

“The Good Fight”

Meditation on 1 Timothy 6:6-19

Sept. 25, 2016

Merritt Island Presbyterian Church

“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, O man of God, shun all this (or flee from these things); pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith; take hold of the eternal life, to which you were called and for which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses. In the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, I charge you to keep the commandment without spot or blame until the manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ, which he will bring about at the right time—he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords. It is he alone who has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see; to him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen.

As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on

God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.

We were on our way to Cocoa Beach on Monday--my day off-- when we pulled into the drive at Lori Wilson Park. A creature was stepping out into the road as our car rolled past. Jim and I both said at the same time, "A turtle!" I begged him to turn around and go back--so I could see the turtle up close. He was moving pretty fast for a turtle. We were back in a jiffy, but he had already crossed the paved driveway and made it to the grass. He was heading towards the playground. I jumped out of the car and tried to take his picture without getting too close and frightening him as he moved along purposefully--this turtle on a mission. Like us, he was headed to the ocean--or at least, the green, wild area that borders Cocoa Beach. He had a long way to go, with his little stubby legs, carrying his house with him. But he knew where he was going and why. He wasn't afraid to journey alone. I smiled as the old saying came to mind, "Slow and steady, wins the race."

We parked and walked to the beach entrance. Jim led the way. I paused on the wooden ramp to adjust my flip flops that would carry me across hot, mid-day sand. It was my first time at the beach since before my surgery-- several months or more. I was still moving slow, plodding along, like a turtle, but enjoying my surroundings, stopping to look

around at children playing, people lounging in chairs, birds flying or tiptoeing on the sand, catching fish in their beaks. I stopped to take pictures with my phone--and Jim was soon far, far away. I motioned for him to stop, so I could catch up. He did, but soon he was far off, again, leaving me to meander and poke along. I watched water rush around my feet and let my toes sink in the sand. I looked for pretty rocks and shells and saw little fish caught in pools the tide carved out. Then I watched a wave come to their rescue and carry them back out to sea.

I was content, though I was a gopher turtle, still moving slowly in my recovery, but moving steadily, sure of where I wanted to go--and why I wanted to get there. Not worried about how far, aware of every step I was taking. Not concerned that I might be the only one going that way. Isn't that what our Christian journey is like, friends? And along the way, we do ministry as the Lord leads us.

Watching the water swirling at my feet, I thought about starfish. Where had all the starfish gone? When I was little girl, visiting Daytona Beach with my family, we would find starfish on the sand. I could tell when they were still alive and when they had been out of the water and in the sun too long-- dry and hard, devoid of life. Like the starfish tourists bought for 75 cents at souvenir shops. I thought of the old story about starfish. Hundreds, no thousands, of starfish washed up on a long, lonely stretch of beach--drying out in the sun. An older man, who had a habit of walking the beach each morning, watched as a young woman picked them up, one by one, and threw them out to sea. Smiling, he said, lightly mocking her, "There are stranded starfish as far as the eye can

see, for miles up the beach. What difference can saving a few of them possibly make?" Smiling, she bends down, picks up another starfish and tosses it far out over the water. She says, I imagine, with gentleness, "It certainly makes a difference to this one."

The Apostle Paul tells Timothy, "Fight the good fight," in our epistle reading today. But it's not what you might think. He is talking about a spiritual battle fought with love and faith, clinging to the promise of eternal life. The occasion is Timothy's commissioning for ministry to the people of Ephesus. Paul, perhaps writing around 62-67 CE, is concerned about "certain people" and their teaching in the church at Ephesus. They desire to be "teachers of the law without understanding what they are saying," Paul says. They are busy with "myths" and promoting "speculations rather than divine training that is known by faith."

Paul meets Timothy in Lystra (in modern day Turkey) on his second missionary journey. They become friends, and co-workers, along with Silas. Timothy's name in Greek--*Timótheos*--means "honoring God" or "honored by God." His father is Greek and not a Christian. Timothy's faith, says Paul in 2 Tim. 1:5, comes from his grandmother, Lois, and his mother Eunice--Jewish women who believe in Jesus the Messiah.

Timothy is younger than Paul, who encourages him to be a strong, confident leader, despite his youth. He says in 1 Tim. 4:12, "Don't let anyone think less of you because you are young. Be an example to all believers in what you say, in the way you live, in your love, your faith, and your purity."

What strikes me is how relevant Paul's observations and instructions

to Timothy are for today. Could it be that our society struggles with the same problems, sins and temptations that the people of Paul and Timothy's time struggled with nearly 2 thousand years ago?

Paul tells Timothy to be content, for "we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out it." Doesn't that sound like, "You can't take it with you?" But that is exactly what people believed back then--that you take your wealth and status into the next world. Egyptian pharaohs' remains were laid in elaborately painted caskets and adorned with golden death masks. They were entombed with jewels and other belongings, food, and offerings to the gods in the afterlife. Paul isn't completely anti-wealth, however. Recall he did work for a living; he wasn't like John the Baptist dressed in camel's hair and a leather belt, living like a hermit in the wilderness. In verse 10, Paul says it's the *love of money* that is "a root of all kinds of evil"--that pursuing wealth and accumulation of things is what plunges people into ruin and destruction. Wealth also leads to haughtiness, Paul suggests in verse 17, and to people setting their hopes on the "uncertainty of riches" rather than "on God who richly provides for us and everything for our enjoyment."

When Paul, in verse 11, calls Timothy, "man of God," and tells him to shun "all this," or "flee these things," he points back to a list of sinful behaviors and attitudes that begins in verse 4 with conceit and ends in verse 10 with the love of money. The good fight is the struggle to pursue what is good -- to be faithful to be what the Lord calls us to be-- faithful to our baptismal vows, as Paul suggests in verse 13, as Timothy made the "good confession in the presence of many witnesses. In the presence of God, who gives life to all things..." Christ's fragile humanity and

suffering for our sakes is emphasized here, without even mentioning his death. The cross looms over us as we read, “and of Christ Jesus who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession.” And with the image of the cross and Paul’s encouraging words in this ancient letter of commissioning, we have the promise of eternal life--not far off in the future, waiting for us when we die, but *right here in this world*, to be grasped. “Fight the good fight of the faith,” Paul says, “**take hold** of the eternal life, to which you were called.”

That list of good pursuits Paul urges on young Timothy? This list is for all who seek to follow Christ. Paul says, “*pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness.*” The word that stands out is *gentleness* because of its position at the end of the sentence. Paul means to emphasize this to Timothy and all who would hear his instructions. Gentleness was in short supply in Paul’s “manly” world.

Gentleness is in short supply in our world today.

Friends, going back to the starfish stranded on a beach and one woman’s efforts to save them, I recall that the story doesn’t end where I left it, though I can’t find a different ending on the Web. The story I remember ends with the man watching the woman for a while--and then joining in--following in her loving, gentle example. Though there were thousands needing rescue, and they would gain nothing in this world, but contentment, perhaps even joy. The older man, ever so gently, reached down, picked them up, and threw them back.

One by one.

Will you pray with me?

Holy One, we seek your face, grateful for your Son's suffering on a cross for our sake. Thank you, Lord, that you have done all the work for our eternal life--that we only must reach out and accept this precious gift. Thank you that this life isn't something far off in the future, waiting to be grasped, but something we can hold onto in this world as we struggle to shun or flee from sin and pursue the good works you lead and strengthen us to do. Teach us how to be righteous, godly, faithful, and loving, enduring temptation, trials and persecution until you come again. Stir us to be *gentle* in this world of anger, hatred and violence. Help us to make a difference as we seek to reach out and rescue this broken, hurting world, one soul at a time. In Christ we pray. Amen.