hope to the whole city. Around that time Julie was introduced to a concept that originated within the Jewish faith, traced by some back to time when the second temple was destroyed. The concept is captured in the phrase Tikkun Olam, and it refers to acts of kindness performed to reconcile the world. To practice Tikkun Olam means we take seriously our call to be God's partners in reconciling a broken world.

Around that time a family of six children fled Afghanistan and was resettled in the United States as refugees. The two oldest were 19 and 21. The parents had been murdered in Afghanistan. The two oldest now took on the role of being parents, and they both worked full-time at minimum wage jobs so the four younger ones, in grades 6-9, could attend school. The 8th and 9th graders were artists, and it turns out their father and grandfather had both been famous artists in Afghanistan. These Muslim kids from Afghanistan had real talent.

The young Jewish boy heard of this situation and for his Mitzvah project he organized an art show, using the paintings of these young Afghan refugees. A Jewish youth and Muslim children were working together to bring healing and reconciliation. A young boy with all the privileges you might expect from a family that had resources, and a refugee family fleeing death and destruction and trying to find their way in a strange new world were joined in this project. The event was held at a Unitarian church. A co-worker of Julie's who is a Christian played music that day from Jewish and Muslim composers.

When Julie told me about Tikkun Olam she also shared a quote she came across from a Rabbi Tarfon. Referring to Tikkun Olam, to being partners with God in reconciling our world, Rabbi Tarfon is quoted as saying, "While you are not obligated to complete the task, neither are you free to desist from it." Paul ran the race all the way to the end of his life. Paul fought the good fight each and every day, until his days on earth came to an end. We are not called to complete the task of reconciling the world...that is in God's hands. But neither are we free to desist from it. This morning I hope God is speaking to each and every one of us, calling us to keep the faith now and to keep the faith forever, to run the race now and to run the race forever, to fight the good fight now and to fight the good fight forever.

What might it look like to fight and run and keep the faith? I told you last week I have fallen in love with the book by Charles Dickens about David Copperfield. When David was young he faced the male version of Cinderella, complete with a wicked step-father who treated him cruelly, shamefully, and violently. Once, when the wicked step-father was menacing him David reacted by biting the step-father's hand. Not long after the step-father shipped him off to a boarding school. To shame him the step-father sent along a pasteboard placard that David had to wear every day at school, a placard that labeled him and humiliated him. The placard read, "Take care of him. He bites." As if young David was a dog, and sure enough he was treated like that by many at his new school.

What might it look like to fight and run and keep the faith? To the ones of you who have felt the call to be teachers and educators, what a high calling you have pursued. David Copperfield is not the first kid who was labeled and he will not be the last. You who teach and work with children, you have the opportunity to remove the labels, to look beyond, to see within, to embrace and encourage, to shield and support, to prop up and to pour into the young lives of your students. In the work you do you are fighting the good fight, you are running the race, and our prayer for you who have accepted this high calling is that you would keep the faith, for it is not an easy calling and it does not come without considerable sacrifice.

What might it look like to fight and run and keep the faith? What gifts, what talents, what desires do you have to bring healing and wholeness to our world. I love hearing about one of the pioneers of faith of our church, a woman named Eloise Saunders, who had a love for birds. I have heard that she would take children and adults, individuals and groups, on outings to look at birds and to learn about them. How many people, young and old, had their eyes opened in ways that led them to see God's creative hand at work just through watching the birds of the air? When Art Ganz and all those who are involved with the Salt Pond Coalition lead kayak trips and have lectures that invite us to care about the precious resource we have right here in our own coastal ponds they are working to preserve and protect God's beautiful, and fragile creation.

When you artists take a brush in your hands and paint, needles and stitch, fabric and quilt and sew, when you take up bells and ring or lift your voices and sing, you are participating in bringing God's healing and wholeness to our world. Sally Scholtz loved to cook, and boy did she use that love and that gift to bless this church. Last October I asked her to help me with the meals for a little retreat we did here at Dunn's Corners. She cooked a delicious meal on Friday night, came early Saturday and set up breakfast, and by the next weekend she was in the hospital being diagnosed with the illness that would soon lead to her death. She ran the race right up to the end. She fought the good fight. She kept the faith.

No sooner had we arrived in Westerly than some of you grabbed me by the (clergy) collar and said, "You need to meet Vivian Johnson." Viv was not able to come to church by that time, as she was going through chemotherapy and needed to be careful about gathering with large groups of people. I visited Viv, fell in love with her, and marveled at her deep faith. We prayed that Viv would get better, but her race was drawing to a close. One morning after Chapel in the Pines Pam Ganz said, "What if we get a group together and bring a worship service to Viv in her home." A few weeks later a group of fifteen or so from Dunn's Corners showed up at the door of Viv's home. Before she would let us in, she took us to her lovely neighbor who lived below her home. It was her friend's birthday. Viv cared about her friend and so we sat with her friend, we sang happy birthday to her friend, and we prayed with her friend. Only after that were we allowed to make our visit with Viv.

Bill and Elmien Fritz brought their boys, Viv got to know the Fritz family at 8:00 service and a sweet friendship was formed. When we told Viv we were bringing a worship service she said, “Bring the Fritz boys. I want to hear them pray the ‘Our Father.’” She said bring Sheri Loeckler, I want to hear her sing. There we were, singing, and praying, sharing and caring. Right up to the end.

I wasn’t surprised that day when Viv had us start by visiting her friend. Whenever she had the strength, Viv would walk me around her whole complex, poking her head in to check on her neighbors, asking me to pray with her friends. Viv believed in sharing the good news with others. The first time I visited Viv she showed me a book on her shelf and said how much she gained from the book. It was called, “The Purpose Driven Life.” I have read that book. We led an all church study of that book. After I got to know Viv, and after she walked me around her apartment building and introduced me to her friends and told me how she prayed for everybody...and I mean everybody...I began to realize why maybe Viv loved the book about the purpose driven life.

The author of the book tells about his father, who was a minister for over fifty years. Even though he pastored mostly small churches in small towns, he was able to take teams of volunteers and in his lifetime his father built over 150 churches around the world. When the author’s dad was dying of cancer, the last week of his life he started to dream, and to dream out loud. In his dreams he recounted the many building projects he had been involved in. Finally, one night his dad’s dreams became so real he tried to climb out of his bed. The family said to him, “What are you trying to do?” The response is just perfect. He replied, “Got to save one more for Jesus! Got to save one more for Jesus! Got to save one more for Jesus!”¹ The finish line was there. He was at the end. But he wasn’t going to stop until he had taken his last breath. No wonder our dear friend Vivian Johnson loved the book about the purpose driven life. Right up until her final moment, she wanted to reach one more person with the love of Jesus Christ.

We will get to the finish line someday. But that day is not today. We are in the thick of the fight. We are in the middle of the race. We have been called by Jesus Christ to share his love in this world, to shine his light, to practice kindness and compassion, to work for justice and healing. By offering ourselves in sacrifice and service today, and every day that we are given, by offering ourselves in sacrifice and service, when that final day comes, we will be able to say, “We fought the good fight. We ran the race. We kept the faith.”

¹ Rick Warren, “The Purpose Driven Life”, p. 287.