

“When Faith Is Tested”

a sermon by

Dr. William P. Wood

First Presbyterian Church
Charlotte, North Carolina

July 25, 2004

Text: “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, and I have kept the faith” (II Timothy 4:7).

For some time now we have all been aware that we are living in a very narcissistic and self-centered culture, a culture that is sometimes defined as the “imperial self.”

I was reminded of this recently in a column published by Martin Marty in *The Christian Century*. One of his readers had sent him an article about a family in Illinois who was celebrating their daughter’s graduation from high school. In fact, they had placed an ad in the local newspaper detailing not only their daughter’s honors, but the rewards she was receiving as well.

The ad announced that Margaret was going to Central State University the next year where she was going to “double major” and become a medical doctor. She had been

valedictorian of her class, won the DAR good citizen award, and was a member of the National Honor Society.

The ad also listed the graduation gifts that her parents were bestowing upon her: a new three level condominium overlooking the Lake in Harper; a new Lexus RX300; a Hawaiian party for her and her friends and a trip to Rhodes, Greece, for a month.

The individual who sent the ad to Dr. Marty noted that nowhere in the ad was there a word of thanks or gratitude to those who had helped Margaret along the way: teachers, coaches, or friends. There was no mention of those who came in second, who consoled the losers, even those parents who might not be able to lavish all of these gifts on their children--even if they wanted to. Martin Marty raised the question of how does a person like Margaret, if she does become a doctor, identify with her peers in school or her patients who may live in poverty or modest means. How does a person like that identify with the brokenness and pain of the world?

I.

In the two weeks since I returned from the Russian mission trip I have been reminded again of the great brokenness and pain that surround our lives. In the past two weeks we have conducted four funerals in this church. This past weekend two young men, recently out of high school, were killed in alcohol related accidents--a fact of life that has been all too real and all too frequent in Charlotte. Events like these not only strain our energy and resources, they test our faith and force us to struggle with the questions of why we live in the kind of world in which we live.

II.

One of the key ingredients in the Christian life is the role that faith plays. One of the dimensions of Christianity that keeps its vitality is its insistence that faith in God provides a person power to help people through life's great difficulties: to live with honor, to do one's work well, to face the blows of life, and to face death as well.

The New Testament is quite confident concerning the key to that kind of power, and the name of that key is faith. "This is the victory that overcomes the world, even our faith," writes the author of I John.

Now faith is essential to everything we say and do, but faith, like hope and love, is not easily defined but can only be described in terms of what it can do in a person's life.

Jesus never defined faith! He illustrated it. He not only said that it could move mountains, he gathered to himself a group of individuals who turned the world upside down.

St. Paul never defined faith. He illustrated it in his life. He began as a persecutor of the church but ended as its greatest champion so that at the end of his life he could write to his young friend Timothy these words: "I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race. I have kept the faith."

There is only one instance in the New Testament where faith is defined. In the book of Hebrews we read this definition. "Faith," writes the author of that epistle, "is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." That is as good a definition as we are likely to find, but even the writer of Hebrews does not leave there. He goes on to describe faith in terms of what it does to life. "By faith Abraham. . . . By faith Moses. . . . by faith Joseph." That is the only way you can describe faith; in terms of what it does for life. And what it does for life is indispensable.

There are two aspects of every person's life: the outward circumstances and the inward circumstances. Now, none of us would ever diminish the importance of outward circumstances: food, shelter, family, and a meaningful job. These are critical. But none of us should diminish the importance of the inward circumstances as well.

This morning I want to address how faith helps us to deal with those occasions when our life and faith are tested.

III.

In the first place, faith centers our world. It gives us a sense of priority and helps us distinguish the things that are important from those which are not.

One of the lasting impressions that I had of my recent trip to Russia was the great failure of communism to sustain life in the Soviet Union. During the Cold War the USSR was considered a superpower. It had nuclear weapons; it had a massive army; it had a lethal navy. But while on the outside, the Soviet Union appeared strong, on the inside the whole infrastructure of life collapsed so that today in many places Russia is a third-world country. Communism, as an ideological and economic system, was simply not adequate to sustain the life of the people of the Soviet Union. Communism in Russia wasn't defeated from the outside. It disintegrated from within.

Communism, however, was not just a failed economic system; it was flawed intellectually and spiritually. George Kennan, who for many years was the American Ambassador to the Soviet Union, once observed that there was nothing more depressing than a Marxist funeral. For Kennan Marxism had no answer to the phenomenon of death. Kennan was convinced any ideology or religion that could not give meaning to death, could not give meaning to life as well.

Today, we find ourselves facing a similar though somewhat different situation. As David Brooks has pointed out in the New York Times, the September 11th (9/11) Commission, in its report noted that the War on Terrorism has an ideological component to it. There is a radical strain of Islamic thought that sees a bitter conflict between itself and the West. If we ignore this aspect of the War on Terrors, notes Brooks, we will never be able to win this war because we will not fully understand all its dimensions.

Faith, then, is one of the means that orders and structures our lives. That was certainly true in the New Testament. The Christian community did not come into existence because of the New Testament. Nor did it come into being because of the great creeds of the church. The Christian Church came into being because of the life of Jesus Christ. Men and women saw in him something they had never seen before. He was the revelation of God.

They had faith in Christ. They trusted him. They found that he was able to give them a power that heretofore they had not possessed. He showed them the nature of God. He had demonstrated a life they longed to live.

That has been the witness of people throughout the years. When Harriet Beecher Stowe sat in worship one Sunday in a little church in Brunswick, Maine, and took communion with those who had gathered there that Sunday, she thought of slaves that she had known through the years and for whom she believed the body and blood of Christ had been shed for as well. Before that service was over she had conceived in her mind a novel that she intended to write. The name of the novel was Uncle Tom's Cabin and it did more to abolish slavery than many of the battles that were fought in the Civil War.

That was her faith--that slavery was wrong--and it was that faith that gave meaning to her life.

IV.

Then, too, when faith is tested we sometimes find that faith releases within us a power we were not certain we possessed. That is the real nature of faith. Sometimes people say to me that they are afraid that they don't have enough faith. Usually they mean that there are certain things they don't believe or that they struggle with. But faith goes far beyond just what a person believes. The real enemy of faith is not disbelief but fear.

Fear imprisons life; faith liberates it. Fear paralyzes life; faith empowers it. Fear disheartens us; faith encourages us. Fear sickens life; faith heals it. Fear narrows our life; faith expands it.

That is a dimension to the Christian religion that many of us have failed to grasp. For some of us Christianity is about believing the right things, and that is a part of it. For some Christianity is about living an ethical life, and that is a part of it as well. For some Christianity is being a part of a community, that that is certainly important.

But there is something else. Paul called it "being strengthened in the inward man."

Paul understood the struggles of faith. He experienced what he called "a thorn in his flesh." We do not know what it was, but we know it hindered his ministry. It must have been some illness, some impediment, or some disability that weighed heavily upon him. He prayed that God would remove it, but God did not remove it. He finally discovered something that all of us need to discover, namely, that God's strength is made evident in our weakness. Paul

understood that. That is why he could finally say, “ I can do all things through him who strengthens me.”

V.

Then, too, in times of testing, faith cannot only unify and empower our lives, it can also make God real to us in ways we had never before imagined. Sometimes we pit science against faith, but in fact, the two are intimately related. This past fall I heard a physicist speak at Princeton University on the relationship between science and faith. For him they were not at odds. According to this physicist, faith is essential to science. It is the way we seek to understand the world around us. Scientific faith grasped the new astronomy before telescopes were strong enough to prove it. Einstein envisioned the theory of relativity long before anyone could prove it.

Therefore, if we were willing, we could write another Eleventh Chapter to the Epistle to the Hebrews. By faith Copernicus perceived that the sun revolves around the sun and not the sun around the earth. By faith Newton grasped the principle that unifies the cosmos, although he was the first to grasp it.

That is the nature of faith. It seeks to find order in life. It seeks power to overcome difficulty. It seeks to find strength and comfort in the power of a living God.

One of the powerful Scriptures in the entire Bible is Psalm 23. Most of us know it by heart. Part of its power is that it is affirmative prayer. It is not the soul whining before God, but availing oneself of the power of God.

“The Lord is my Shepherd. I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures.
He restores my soul.
He leads me in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.”

Throughout this Psalm there is confidence that faith in God orders life, gives life strength, and connects one to God.

That is the faith that allowed the Apostle Paul, at the end of a long and fruitful life to say these words to Timothy, which we would claim for ourselves:

“I have fought the good fight; I have finished the race. I have kept the faith.” Amen.