

Keep The Faith

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on Nov. 20, 2022

Based on 2 Timothy 4:6-8

I want to begin by reading a couple of paragraphs from an obituary of a man named Val Paterson that appeared in the Salt Lake Tribune a ten years ago. What is notable about it is that Val wrote every bit of it himself, except for the last three words of the first line:

I was born in Salt Lake City, March 27th 1953. I died of Throat Cancer on July 10th 2012. I enjoyed one good life. I traveled to every place on earth that I ever wanted to go. Had every job that I wanted to have. Learned all that I wanted to learn. Fixed everything I wanted to fix. Eaten everything I wanted to eat. My life mottos were: "If you can break it, I can fix it", "Don't apply for a job, create one."

I had three requirements for seeking a great job; 1 - All glory, 2 - Top pay, 3 - No work.

My regret is that I felt invincible when young and smoked cigarettes when I knew they were bad for me. Now, to make it worse, I have robbed my beloved wife, Mary Jane, of a decade or more of the two of us growing old together and laughing at all the thousands of simple things that we have come to enjoy and fill our lives with, such happy words and moments.

Now that I have gone to my reward, I have confessions and things I should now say. As it turns out, I AM the guy who stole the safe from the Motor View Drive Inn back in June, 1971. I could have left that unsaid, but I wanted to get it off my chest. Also, I really am NOT a PhD. What happened was that the day I went to pay off my college student loan at the U of Utah, the girl working there put my receipt into the wrong stack, and two weeks later, a PhD diploma came in the mail. I didn't even graduate. I only had about 3 years of college credit. In fact, I never did learn what the letters "PhD" even stood for. For all of the Electronic Engineers I have worked with, I'm sorry, but you have to admit my designs always worked very well, and were well engineered, and I always made you laugh.

The whole obituary is quite touching, very funny, and apparently too true.

What does it take to write your own obituary when you are dying rather young, and do it with such humor and panache? It takes a certain inborn grace, I imagine? It takes what we now call, emotional intelligence and a sense that every day is a gift.

I want to talk about that kind of intelligence. I want to discuss what it might take not to just live a meaningful life but to finish well. I think that is what is at the heart of the text from 2 Timothy today.

Writing from a Roman jail, with suspicion that he would soon be dead, the apostle Paul looked back at his remarkable life. Then he wrote his own epitaph:

“For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.”

Was Paul afraid to die? Probably some. Who isn't? But from this morning's text, I get the feeling he was saying goodbye to it all with no regrets. None.

It had clearly been a struggle. But Paul knows in his heart that he has, indeed, fought a very good, worthwhile fight. He has kept the faith when there were times when he must have thought it might be better to just give it up. He has finished his long race.

The now famous book, *Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light—The Private Writings of the Saint of Calcutta*, contains a revelation that is so surprising that it garnered a tremendous amount of attention. You may remember that Mother Teresa struggled with her faith and experienced a great deal of darkness for the last fifty years of her long and remarkable life.

“If I ever become a saint,” she wrote, “I will surely be one of darkness.”

A native of Albania, she joined the Sisters of Loretto, a missionary order, and was sent to Calcutta in 1929. She was assigned to the Bengali School for Girls where her superiors recognized her gifts immediately: “prayerfulness, compassion, charity; a natural talent for organization and leadership, presence of mind, commonsense and courage.” She was a tiny woman but she once chased away an angry bull in order to protect her girls. Another time she faced down a group of thieves trying to rob the convent.

In the 1940s she had a mystical experience in which she heard Jesus ask her to “come be my light” and her response was, “I will never refuse you.” She made a vow to “do something beautiful for God” and finally received permission to leave the Sisters of Loretto and found a new order, the Missionaries of Charity whose mission was simply to bring the light of God’s love to the poorest of the poor on the streets of Calcutta.

That is exactly what she and the Missionaries of Charity did: minister to the sick and dying, the homeless and forgotten—bringing a bit of compassion and dignity into lives that were totally lost and about to end.

Her work was so genuine and she was so guilelessly authentic that everyone who heard about her and met her concluded that if there ever was such a thing as a saint, Mother Teresa was one.

Early in my years of ministry I read a book about her by Malcolm Muggeridge called, *Something Beautiful for God*. That book made her something of a celebrity, and she was eventually awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

Who would have known that all the while she was experiencing not the spiritual fullness and contentment and happiness that everyone expected, but doubt, emptiness, longing?

Her personal journals and correspondence with her friends and superiors reveal a very brave woman doing remarkable things and all the time, struggling with darkness. Some of it is almost stream of consciousness, written to her spiritual director:

“The place of God in my soul is blank,” she wrote. “I feel that God does not want me. . . . Sometimes I just hear my heart cry out, “My God,” and nothing else comes. (pp. 1–2)

Some criticized her posthumously. Some among the evangelical community, found her darkness the equivalent of lack of faith. Some of the outspoken atheists who sold so many books a 20 years ago, gleefully rubbed their hands and said, “Aha! Her experience of God’s absence means there is nothing there, no God, as we have been trying to tell everyone.”

Martin Marty, a progressive Christian voice, said something else. He called the book “sadly beautiful” and “beautifully sad.” A *Newsweek religion* writer said he used to feel almost put off by Mother Teresa’s perfection, but after these revelations he said she was finally approachable. She was human after all.

Mother Teresa’s experience is actually a gift —a reminder that saintliness doesn’t mean living with consistent, sustained certainty and a daily personal communion with God.

She is a reminder that darkness is a part of faith, and that to be human is to doubt and experience spiritual emptiness and to struggle and do ones best to be brave despite the darkness we all face.

Now, what Mother Teresa didn’t do was surrender to the darkness. She did not become despondent, and withdraw from her call. Instead, with amazing strength, she fought the fight. She continued to do what she believed God wanted her to do. She never stopped loving Jesus and trying to be his light.

“I will never refuse you,” she had said at the outset, and her final dying words were simply , “I have never refused you.”

Frederick Buechner once wrote, “Saints are not ‘plaster statues,’ men and women of such paralyzing virtue that they never thought a nasty thought, never committed an evil act their whole life long.”

"Saints," Buechner says, "are essentially life givers. To be with them is to become more alive" (*Wishful Thinking*, p. 102).

Remember the theme that we are using as a banner over these November sermons are the words of St. Irenaeus, "The glory of God is a human being, fully alive."

Episcopal priest, Barbara Brown Taylor, whose church has kept the idea of saints alive, says, "What makes a saint is extravagance—excessive love, flagrant mercy, radical affection, exorbitant charity, immoderate faith, intemperate hope, inordinate love" (*Weavings*, Sept.-Oct. 1988, p. 34).

It's believing that life is so much more than putting up with a job you do for money five or six days a week for forty years before you rest in the sun a while and then pass away.

The writer of the New Testament, *Letter to the Hebrews*, speaks of life as an athletic event and exhorts us to remember the invisible beloved ones who are around us. "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses." The writer wants us to envision ourselves as athletes in the arena.

He or she envisions a coliseum, like the one in Qatar where the World Cup begins today, with a pitch in the middle and seats surround it. And that writer mentions a host of saints who were not all particularly saintly. Many started out in pretty dark places.

Then the writer implies that it's not how you start out; it's how you finish up that counts. It mentions a woman in the Bible named, Rahab, who aided the Hebrew spies, Joshua and Caleb, who settled the Promised Land. Poor Rahab started out as a prostitute, but she ended up in the family tree of Jesus.

Again, it's not how you start out; it's how you finish up. Paul started out as a violent persecutor, but he ended up as the one most responsible for the survival of the Christian movement. He was tempted to give it all up many

times, but, as he himself said, he fought the good fight, he kept the faith, he finished the race,

Of course, to finish well, it helps to have spent your life doing something you can look back at with pride and a sense of accomplishment. As has often been said, "It's a terrible thing to climb all the way to the top of a ladder and find out it is leaning against the wrong wall." (Thomas Merton).

But even with that possibility, a person can still open one's heart in a way that allows them to embrace their last years with grace and renewed purpose. It's never too late.

The journalist/speechwriter, Michael Gerson died this week. He regretted a few speeches he'd written for George W. Bush about non-existent weapons of mass-destruction in Iraq but he kept his head on straight and helped me see things more clearly than my liberal Democrat leaning brain could sometimes be blind to. He certainly finished well. Here is something on him from this morning's NYTimes ...

His last column for The Post appeared on the morning of his death. In it he reflected on the emotional pain of sending his younger son to college, and what being a father had taught him about life.

"Parenthood offers many lessons in patience and sacrifice," he wrote. "But ultimately, it is a lesson in humility. The very best thing about your life is a short stage in someone else's story. And it is enough."

I love stories about people who may not be born with gifts, talents, and good looks but make their one precious life sing, anyway.

Here is the best story I know about that. Let me finish with it. It's a first-person account told by Anjelina Citron:

She says, I'm attending a high school cross-country track meet. I'm waiting to see one of my children compete.

Right now they're running the girls' 5K race. Because part of the course is wooded, we lose sight of the runners for much of the competition.

Ten minutes into the race, the lead runners emerge from the woods, and the other parents and I stop chatting and pay attention.

As they get closer, I notice that one of the girls in the lead is at least a hundred pounds overweight. How is this possible, I wonder?

As the runners cross the finish line, the overweight girl veers to the left and continues around the track. She has completed only one lap of the two-lap race. We'll have to wait for her to finish before the next race can begin.

Maybe some parents are thinking about getting home late for dinner, but I'm thinking about that girl out there all alone, how she didn't look at any of us as she plodded by in her jersey and shorts. The tension is palpable, and a few spectators make jokes, but mostly it is quiet.

I think about the courage it takes for her to keep going. Could I do that? Fifteen minutes later, the overweight girl comes into view, and her teammates run to her, yelling her name. As she crosses the finish line, she is surrounded by dozens of cheering fans.

I think we can all learn a lesson from this. Why? Because people who finish well at the end of life *are* most often those who have made a habit of finishing well all their life long,

It's about fighting the good fight; it's about keeping the faith. It's about finishing the race we began.

Amen