

**October 27, 2013 Norwalk**

**Pastoral Prayer**

We seek all kinds of things, O God, many of them important and nourishing and sustaining and satisfying. We seek a good education; a good job that makes use of our gifts and pays us enough to get by; we seek meaningful relationships with family and friends, and a strong community that looks after all its citizens. We seek good health – even if our habits and lifestyles at times belie it. We seek safety and security because often we are afraid. But in the midst of all these pursuits, we would seek first your Kingdom and your righteousness, trusting that when we do these other things will be added. And so we gather here in these moments to sing, sometimes; to laugh and share and make ourselves pliable to your Word; and just now to bow our heads in the company of each other to entrust once again all that we are and all that we have to your guiding hand.

We bring our Spirit-given gifts and the fullness of our resources that you might bless them and use them; we bring our aspirations, our anxieties, our fears and our frustrations that you might relieve and channel them; we bring our estrangements that you might heal them, and our disillusionments that you might reshape them into new commitments. And we bring to you our joys that you might hear our gratitude, and our concerns that in them you might heal, comfort, strengthen, and recreate.

Hear, then, our thanks for...

*---airbags and their protectiveness;  
---the blessings and opportunities of this great church;  
---mentors and pillars and their affectionate example*

Here our prayers of intercession for...

*---the Search Committee and its work  
---the ill and their healing  
---the grieving and their comfort  
---our leaders and their governing;  
---our troops and their well-being;  
---and as Jesus taught us, our enemies and our reconciliation.*

We pray in the name of Jesus, who taught us to pray: Our Father who art in heaven...

**2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18**

*As for me, I am already being poured out as a libation, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on that day, and not only to me*

*but also to all who have longed for his appearing.*

*At my first defense no one came to my support, but all deserted me. May it not be counted against them! But the Lord stood by me and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. So I was rescued from the lion's mouth. The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and save me for his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen.*

### ***Running Despite the Hills***

Boarding the plane recently I couldn't help overhearing the conversation of two young men in line behind me. I would guess they were in their late 20's, and one of them had apparently just gotten a new job. They talked of an earlier interview process that hadn't born fruit; the months of waiting for another opportunity and the circuitous route that had eventually led to this new position. Finally, the friend asked about the person who had previously been in the job.

"He had been there about 9 years, and apparently was a really nice guy – everybody seemed to like him a lot – but he was a really old guy – you know, like 55 – and had apparently lost his enthusiasm."

A "really old guy – like 55." I wanted to turn around and smack the guy, but at 57 I no longer had the strength. It was all I could do to simply totter down the jetway and collapse into the plane. But the conversation

highlighted for me the myriad trajectories of vision from which we look at life – one of which being age. It's certainly not a given that we get smarter with age, but from the elevation of time and experience, we do have the chance to gain some wisdom. And, hopefully, some larger perspective.

Not long ago I officiated at a funeral for a man I hadn't known who had passed away following a bout with cancer. The family had requested that the guest soloist sing the old Frank Sinatra classic, "My Way." Now that you have started singing it through in your head, you have already recalled that it takes the form of a philosophical rear view mirror on the part of a man apparently nearing the end of his life. Acknowledging that the "end is near" and that he is soon to "face the final curtain," the singer observes that he has lived a full and productive life.

*Regrets I've had a few  
But then again too few to mention  
I did what I had to do  
And saw it through without exemption*

*Yes there were times I'm sure you knew  
When I bit off more than I could chew  
But through it all when there was doubt  
I ate it up and spit it out, I faced it all*

*And I stood tall and did it my way*

No regrets – or at least few enough of them; looking back over the sweep of one's experience and feeling a sense of pride and satisfaction – or at least being at peace with the view. Sometimes, I recognize, that assessment is colored by a tint of nostalgia, but there isn't anything really wrong with that. I think it's axiomatic that no matter where, in the course of geologic time, a generation falls, previous generations had a more difficult time of it – their winters were always colder, their lunch boxes were always emptier, and the roads they walked to and from school were always uphill and knee-deep in snow. While the point of those stories could be to deride the current generation for its wimpier engagement of an even wimpier life, I rather think the intent is simply and perhaps proudly to observe that despite the challenges we faced, we made it; we overcame the hurdles and hardships...and you can too.

That, I think, is somewhere inside of Paul's sharing with Timothy in this almost valedictory letter to the younger church leader in which he, like the singer, an old guy maybe 55 or so, seems conspicuously absent real regrets. *"It's been hard. Times were tough. People I thought were supporters and friends deserted me. But God stood by me – uphill,*

*downhill, and through the snow. And now I can confidently say that I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.*” Too bad this wasn’t the text for last Sunday while the marathon was running through the streets of Des Moines.

That analogy, of course, is relevant because as Paul seems to hint, discipleship is a marathon more so than a sprint. One doesn't succeed or fail in a single burst of spiritual explosiveness, but rather persists in the steady lope of everyday life. And, as he assesses the various twists in his road, Paul feels some sense of contentment that he has kept at it, kept running, despite the hills inclining in both directions.

A closer look, however, notices that Paul isn't really claiming the credit it might at first appear. Yes, Paul may have kept at it, he may well have carried out his ministry in his own way, but ultimately it was not his own ingenuity and resourcefulness that got him through; it was God, he acknowledges, who gave him the strength. People – co-workers, friends, presumably even family – had variously helped and drifted away, but God had never wavered from his side.

You’ll recall – if you know anything about Paul’s life – that that holy companionship hadn’t meant a life of simplicity and constant comfort. Paul

was rather routinely thrown into jail, beaten, chased out of towns, forced to defend himself even to the churches he had established and, at least according to tradition, was ultimately martyred at the hands of the Roman government. The blessing of God hadn't translated into big bank accounts, material possessions, a pimple-free complexion, or the adoration of his peers. I don't know where – except from TV preachers – that we got the idea that big cars and boxes of bon bons were the signs of God's blessing; that luxury, leisure, and constant comfort were the high water marks of life. By any calculation of such things, Paul had had a hard life that only got harder when he started following Jesus; but as far as he was concerned it had been a precious one, a good one, a blessed one in which he was constantly conscious of the hand of God in his own.

And looking back over the sweep of it, what he calls attention to are not the fabulous tents he made for the most important names in town; not the wall full of diplomas earned from prestigious universities, not the politicians who sought his counsel or the platinum frequent flyer level he has attained as a sought-after consultant and speaker. He doesn't point to the successfulness of his children, the size and influence of his congregations, the philanthropic foundation he has established or the

honors he has been awarded. What he is proud of – in a contented rather than arrogant sort of way – what he feels good about, what matters the most to him, is that he has kept his eyes watching for what God is doing in the world, and offered himself up to whatever usefulness God could find for him in that holy project.

*“I have kept the faith”* is not a way of saying *“I have followed all the rules; I have done everything right”* but rather *“I have trusted in who God is and what God is doing, and in the power of God to make the best of me and everything else that God has made.”*

“And I have fought the good fight. I have poured the best of myself into this sacred calling, and now, in that same faith by which I have lived, I offer all that I have done, all that I have left, and all that will yet be into God’s own care and keeping. *To God be the glory forever and ever. Amen.*”

They are words that beg for a recalibration in our own assessment of the way we conduct our living – of what we are pursuing, what we view as important, and how we measure success. The Gospel, you see, is quite counter cultural in its parsing of genuine value. Its standards, its template of achievement and importance is a very different shape.

Remember the account of the Upper Room, when Jesus gathered with his disciples on what would prove to be their final night together? There was the meal they shared together that has become so emblematic for us, but there was also that awkward experience with the basin and the towel, when Jesus knelt down and washed the feet of his friends. There is nothing triumphant, magisterial, glamorous or sexy about that humble act, but after he was finished Jesus looked into their puzzled eyes and said, *“that pretty well sums it up. Think of it as a ‘new commandment’ – to love one another as I have loved you. This is what you are supposed to be famous for: the way you love one another.”*

As emotionally attractive as that sentiment sounds, we ought to admit how psychologically hard that concept really is. There are, after all, so many other things that would be so much more exciting to be known for. But as far as Jesus is concerned, this is it. There are no higher aspirations than this. If you are young – just getting started, just now testing your footing along this winding stone path of life – this is the trajectory, this is your highest calling, whatever job you may or may not have; whatever income you may or may not earn. ***How are you living in love?***

If you are really old – like me; fizzling out and barely able to sit up



and take nourishment – this is the measure of your life: not how far you made it in the corporate hierarchy or the size of your 401K; not the brand of your car or the number of months you are able to spend in warmer climates during the winter, ***but how have you loved?***

*“As for me,” Paul reflects, “I am getting close to the end. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing.”*

As for the rest of us? Well, we are still running, uphill, downhill, albeit some more swiftly than others. To us, I think Paul would simply say, “don’t worry too much about the hills. God is with you. As stewards of the grace you know, you just keep the faith.”