

## **Fighting the Good Fight**

**Joel 2:23-32; II Timothy 4:6-8; Luke 18:9-14; Psalm 65 10-28-07**

This past week I am sure many of us have been stirred by the terrible fires that have swept across parts of Southern California. Those who have lost their homes will have a battle on their hands as they seek to restore some semblance of the life they enjoyed before the fires. It will be an emotional struggle as well as a physical one.

The people who stepped up to physically confront and fight the fires will have memories of all they have gone through burned into their minds. Especially the twelve fire fighters who enclosed themselves in fire resistant shelters, a last resort effort, and stayed put until helicopters dropped huge quantities of water to douse the raging flames around them. As soon as they were safe, all twelve volunteered to go back and do it all again. Those who have been caught in this fiery furnace know that life is difficult and that they will have to face challenges they might never have dreamed of and face them with incredible courage.

Very often we float through life with occasional ripples that throw us off course for a while but that are not so difficult that we cannot see our way through them. But, there are those times when we find ourselves fighting the good fight just to survive and carry on with life.

Of course, this has been true of human life as long as there has been human life. Our Bible stories reveal this over and over again. They are made up of tales of humans overcoming disaster time after time after time. These examples try to show us that if we have a strong belief in God we can overcome any battles we may face, both those that occur within us and those that are of an outward nature.

Joel, one of the minor or lesser prophets speaks with a true prophetic voice when he points to the better days that will come for the nation Israel if they turn their lives around and follow the ways of God. These better days will follow a plague of locusts and it will be a time when the Spirit of the Lord will fall upon the people and they will have the gift of prophecy. Both men and women will be prophets in their own right as they begin to see the truth and the light of the way of following their God—the One who saved them in their darkest days. If they remained strong and fought the good fight against the invasion of the winged enemy all would be well. This was an enemy they could see and plot against.

We fight many battles within ourselves that are not always as evident as a plague of locusts swirling through the air and eating everything in sight. One of them is mentioned in our Gospel reading for this morning. It is a delicate balance we must maintain between being humble being terribly self-righteous.

We all know those folks who think they have the definitive and only answer to every problem. They believe they are the “be all and end all.” When we are exposed to them on a regular basis, we find ourselves eventually turning off our hearing so that we do not have to endure them. They are often inflexible and very demanding and never can see beyond their own noses unless they feel the need to judge others. We know these folks and, sometimes, “they are us.” For within each of us the qualities of pride and self-righteousness live. These qualities differ from a healthy self-esteem. “Self-esteem” has

been defined as "...the experience of being competent to cope with the basic challenges of life and being worthy of happiness". It is not an over bearing sense of being the one and only on earth.

The Pharisee in the parable thought he had all the answers and that he was worthy of God's regard. He pointed his finger at the tax collector, one of the most despised people in society, and simply issued a judgment about him. The tax collector was so absorbed in asking God to have mercy upon him that he probably did not even notice or hear the comments the Pharisee made. He knew that he needed the grace of God to survive the battles of life. He knew he was not God and it was not his role to judge and condemn others. He knew his place in life and he had respect for it. He understood that he was just a human being in need of God's mercy. And he prayed to God with humility and longing.

Jesus, in offering this story to his immediate followers and to us, was trying to guide us onto the pathway of non-judgmental living. If we are so busy judging others and, most often, condemning them, we cannot see what it is within ourselves that needs a bit of correction or, maybe, a lot of correction. We often do not see the way we appear to others unless we take a step back and consider our words and actions. When we do this we need to ask ourselves if we would want to be treated as we treat others. Do we think we are superior to others, as did the Pharisee, or do we manage to see that we all are human and that we all are loved by God with our imperfections? The expectation of our faith is that we will learn to grow from being narrow beings to becoming those who exclude no one as being unworthy. Who are we to judge?

The author of the Second Letter to Timothy knew well the battles that went on within and without. He knew what those who tried to pastor groups of people would face. As he looked at the end of his life, he penned those words about fighting the good fight and finishing his race and being ready to move on to the next level of life. It seems he had found a sense of peace in all he had accomplished. He was ready to hear God say to him, "Well, done, good and faithful servant."

We all hope for a sense of peace when this earthly life ends. There is always at least one time when we review all we have done and all we have neglected to do. I know this from several years of working as a chaplain in a retirement facility where it was often my privilege to be with people as they took their last few breaths. There was, almost always, a sense of peace as they moved over into the unknown with faith that they had fought the good fight and had at last finished the race of life that had been theirs.

This same peace can be ours if we know that a power greater than ourselves, a power we call "God" is within us through all the turmoil and challenge we face during this earthly existence. Jesus came to open a door that we might glimpse the nature of God as we live and move and have our being. It is up to us to take the courageous steps through that door into a way of living that encourages us to be more loving, more inclusive, more forgiving, more accepting of our fellow humans. This is what it is God asked of the nation Israel, this is what the author of the Letter to Timothy asked. Only we can come up with the right answer through fighting the good fight with grace and love. -- Amen