

## MEDITATION 10/11/2020

I'll bet that some of you have a little pamphlet at home, maybe it was put out by the American Bible Society or even the Gideons, and that pamphlet suggests scripture readings for different occasions. If you don't have one I'll bet your mother did, or maybe your grandmother, tucked into her Bible at a passage that she frequently read. That little pamphlet suggests a specific reading if, for example, you're lonely, or you're confused, or you're in trouble. Some of them even suggest a scripture to read if you can't sleep. Those little pamphlets can be very helpful, especially if you're not really familiar with everything that's in the Bible. But they have a bit of a danger built in. They tend to stereotype scripture verses so that you don't read those verses unless you're lonely, or confused, or in trouble, or you can't sleep. And it's not just regular church members that do that. You know, you'd think that we preachers would know better, but we do too, especially with scripture passages that we use frequently for funerals. I don't often preach, for instance, on the text from the Gospel of John in which Jesus says "In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so I would've told you. I go to prepare a place for you." I read that text all the time for funerals, but Sunday morning worship not so much, I kind of set it aside. And I shouldn't do that because biblical texts speak to us in all kinds of places and all kinds of times. It's not really a good idea to pack some of them in a box and put them on the shelf until the time is more to our liking. They deserve to be heard more frequently.

Well, this particular scripture that I read this morning from 2nd Timothy 4:6-8 I used in a funeral that I conducted this past Monday. Don't worry, it was not anybody from our congregation, it was the mother of a dear friend of mine whose health had been declining for about a year and well before her death he had asked me if I would conduct that funeral and I used this passage. Paul may have written these words at the end of his life when he was imprisoned and facing death, and so I applied the text to the woman who had died, who was a faithful church member all her life. She had certainly fought the good fight, finished the race, and kept the faith. But I got to thinking about it after the funeral and I thought this text applies to all of us too. We're all doing our best to do those same things; to fight the good fight, to finish the race, and keep to the faith. These days those things are not terribly easy to do. It's really a lot easier to say something like "I'm tired, I'm tired of all this. I'm not going to struggle with these issues around me anymore. I'm tired of hearing about racial inequality. I'm tired of hearing about people in poverty who are hungry. I'm fine, I'm going off the grid. I'm going to drop out and ignore all of it." Worse yet, it's tempting to forget about our faith that calls us to be peacemakers and instead we return the hate and violence around us with even more hate and violence. We want to be like Paul, we want to continue to fight the good fight, to keep running the race, and keep the faith, but how do we do that? Well, I have a few suggestions, so let's look at them one at a time. How do we fight the good fight? There's a lot of misunderstanding about that. When you say the word "fight" Rocky comes to mind, with his boxing gloves and whacking somebody else in the ring. But our kind of fighting doesn't have anything to do with that. Doesn't have to do with boxing gloves, doesn't have to do with assault weapons, doesn't have to do with anything physical as a matter of fact because we aren't fighting people, we're fighting evil. It's really tempting to personify that evil, to apply it to a specific human being or the other political party or another country with whom we are at odds. But that's not what we're about.

The author of the book of Ephesians reminds us (Chapter 6 verse 12) our struggle is not against flesh and

blood, but against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Well, that makes it tough; we can't fight spiritual evil with anything physical. We can only fight by letting Christ fight for us. How we do that? Well, we do it by trusting what Jesus taught and living the way that he lived. Jesus told us to reject the way the world fights and respond to violence not with more violence but with peace and compassion. If you want to know what that looks like I would point you to the medical group Doctors without Borders. They offer medical assistance to anyone in any country or crisis situation based not on their politics not in their alliances, based only on their independent assessment of those people's needs. Doctors without Borders don't care about what politicians want or what the media says and it gets them in trouble sometimes, but if people want medical assistance they try to provide it. This is fighting the good fight the way the Jesus asks us to fight by using our ability to help people instead of to destroy them. That kind of fighting is really about keeping the faith; we need to hang onto our faith tightly or it will slip away from us before we realize it because the world is so tempting and our faith says we mustn't do things that way.

Now, some folks will tell you that all you have to do is say "Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior" and that's fine you've got all the faith you need. Well, that's the beginning of faith, but it's not the end of it. Saying "Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior" and stopping there is like registering for school but never going to any classes. Our faith shows itself through its actions. Following the commandments that tell us: Don't Kill, Don't Steal, Don't Lie, Don't Cheat, all that stuff, the big ten. They're some of the foundations of our faith. We don't have any problem with the 10 Commandments, but we need to move beyond those to really get at the heart of who we are as Christians. Our ultimate guide to Christian behavior really should be the Beatitudes that begin the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew, that's in Matthew 5: 1-12 if you want to brush up on what those are. They're a lot harder to follow than the 10 commandments. They tell us to be humble for instance, and realize we are not the center of the universe. They called us to mourn with others who have no one who cares about them. We're supposed to crave righteousness even more than we want our morning coffee. We're supposed to be merciful even to people who are cruel. We are even supposed to be peacemakers in a world that glorifies violence. That's the center of our faith and you know it is hard to hang onto as a wet slippery fish, but we got to hang onto it just as tightly, maybe more tightly, because if we lose that, we lose everything. So, we fight evil by hanging onto our faith, behaving like Jesus did, and rejecting the world's methods of violence and hatred. And when we do that and when we keep doing it well, we're running the race. Paul talked a lot about running races, that metaphor is in several of his letters because foot races were as popular in the ancient Roman world as football games are today, and you know how popular football games are. "You've got to keep running the race." Paul said "don't stop on the sidelines, and at the end of your life you can be proud of the race you've run." Now the race that we're running is a very long one. Some races of course are short, like 100 meter dash, that's one of the popular ones in the Olympics, it's a glamorous race. The last person who won it in the Olympics, Usain Bolt, ran it in under 10 seconds. But the race that we're running is more like a marathon, which is a race of just over 26 miles. Elite world class runners can finish it a little over two hours. But regular old runners - three hours, four hours - takes a lot longer to finish. If a marathon runner began the race by running as hard as Usain Bolt does in his sprint that runner would pretty soon collapse on the sidelines and would never finish. Our race of faith is just as difficult and as long as the marathon and we have to pace ourselves just as carefully. We need to,

for instance, keep up our energy not through those little energy gels but through worship and prayer and fellowship with other Christians. If we get discouraged we need to run with a companion who can encourage us, maybe share the wisdom that they have learned over their life. If our course is flat we can speed up, but we're going to get to some hills and then we're going to have to take it easy, and right now there's a bunch of hills in our lives. And the most important thing to remember about that race is that we aren't running it to beat somebody else; we only want to finish, and we want to do our best as we're getting there, and God has promised to help us do that.

Fighting the good fight, running the race, keeping the faith, that's what we are doing every second of our lives, and we're joining every single Christian in that great cloud of witnesses, as Hebrews calls it, as we try our best to follow Jesus wherever he leads us, and do it the way he wants us to do it. And we know what awaits us at the end of that race; it's not a championship boxer's belt, it's not an Olympic medal, it's a crown of righteousness just like the ones that all the other Christians received who have gone into glory before us. So don't give up the fight, don't drop out of the race, don't lose your grip on the faith. Keep going until the very end because I guarantee you don't want to miss the award ceremony.