

SERMON: The Good Fight

TEXT: 1 Timothy 6:6-19

This will come as a great surprise to those of you who know me, but I am a non-violent person. I don't even care for violent words, like FIGHT. As a young teenager, I remember being uncomfortable with the government talking about the "war on drugs," not because I disagreed with the policies or advocated illegal drug use, but simply because it was referred to as a *war*.

Just recently I heard someone talking about a conversation with a friend of his, who is adamantly against any sort of violence whatsoever, for any reason. At this strong declaration, his other friends around the table started trying to think of situations that would make him change his mind. I imagine this made for some interesting conversation – some of it serious and thought-provoking, some of it humorous, and some of it downright shocking.

And then to read from the First Letter of Timothy this week, where it says to "fight the good fight of the faith," made me hesitate and wonder, should my faith cause a fight?

I mean, we all know that religion has been causing horrific, brutal, and on-going violence since the beginning of time, literally. Culture against culture, nation against nation, church against church, family against family. Examples are not hard to find.

In fact, just this week I read an opinion piece which doubled as a brief autobiography written by Heidi Hall, a journalist from Sikeston, Missouri. Her family disowned her when she left the faith of Jehovah's Witnesses in which she was raised. She eventually found a home and friends who became her family in the Presbyterian Church (USA). Just recently, she died from colon cancer at age 49, surrounded by her friends. The article she wrote is titled, *Finding a faith that is stronger than death — or my family's rejection*. (religionnews.com, September 26, 2019)

When I think it, I realize that I have had to fight for my faith, as well, from as far back as I can remember. I was just six years old when my mother left the Roman Catholic Church and took my sisters and I back to the Presbyterian Church where she was raised. I knew she was upset with the Catholic Church, but I'm sure I didn't really understand why at that age. I learned many years later that she didn't receive any pastoral care from the priests after my brother died. In her

mind, it was because she and my father were going through a divorce, so the church was passing judgment rather than showing compassion.

Furthermore, as a woman doing what is traditionally – and some would say, biblically – man’s work, I have had to fight the attitude that I don’t belong in the pulpit.

It’s a fight sometimes to discern where God is leading and to answer God’s call. It’s even a fight to find the words that God wants me to speak every Sunday morning. It’s a fight to discover God’s truth, to stand for truth, to live the truth, regardless of what is easy and what is popular.

“Fight the good fight of the faith,” Paul wrote to Timothy. My question is, what makes the fight of faith a GOOD fight? Let’s look again at Paul’s words: “Of course, there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment; for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it; but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these. But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the

faith and pierced themselves with many pains. But as for you, [follower] of God, shun all this; pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness.”

The fight is against our own senseless and harmful desires and temptations: to be rich, to serve ourselves, to do things our own way, to continue striving for more than we need. We love our money, our clothes, our vehicles, our homes, nice restaurants, travel adventures, bigger and better toys. The fight is to “shun all this”. The fight is to love our neighbor more.

A good example is the story we heard from the Gospel of Luke, known as *The Rich Man and Lazarus*.

In life, the rich man feasted while Lazarus lay outside his gate, diseased and starving. Soon, both men died. The rich man went to Hades, and Lazarus, it appears, went to heaven with Father Abraham. The rich man still apparently viewed Lazarus as some sort of slave, because he asked Abraham to send Lazarus to cool his tongue with water. But Abraham explained that the tables were now turned. Lazarus, who lived his life in agony, now was in a place of comfort. And the rich man, who “feasted sumptuously every day,” was now in agony. Resigned to his own fate, the rich man then begged Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his

five brothers so they wouldn't also "come into this place of torment." Abraham denied his request, saying that they should have listened to Moses and the prophets, and a man rising from the dead would be no more convincing.

In life, the rich man dressed in purple linen and feasted sumptuously every day, while Lazarus laid just outside his door, diseased and starving. So close, and yet so far. And after death, they are still separated by a great chasm, but their fortunes have been reversed. Lazarus is in eternal comfort by Abraham's side, while the rich man is in agony.

The rich man's *fight* (if you will) is a desire to cross over, and a feeling of regret that he had not been more generous on earth. Unfortunately, his regret falls far short of true remorse. He regrets his life choices *only* because he has met his fate of eternal torment. Furthermore, his concern for others has extended only to his five brothers. He begs Father Abraham to send Lazarus to warn them, that they might be spared eternal agony. The rich man still fails to understand that Lazarus – in his own right – was worthy of the rich man's attention, despite whatever reward or punishment awaited him in the afterlife.

He reminds me of Scrooge in the classic tale, “A Christmas Carol.” After being visited by the ghosts of Christmas past, present, and future, Scrooge changes his ways. But has he really learned compassion, or is his change of attitude based on his fear of afterlife of agony?

I wouldn't call any one of us a Scrooge. But compared to the rest of the world, we are privileged. Like the rich man, we are “feasting sumptuously.” We have become so comfortable and self-satisfied that we are oblivious to the needs around us. And yet, we're not content, because we keep wanting more.

This is THE GOOD FIGHT of faith. And, yes, it is a constant battle; our own will against God's will. The proverbial personification of our conscience, with an angel on one shoulder and a devil on the other, each competing for our attention. Will we listen to the devil, who tempts us with money and luxury and self-indulgences of all kinds? Or will we choose the way of the angel, who hopes to entice us with riches of another kind? The riches of righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness.

It sounds so beautiful when we conclude our worship with the divine commandment to love God and to love our neighbor as ourselves. But let's face it.

It's not always easy. It's a struggle. It's a fight. But it is THE GOOD FIGHT of faith.

The reward is faith itself. The reward is a sense of peace when we know we can rely on God, "who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment." The reward is the ability to live a life of contentment. A life of "righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, and gentleness." The reward is the invitation to embrace and "take hold of the life that really is life."

May we claim it and live it... to the glory of God!

AMEN.