

October 27, 2013

**The Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost**

2 Timothy 4.6-5, 16-18

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

*The Rev'd Noelle York-Simmons, associate rector*

From a programmatic perspective, this morning's reading from Paul's second letter to Timothy couldn't be more perfectly timed. You see, during our formation time, the adult formation committee will be presenting what we officially call "Halfway Home" but behind the scenes we affectionately call "death day". At 10:20 in Ellis Hall, you will have the chance to hear from several different experts in topics of end-of-life planning. Financial planning, funeral planning, hospice care, retirement communities... There will be lots of opportunities to learn how to get your affairs in order, either well before it is time for you to do so or to help someone you love who is nearing the end of their time here in the mortal realm.

And so imagine my surprise when I opened this week's readings and was presented with this gift from Second Timothy. "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith." Paul is reaching the end of his life and is beginning to reflect to Timothy on his successes and his preparation for the next things.

First Timothy, Second Timothy and the Epistle to Titus are often grouped together as the "Pastoral Epistles." They are called this because they are written to the leaders of church communities rather than the communities themselves, like say the church at Corinth or the church in Phillipi. These letters discuss Christian doctrine and oversight of communities, with advice, instruction and encouragement to those who find themselves at the heads of these nascent communities.

The material in the letters to Timothy is tender material, intimate and dramatic. We are reading in on letters written from one individual to a beloved friend and student. Today's reading finds Paul in a moment of vulnerability, close to death and feeling deserted.

We don't talk much about death and dying unless we are in the middle of the process of dying or journeying with someone who is. We save our death talks for funeral planning when the reality is stark and can no longer be avoided.

Death conversations are not, generally speaking, comfortable for us. Even those of us with a solid and well-thought-out theology of death and resurrection don't really relish the notion of being left behind by beloved members of our family or community. There is a natural fear, an abiding sadness, when the subject comes up.

Our common language betrays this aversion. It is rare in common parlance to say that someone is “dead”. It is more polite, less jarring, I guess, to say she has “passed away”, “left this mortal coil”, “gone on to her greater reward”, “gone to rest in the arms of the Savior”. Don’t get me wrong, I think that using these phrases to work into our hearts the very difficult reality of bodily death makes sense on many levels. It makes it easier to wrap our saddened and frightened minds around the powerful transformation that has occurred in front of us.

But note that you will rarely hear us using these phrases here. On our written prayer list, our email prayer circle, our Prayers of the People, and even in the general speech of the clergy, we do our best to take Christian ownership of the concept of death. That is, in part, to help us remember that we believe in a God who has belittled death and made it something that no longer has power over us, that no longer holds court, in this realm or the one beyond.

And so we prove our own power over death by speaking its name. She has died. As Christ died. And she will rise as He did, too.

But Paul is talking about more than his impending death here. He is talking about how he lived his earthly life. “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.” For Paul, this race was not a 50 yard dash. It was a marathon. We read through his letters that he experienced all the parts of that classic marathon, too. He had moments of euphoria, times of deep despair and days when he just kept putting one foot in front of the other. I have no doubt that Paul had times when, like every other marathoner I know, myself included, that Paul thought, “Why exactly am I putting myself through this?”

But through this long, long race, he kept the faith. And for that, Paul believes that he will be awarded the crown of righteousness. And then, Paul adds a gentle note to his missive: “and not only me, but all who have longed for his appearing.”

Did you hear that? In his last days, the apostle Paul, known in some circles as the root of some of the most divisive texts in scripture, allows that all of us who have at one point or another longed to see the face of Christ will also receive that crown of righteousness. Let me say that again: Paul is offering that we do not all have to be holy marathoners in order to be welcome in the kingdom of heaven.

Did you get that?

Sprinters, too, and Saturday afternoon joggers, treadmill warriors and even the couch potatoes. And everyone in between.

All of us who have longed to see God. Welcome.

After this service, we will be providing an opportunity to dip your pinky toe into the waters of some end of life planning. There’s not a whole lot we can do to make it a joyous, celebratory occasion (though there will be really good coffee).

But this is your parish's way of acknowledging that these conversations are hard to begin. And that often we're too busy or distracted by the race we are running to actually see the finish line.

The tools we are offering will not make the process of letting go any easier, but they will make more space in the world for us to celebrate your life, to enjoy the memory of you, to mourn your departure for us for a time, instead of getting lost and distracted in paperwork, details and questions.

And when the paperwork is complete and details are sorted out, we can go back to the work at hand, to the race that is set before us, to run until we reach the end, to live fully until we die, to work for the Gospel until that day when we are welcomed into the arms of One we long to see, who will greet us at our entrance, "Welcome, good and faithful servant."