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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
10/24/2010, The Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost  
1 Timothy 1:12-17, Luke 15:1-10

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I am drawn to St. Paul's testimony in this morning's Epistle Reading. Paul senses that his life is drawing to its close. There is a sense of peace in the man. He is willing to entrust himself to Christ, whom he has served with devotion from the day of his conversion on the Damascus road:

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. (2 Timothy 4:7, RSV)

My! How good it would be to serve Christ like that!

My goal in this sermon is to talk about the good fight of faith. In this fallen world, we are immersed in fighting, contentions, and struggles. Fightings without, fightings within. Fightings against finance, against illness, against competitors. And sometimes, the most important of fights is with our own heart. My theme is that beneath all these conflicts, and foundational to them all, let us fight the good fight of faith.

Carol and I visited Rome three years ago. It was a celebration of our twenty-fifth wedding anniversary, and it was a magnificent trip for us. We stayed in a hotel near St. Peter's Basilica; we descended into the Scavi - the archeological excavations beneath the basilica - and there we beheld the bones of St. Peter; we lingered in the Sistine Chapel and before Michelangelo's *Pieta*; we admired the Swiss Guards and their wonderful uniforms; and in general, we were delighted and inspired by our visit to the beautiful church of St. Peter.

But, stubborn Lutherans that we are, we also got on an outward bound subway and made a visit to a second great basilica in Rome. It is called The Papal Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls. A "basilica" is not simply an impressive church; rather it is a church with the remains of its namesake. That means, that just as the bones of St. Peter are believed to rest beneath the altar of St. Peter's Basilica, so the bones of St. Paul are believed to rest beneath the altar of St. Paul Outside the Walls. It is a majestic basilica, but rather lonely compared to St. Peter's. Not much going on at St. Paul Outside the Walls.

Like Peter, Paul died the death of a martyr there in Rome. Tradition has it that Peter was crucified, as was his Master before him, and Paul was beheaded. Paul died during a cruel persecution of the early church during the reign of that madman Nero.

In this morning's reading, St. Paul seems to sense that his death is drawing near. He has been in prison there in Rome. Now Nero is leading a persecution of Christians for a great fire that ravaged the city -- a fire that both ancient and

modern historians suspect was set by Nero himself. No matter the justice or injustice of the matter, Paul is soon to die:

<sup>6</sup>For I am already on the point of being sacrificed; the time of my departure has come. (2 Timothy 4:6, RSV)

Paul's chief intention in this Second Epistle to Timothy is to comfort and strengthen his young colleague, who soon must carry on his ministry without his mentor. Some of us have been there. Our family still cherishes our memory of our final visit to dear old Pastor Raymond Shaheen, who was my pastor and who preached here at Immanuel and led a retreat for us years ago. Pastor Shaheen was elderly and weak when we visited then, charming and full of faith as ever, but soon to pass on to the nearer presence of Christ.

In his Second Epistle to Timothy, it is clear that Paul would love to see his young colleague again, but it is no certain matter that he will, and so he uses this letter to say his farewell and Godspeed to Timothy.

This is the context for one of the famous sayings from Second Timothy. It is a verse from the chapter just before this morning's reading. It is a saying about the Bible, and it goes this way:

<sup>16</sup>All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, <sup>17</sup>so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3:16-17, NRSV)

It is as if Paul is saying to Timothy, in place of me, you have the Scriptures. Yes, and you have God, who has been your protector from of old and we continue to be henceforth, with even more earnestness.<sup>1</sup>

In this way, Paul places Timothy in the same circumstances as you and me. We do not have St. Paul to sit down and talk to. We are not able to hear his preaching or to ask him our questions. But we are not left bereft, because we have the Holy Scriptures, which teach us what the apostles would have us know.

Psalms 71 is sometimes called "the old person's Psalm." It includes these moving lines:

<sup>9</sup>[O LORD God] Cast me not off in the time of old age; forsake me not when my strength faileth.

<sup>17</sup>O God, thou hast taught me from my youth: and hitherto have I declared thy wondrous works.

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<sup>1</sup> This line comes from my memory of Chrysostom's Letter to a Young Widow.

<sup>18</sup>Now also when I am old and grayheaded, O God, forsake me not;  
(Psalm 71:9, 17-18, KJV)

Well, now St. Paul is old and grayheaded. He is confident that the Lord will never forsake him, and he is grateful to be able to say to Timothy that as far as lies in him, he has not forsaken the Lord:

<sup>7</sup>I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. (2 Timothy 4:7, RSV)

I do not think Paul is boasting here, at least he is not boasting in the same way as the Pharisee in this morning's Gospel Lesson. Between the two of those fellows in our Lord's parable -- between the Pharisee who boasted of his piety and the broken tax collector who could only beat his breast and cry his Kyrie -- St. Paul was much more like the lowly tax collector:

<sup>13</sup>But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me a sinner!' (Luke 18:13, RSV)

No, I do not think Paul is boasting when he says that he has fought the good fight, for he knows, to his lifelong sorrow, that at one time, he was enemy to the one he now counts his Savior:

<sup>9</sup>For I am *the least* of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. (1 Corinthians 15:9, RSV)

Rather than boasting in the manner of the self-righteous Pharisee, Paul seems to be sharing an honest account with young Timothy of how he has tried to live his life. As best he could, earthen vessel that he was, Paul has tried to live for Christ, and I think that is a good thing to be able to say at the end of a long life. I hope to be able to repeat such a testimony myself at the end. I pray that I will be able to do so someday.

Notice that in his testimony to Timothy, St. Paul speaks of a good *fight*. Fights and contentions and struggles are unavoidable in this world, though if we would be honest with ourselves I think we would have to admit that sometimes we ourselves make life harder than it needs to be. Through our disorganization or procrastination, or sheer laziness, we end up fighting to exhaustion to do the things we could have more easily accomplished if we had not delayed.

Still, even the most orderly of lives faces fights and struggles in this world. The peaceable kingdom, where the wolf dwells in peace with the lamb, has not yet arrived, and so sometimes we find ourselves fighting with all our might in a very competitive world.

So, fightings come to us. What I want for us is that among our fightings, and as the foundation of them all, we include this particular kind of fight of which St. Paul speaks: the good fight of *faith*. Let us be people who engage in the good fight of faith.

And this brings me to a lovely passage in St. John Chrysostom about the good fight of faith. He contrasts the good fight of faith with fights and contests in the arena or the Olympic Games:

But is that a good fight, where there are imprisonment, chains, and death? Yea, he [Paul] says, for it is fought in the cause of Christ, and great crowns are won in it. “The good fight”! There is no worthier than this contest. This crown is without end. This is not of olive leaves. It has not a human umpire. It has not men for spectators. The theater is crowded with Angels. There [in the arena] men labor [and train] many days, and suffer hardships, and for one hour they receive the crown, and immediately all the pleasure passes away. But here far otherwise, it continues for ever in brightness, glory, and honor. Henceforth we ought to rejoice. For I am entering on my rest, [Paul says] I am leaving the race. Thou hast heard that “it is better to depart and to be with Christ.” (Chrysostom, on our text)

I think that many of you get up on a Sunday morning, wipe the sleep from your eyes, have your breakfast, get dressed and come to church because you want to be better people in this world. You want to bear the name of Christ with integrity. You want to be of help to our world. To do so might very mean that you are going to have to do some fighting, perhaps this week, almost certainly sometime in your future.

And much of the fighting is going to be with yourself. Some people seem to have such good hearts that they seem to have no bad impulses. Oh! To be such a one! But I am not such a one, and perhaps you are not either. Much of the striving, then, to be a good person will be striving against our impulses of impatience, covetousness, laziness, lust, even hatred or contempt for others. After all, it was so very easy for the righteous Pharisee to slip from praise of his own piety to contempt for others, even for the poor man on his knees nearby:

<sup>11</sup>The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, ‘God, I thank thee that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. (Luke 18:11, RSV)

It is bad enough that we have to fight with our competitors to try to make a living in this world. It is even harder, sometimes, to have to fight with our own hearts.

But Chrysostom is right: the angels, the heavenly host, and above all God himself, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, regard this good fight of yours below and

cheer you onwards. And the rewards of this good fight are not a perishable olive wreath, but something more important: the welfare of your neighbor, of your family, of that one God has entrusted to you to deal with, and the welfare of your own soul. Fight the good fight of faith, then, for their sake, and for your own.

When Paul looks ahead and sees his own death fast approaching, he remains calm and confident. Indeed, he speaks of a reward -- a certain crown for himself, and the same crown for you and me too:

<sup>8</sup>Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing. (2 Timothy 4:8, RSV)

You are they who have loved the appearing of Christ. You have heard his story and tossed in your fate to his. Cling to him. Conform yourself to him. Love others as he has loved you. Fight the good fight of faith and leave the rest to Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.