

Fighting the Good Fight ~ October 24, 2010
II Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18; Luke 18:9-14; Psalm 65

We all have been exposed to the rigors of a particularly nasty season of political campaigning. As I read over the parable from Luke for this week, I could not help but have a vision of two politicians standing in a village square. One was looking down his or her nose at an opponent and saying, “Golly gee, I am so glad I don’t have the track record he or she has, it will surely taint their chances in the upcoming election.” The other is not just standing humbly by, like the tax collector in our story was but is waiting to give the opponent his or her return best shot. In the present arena of politics, no one seems to have much humility, understanding or patience.

Of course, the two characters in the parable were not politicians in our sense of the word. They were religious folks. The one was very proud of his accomplishments and happy to toot his own horn of righteousness. From his lofty position he found it easy to look down on the tax collector and judge him quite harshly. The Pharisee certainly saw himself as “holier than thou.”

We encounter people like this often in our world. They believe that they are far superior to others. Sometimes they have a fatter bank account, sometimes they have the largest house in town, sometimes they have the cleanest floors around, sometimes, they grow the most beautiful gardens. There are also those who feel they are more spiritually advanced than others and tell us about it. They seem to forget that our pathways to spiritual fulfillment often take a long and winding road, a way only known to the person on the journey. As these people gaze about themselves believing they are the very best, they tend to take shots at those who do not quite measure up to their narrow standards.

We also come across those who have some humility, who know they do not measure up to all God expects of them, who try over and over again to get things right. They don’t judge others, only themselves.

In a way, Jesus reminds us that “what goes around will, indeed, come around.” Those who consider themselves better than others will be taken down a peg or two and those who proceed through life with a measure of humility will eventually be exalted. He knew that in God’s system of justice, we all have another chance to get things right and those who know they have some growing to do are those who are the most prized.

We proceed through life side by side, those who think very highly of themselves and those who know there is always room for growth. We walk together fighting the good fight and hoping to finish our race here on earth in good style.

Paul was sending Timothy advice on how to live a successful life as a pastor. I & II Timothy and Titus are known as the “pastoral letters.” They offer instruction on how to serve God’s people. If we consider all of Paul’s letters, we know that there were times when he sounded very full of himself—he believed he had the best way to know Jesus better, even though he had never known him at all. In spite of this, he sought to help others find the way and not be too critical of them if they failed.

In our reading Paul was dying and he offered up his last thoughts. He had done all he could do with support from others and without it. Paul believed he was strengthened by a God who loved him and who enabled him to do great things. He had established and

supported many small churches and knew his work had not been in vain. He warned Timothy of the coming hard times and encouraged him to follow his example in fighting the good fight.

We all fight the good fight every day. We struggle to be good people, those who refuse to sit in harsh judgment of others. We try to be more understanding, more loving, more caring more supportive of others. There are times we can retire at night and reflect on the day and say to ourselves, “This was a really positive day. I actually practiced what I like to preach. I did not condemn any one because they do not see things as I do. I did not back anyone into a corner with my loud observations. I went about the tasks set before me with cheerfulness and a lack of grumbling. I sought to understand the feelings of others and know that they are as human as I am and have their faults as I do.”

Then there are those other days when we know we have fallen short of the way we are to live. We have been impatient and rude and loud and angry. We have allowed our petty needs to shut out those who wanted to be close to us. We have been difficult or obstructive or unforgiving. We have insisted on our own way as if others do not have ideas, too. While we might understand what is going on with someone else, we pretend we don't just so we do not have to engage that person. We become the Pharisee in our parable picking on the person standing near us with head bowed.

This is human nature. We are blessed with a God who understands that we are only human. We are encouraged to know that we have another chance to make all things new again.

Sometimes it takes great strength and courage to move beyond our comfort zones—the ones in which we sit and protect ourselves. It takes strength and courage to venture into a new way of thinking and moving and living. But, we were created in God's image with all the graces that can make us become the best humans we can ever become. We have before us the words of Jesus that show us the way forward; that instruct us and help us discover our way. We know, as Paul did, that we never make the journey alone through life, God upholds and nurtures us no matter who we are or where we are. We need only reach within to feel the power of God and then turn to our fellow humans and reach out to help them fight the good fight that leads us to eternal life. We are all in this together and it is a beautiful thing when we choose to walk the pathway of God setting aside what it is that separates us and gaining a focus on what it is that unites us all.

Amen