Twenty Second Sunday after Pentecost
Grace Church of West Feliciana Parish,
Saint Francisville, LA
23 October 2016

2 Timothy 4

This has been a difficult year for us at Grace Church. We have lost so many of our members that it seems like we have gone form one funeral to the next. We lost people like Michael Hughes, Robert Fisher, Kent Mitchell, John Woodward, George Black, Elmo Hedgwood, Cecil Mae Dwyer, Jim Tengler, Terril Thompson, and Carolyn Bunch. I have been thinking about they way these beloved people lived their lives and how they finished the race, as I reflect about the life and work of the apostle Paul. It was an absolute honor to have met most of them and to count myself as a friend. Their absence has left a void in this congregation and in many of our lives, but their fight was not in vain and many of us still benefit today form the love they shared with us then. Today we remember them and we give thanks to God for them.

In second Timothy today we hear about Paul's last days. He is in jail, he is about to die, and he uses whatever life he has left to comfort his beloved disciple, Timothy. The letter uses the following words: "I am already being poured out as a libation, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith." Using metaphors from the Greek games and the gymnasium, the letter describes life as a fight, a race, and an act of endurance. These are metaphors that are familiar to us today. We say things like "I am fighting against time," "Life is a struggle", "Life is a contest", etc. For most, life becomes a struggle and we have to fight enemies that are sometimes visible and most of the time invisible. Not only do we fight to achieve our goals in the corporate, business, and personal worlds, but we often have to fight against the very real threats of anxiety, illness, economic downturns, and depression. Not to mention all the invisible enemies we fight daily: fears, hatred, doubts, insecurities, hopelessness, and helplessness. We in fact face many enemies, both visible and invisible. Life is a fight and a struggle.

Paul also compares life to a race. We often say that someone has entered or has left "the rat race". There is natural competition built into every area of life: we interview for jobs where someone is always the winner and many are the losers. We compete for spots at fancy schools and clubs. We compete for recognition and the respect of others. We compete for advancement in our jobs, where the employees are many and the chances for advancement are few. Using popular television shows, we could say that Life is an "Amazing Race", where everyone wants to be a "Survivor", everybody "Wants to be a Millionaire", and very few are "Smarter than a 5th Grader".

Lastly, Paul compares life to an act of endurance. Those who endure to the end survive and those who don't perish. A marathon runner can only hope to win by remaining faithful to his or her training (1 Corinthians 9:24-26). In order to fight the good fight and run the race successfully we must condition ourselves, we must train, we must constantly exercise our skills and talents. Practice makes perfect and those who endure daily in their training will survive to the end and will win the crown of glory. Running successfully the race of life requires sacrifice, commitment, single-minded determination, drive, and ambition.

Paul declares triumphantly, "I have fought the good fight, I have ran the race, I have kept the faith (I have endured)". Paul's life has been an amazing story. But, this was so, not because Paul was seeking the spot light, or because he was competing for personal glory, or even because he was propelling himself forward by his own strength. This Good Fight had a purpose in mind: to eradicate the forces of sin and hopelessness that enslave the human heart by the spread of the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. This was a mission Paul was dedicated to accomplish at any personal cost (2 Cor 11:23-27.) To do this Paul had to fight against intolerance, close-mindedness, ignorance, fear, institutionalized religion, corrupt governments and politicians, back-sliding friends, arrogant opponents, and powerful adversaries from within his own people.

Paul's amazing race took the Gospel of Freedom, the "Gospel of God's Grace" (Acts 20:24) to many parts of the world, and because of his single-minded determination, the Christian church grew to become a world-changing and civilization-enhancing church. This great race was ran against the backdrop of great conflict, but Paul endured to the end by training like a marathon runner (2 Timothy 3:10). Patiently, consistently, stubbornly doing what needed to be done to reach just one more person, to share Christ with just one more household, and to retreat the forces of hopelessness and evil just a few more feet.

This type of single-minded and sacrificial lifestyle is not the result of personal ambition, arrogant grandstanding, and self-righteous moralism. This radical "I am all in" lifestyle is the result of great love and a personal relationship with the Lord. Only in relationship with Christ can the Christian find the strength to be faithful in his mission. Only when convinced that there is no other way but Christ's way can the Christian give it all up, and commit totally to Christ. Paul did not place himself at the edge of society and made himself a pariah because he though that Jesus was a good guy. He knew with absolute conviction that Christ is the way to the Father. That he was the truth, the way, and the life! And this conviction came to Paul not necessarily in books, although he was well acquainted with the Scriptures, but out of a personal relationship with Christ. Out of an encounter with the risen Messiah that transformed his mind, his heart, and his entire life for the rest of his days.

My friends we too are on a race here. The goal of this race for us, as it was for Paul, is to know Christ and to make him known to the ends of the world. This is the primary goal. We must enter into relationship with Christ and we must let that relationship so transform our existence that we will have no option but to tell others about him. I know that many of us started this race on shaky ground. I know that many of us are still stumbling our way to the finish line. Some of us are barely able to continue in our spiritual journey and the temptation to give up and drop out is very strong. How can we believe that God is guiding us where he wants us to be, while we are surrounded by so much pain, so much need, so much sacrifice? Many of us are in great emotional and even physical pain and wonder, "What sense does it make to believe in a benevolent God when my life is such a mess?" "Why should I continue to lead the life of a disciple when I am constantly spat on, ridiculed, labeled, and rejected?" "Why should I continue to deprive myself and lead an ethical life, when it seems like others are having all the fun?" Many simply wonder, "How is faith in God going to help me anyway?"

If this is where you are, then congratulations! You are part of the human race and you are alive. The questions and the doubts are normal and common place. It is normal to feel tired from time to time and to feel like it would be easier if we quit. But we must keep on keeping on. We must endure in our faith. There is too much at stake to quit now and to loose hope. Remember that it is not us who run the race, but Christ in us. We can not do it alone. We can not propel ourselves forward on our own strength, we need Christ in our lives. We need that personal encounter that makes all other personal encounters pale in comparison. To fall in love once again with the Christ who saved us. And once we fall in love with him again, we will realize that the goal line is in sight, the checkered flag is ahead of us, home base is just around the corner.

Remember that God loves us dearly and will help us cross the finish line. God will carry us in his loving arms if that's what we need. And, together, we will make it to the other side. We are not alone in our struggles. We are not alone in this fight. Right there on our corner, the Savior of the world, and none other, awaits to offer us any assistance we may need. So, Let us fight as to win this fight. Let us run as though our lives depend on it. And let us not loose faith. The same God who walks with us awaits at the finish line. Amen!