

“Keeping the Faith”

a sermon by

Dr. William P. Wood

First Presbyterian Church
Charlotte, North Carolina

October 14, 2007

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

Recently, my daughter Lucy, who lives in Washington, D.C., called me on the phone to give me an update on a new job that she has. She is teaching English at a school called St. Stephen’s/St. Agnes in Alexandria, Virginia. It is her first year of teaching and a new experience for her.

She has three classes of ninth graders and one twelfth grade class. The twelfth graders are studying Shakespeare’s great tragedy, *Hamlet*, and Lucy said it was quite a challenge for her to keep up with these students who are not all that younger in age than she is. As a first year teacher, she was concerned whether the students were really learning anything or not. She was greatly relieved on Parents Night, when several of the parents took her aside and told her how impressed they were that their students were actually talking about Shakespeare. But the thing that impressed her the most was the parent of a child in Lucy’s class who is the quietest, shyest student in the whole class. This is a young person who never says anything.

So you can imagine this child’s mother’s surprise when one day she and her daughter were in the car together. The mother noticed that there was a strange smell in the car. She wasn’t sure what it was, so she said to her daughter, “There is a smell in the car. It smells like something is rotten.” To her mother’s utter astonishment, her daughter, who never utters a word, replied, quoting from *Hamlet* directly, “Yes, there’s something rotten in Denmark.” The mother almost wrecked the car.

I.

There is something very satisfying for any of us to believe that we have made a difference in someone’s life. Whether we are a teacher, a preacher, a coach, someone in business,

or even a parent, there is a great satisfaction in knowing that somehow we have made a difference in someone's life.

In the Scripture that I have read for you this morning, the Apostle Paul is reflecting on his life, which he understands is now coming to an end. In this passage there are three concerns that Paul shares with this young man Timothy: his concern for the faithfulness of Timothy to the gospel, his concern about false teachers in the church, and thirdly, his personal reflections about his own ministry. The images that Paul uses are taken from the Roman games. To fight the good fight suggests the metaphor of the wrestler. To complete the race implies the world of the runner.

But Paul says that he has done more than that. He has kept the faith. He has resisted the false teachers. He has entrusted to Timothy the ministry that he has shared.

Paul knows that his time is short. His life is being poured out like a libation. But he knows something else as well. He knows that there is a "crown of righteousness" that has been prepared for him, and not only for him, but also for all who long for the appearance of Christ.

As we come to Dedication Sunday, there is nothing more critical for our church than our ability to keep the faith that has been entrusted to us. So what does that mean?

II.

For one thing, it means that each one of us as a disciple of Jesus Christ is challenged to fulfill our responsibility to Christ. Certainly that was true of the Apostle Paul. In his letter to the church at Corinth he speaks of his experiences as an Apostle to the Gentiles. Listen to his words: "Five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea" (II Corinthians 11: 24 ff.). Paul then goes on to account the other hardships he was called to bear: frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from his own people, in danger from the Gentiles; sleepless nights, hunger and thirst, cold and naked.

I don't believe that there is anything more important for any of us than to be able to look back on our lives and be able to say with Paul, "I have kept the faith."

Next week the Presbyterian Women of our church will introduce a new cookbook entitled *Inspired Cooking*. One of the features in this book is a series of brief essays by members of our community, as well as members of our church. One of the essays was written by Frye Gaillard, who is now a Writer in Residence at the University of South Alabama, but who for a number of years was a reporter for the *Charlotte Observer*. In his essay Frye Gaillard pays tribute to Judge James B. McMillan, a federal judge and elder in this church. In the very difficult period of the late 1960's and early 1970's, Judge McMillan ruled in the case *Swann vs. the Board of Education* for mandatory busing. Needless to say, it was an unpopular decision in many quarters of our city, and Judge McMillan's life was threatened on a number of occasions.

When Gaillard asked Judge McMillan how he had managed to cope under such relentless pressure, McMillan replied, "The way I figure it," he declared, "you have to assume that God has

a plan for your life. You do your best to understand what it is, then you try not to depart from it too far.”

James McMillan kept the faith, and there is no more significant statement that could be made for any of us than that.

III.

There is another challenge before us as a church, and it is the challenge to keep the faith that has been handed down to us. Recently, I came across an article by James Edwards, who teaches at Whitworth College in Washington State. The title of the article was “How Can Our Denomination Become What It Ought to Be?” In this article James Edwards deals with one of most important struggles that the church has today, the struggle between our faith and the culture in which we live. As Presbyterians, we have often seen ourselves as called to “transform the culture in which we live.” Other churches have argued that the church should simply accept the culture, while others believe that the church should simply abandon the culture. But Presbyterians have also believed that our role was to transform the culture in the name of Christ.

In his address Edwards quotes Martin Luther, the great Reformer, who said, “But when it comes to whether one teaches correctly about the Word of God, there I take my stand and fight. That is my calling. When the word of God remains pure, even if the quality of life fails us, life is placed in a position to become what it ought. That is why everything hinges on the purity of the Word. I have succeeded only if I have taught it correctly.”

In May of 1934 a group of evangelical Christians met in Barmen, Germany to discuss the situation in Germany with the rise of Adolph Hitler and the party of National Socialism. The outgrowth of this meeting was the Barmen Declaration of 1934 in which the church declared that it had to listen to the Word of God in Jesus Christ. As such, it stood in opposition to National Socialism and the Third Reich.

Albert Einstein, the great scientist, noted after the war that the Confessing Church was the only institution that stood up against Hitler’s government. Einstein went on to observe that all the other institutions caved into Hitler: the great universities, the great newspapers of Germany—all capitulated to the government. Only the church, Einstein observed, stood strong against the Nazi regime.

We are living in a time in which the church is tempted to be nothing more than another form of entertainment offering to a consumer culture, whatever that culture demands. Keeping the faith means learning how to say “No” to a pagan and often corrupt culture.

IV.

Then, too, we are faced with the question of what it means for First Presbyterian Church to keep the faith. This week’s New York Times had an article on the restoration that was going on in Brooklyn Heights. The article featured several photographs of the Plymouth Church in that neighborhood, where Henry Ward Beecher had been the minister in the 19th Century. Several months ago I mentioned a new biography on Beecher entitled *The Most Famous Man in*

America. In that biography the author, Debby Applegate, noted that during the time that Beecher served as pastor of that congregation thousands of people flocked to that church. People poured out of streetcars and boats to hear this dynamic preacher.

After the worship service a couple spoke to me. They were members of the Plymouth Church. When I asked them how things were going, they said that the church today was only a shell of what it had been. Presently, there were only 200 members in a church that had once numbered its members in the thousands.

If there is anything I have learned over the past thirty years, it is the frailty of human institutions. One can drive to almost any city in this country and see the graveyard of once great churches, many of whom are now closed.

One of the important questions facing our church today is the question “What kind of church do we want to be?” Shall we be content with the status quo or will we be able to see a future before us that allows this church to grow in its witness for Christ in the heart of the center city?

We are living in a changing and dynamic neighborhood. There are currently five thousand residents in the Uptown Area. Over the next few years that will grow to 15,000 as new condominiums and houses are built in the center city. One of the questions facing us is what our response to this will be. Will we see it as an annoyance or an opportunity?

In Tom Stoppard’s play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, there is a scene in which these two young friends of Hamlet are on their way to England. Unknown to them they bear in their possession a letter to the King that orders them to be killed. Somehow these two young men sense that they are moving to a fate that had not imagined. One of these young men turns and says to his friend, “There must have been a moment in the beginning when we could have said ‘No,’ but somehow we missed it.”

Today, as we look around us, we see numerous opportunities that our church can make a difference in our community. There are opportunities in worship, in Christian Education, in Pastoral Care, and in outreach.

Several years ago Sam Roberson, who is the General Presbytery of the Presbytery of Charlotte, spoke to me at a Presbytery meeting. He told me that the Presbytery had done a study of the 138 churches in our Presbytery. In the past twenty years, he noted, many of our churches have suffered a massive loss of membership. Only a handful, he said, have shown any real growth. Then he went on to say, “Out of that handful, there is one shining star, and that shining star is First Presbyterian Church.”

As a church, we have been given a tremendous opportunity to be a witness in the heart of this city. Today, we are asking you to demonstrate your commitment to our church for 2008.

May God grant us wisdom and courage for the living of these days.

Amen!