

"Stay in the Fight"
2 Timothy 4:1-8
60th Anniversary Worship

In the 1996 Olympics, an athlete stole the hearts of many fans. It was an Italian athlete, who was running in the 10,000 meter race. His name was Stefano. He did not set the world record - far from it, he finished dead last.

But still the fans loved him. The race was won by an Ethiopian in record time. The way they do the 10,000 meter race is in the stadium, counting laps until the finish. Seven of the 25 runners who started, had DNF - did not finish. Either injury or they just saw it was hopeless.

Stefano immediately dropped into last place after the first thousand meters. The field began to lap him. The Ethiopian lapped him twice. He finished two full minutes behind the winner. It doesn't sound like that much, but when the race was over, everyone was hugging each other, Stefano was still out on the oval. He was running by himself.

The PA announcer came on and said Stefano was running each lap faster than the previous. He was getting better with each lap. The crowd began to get behind him.

When he finally crossed the finish line by himself, the crowd gave him a huge ovation, not only did he finish, he finished strong.

I was thinking of a scripture passage to help us reflect on this milestone in the life of Saint Mark Church. And in considering that, I like the image of a long race, filled with challenges and temptations to drop out or give up, but persisting none the less.

Sounds a little like the year we have all been through too.

60 years is a lot, yes, but in my travels, I have also had the privilege of celebrating a 175th anniversary with the Bethel Presbyterian Church in Redstone Presbytery as a student pastor, So this is still a relatively young ministry here.

In a few moments, we will have some reflections on part of that history. And here in the Sanctuary there are lots of boards which serve as a kind of timeline of important milestones. During the Interim/Transitional time, it is actually a great exercise to see where we have been, and look forward to where God is leading us.

Eugene Peterson wrote a book called "A Long Obedience in the Same Direction." Peterson writes that he observed many people starting the Christian journey, but he says, there is a dreadful attrition rate. As soon as discipleship becomes tough, as soon as it becomes uncomfortable, or obstacles come in the way, some people drop out.

Only a few, Peterson observes, have the enthusiasm for what he calls "the patient acquisition of Christian virtues."

That can be thought of not only as individual disciples, but also as a community of faith. To have the patience and wisdom for the long obedience in the same direction as the body of Christ.

The Apostle Paul, in this wonderful letter to his understudy Timothy - (by the way in Seminary, Timothy is referred to as the very first DMin student), Paul gives us three phrases that we can use as soul food for the journey, either as individual or as a community of faith here at Saint Mark.

The first phrase:

Paul says to Timothy: "I have fought the good fight"
Some Greek scholars have looked at that and translated it: "I have run the great race", relating to the Gladiatorial games of Rome. The word for fight is "agon", the same root as agony - What he is saying is that the good fight has some challenges and obstacles and pain.

But we skim right over the word "good" What is the good fight? Are we running the great race, fighting the good fight?

Well, fortunately, in those previous verses, Paul lays it out in detail: The good fight:
Proclaim the message, be persistent, whether the time is favorable or unfavorable. Convince, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching.
Endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully.

This would be one of my prayers for this church for the next 60 years. We see ways that you have fulfilled this over the past 60 years. I am sure there were times we could have done better, but can we say we have fought the good fight? Will we continue to do that whether the time is favorable or unfavorable?

Phrase #2

The next phrase that Paul uses with Timothy is "I have finished the race"

Like we saw with Stefano in the Olympics, there are people who do not finish the race.

It is a life challenge for many of us. I know I have half-finished projects in my basement. It is hard to be persistent and consistent. It is a struggle for me. How about you?

When our Doctor of Ministry director, Susan at PTS gathered us on the very first day of class she said something that shocked us. "Only about one-third of you will start and finish this degree". No way, I thought! This group is talented, they are great people!

Fast forward 4 years, out of our initial cohort of 35 students, when graduation day came, there were about 12 of us who ended up with a degree.

The Apostle Paul says "I have finished the race." I have completed my task.

How can you be as persistent and patient as he asks us to be?

I love the story to that end, of Georgine Johnson of Cleveland Ohio. She was 42 years old at the time, and decided to enter a 10,000 meter race in Cleveland to see how she would do. But in a strange coincidence, they were also holding a marathon in Cleveland on the same day. In the confusion, she ended up on the wrong starting line.

After a few miles she suddenly realized, "Oh no, I am in the marathon"

She began to drift to the side to drop out, when she said, "Hey I've never run a marathon, maybe this could be interesting!

She thought to herself:

I will just try to complete one mile at a time.

As she passed 10 miles, she had never run that far, she said, "OK just a few steps at a time"

She somehow managed to finish the race.

Afterwards the people asked, "Why didn't you just drop out?"

She said, "Well I didn't look at the whole race, I just said, I'll look at the next phase and do my best, and when I get done, I will try the next phase after that.

But here is the thing: She said if I had thought about the whole 26 miles, I could not have done it.

We don't always know what is ahead. Not many of us had a pandemic, murder hornets, and an attempted coup on our planning calendars for 2020 and 2021.

There are probably going to be big ministry challenges for us in the next 60 years. That is fairly certain. Of course, we don't know what is ahead.

We don't always know how long the race is going to be. Sometimes we think we are signing up for the 6 mile run, when we are actually signed up for the marathon and we didn't know it.

But can we take each one, each day in itself, to, as Jesus said, "not worry about tomorrow, but let today's own troubles be sufficient for today."? Taking it one step at a time.

Paul exhorts Timothy to finish the race. Especially when there are challenges, obstacles, things not going the way you expected.

Phrase 3:

The apostle Paul says, "I have kept the faith"
If you are an athlete in the Olympics, in the opening ceremonies you take an oath. In essence you confirm you have trained properly, you will do your best, and you will not cheat in any way.

It is that same phrase that Paul uses here: literally translated I have kept the oath.

I have done my best, I have made it to the finish line,
I have played by the rules.

In John 13:1 the best description of the ministry of
Jesus is written, as John writes, 'Jesus loved them to
the end.'

He loved his disciples no matter what right to the end,
and then beyond. He kept his vow, his oath, he was
faithful to them and to us.

It was just two years ago almost to this day. Can you
remember all the way back to 2019?
The local baseball team was attempting to do something
extraordinary. Improbable really.

To come back from starting the season 19-31, to finish
strong and go on to win the World Series. And the motto
they used was not to think about doing that all at
once. They were exhorted to just take care of today.
Or as the manager loved to say. "Just go 1-0"
When things were tough, they were asked to "Stay in the
Fight". Don't drop to the side, don't give up.
Stay in the fight.

If I had one more prayer for this congregation for the
next year or 20 years or 60 years, Stay in the Fight.
What you can do in Jesus' name for this community can
be life changing. We are blessed with so many
resources. With talented people, with committed
disciples.

Proclaim the message, be persistent, whether the time
is favorable or unfavorable. Convince, and encourage,
with the utmost patience in teaching.
Endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry
out your ministry fully.

And we might add, work for justice, love and care for
each other, work to end gun violence, heal racial
divisions, feed the hungry, be stewards of creation.

And who knows where else God might lead us?

Paul says,
I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race,
I have kept the faith.

Stay in the fight. May it be so.