

For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure. ⁷ I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. ⁸ 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. (2 Timothy 4:6-8)

Fight the Good Fight

I'm sure you all heard about the Southwest Airlines flight that had an engine explode a couple of weeks ago. It blew out a window and a woman was killed. The plane depressurized and plunged thousands of feet. These days, many planes have Wi-Fi. But you have to pay for it. So as the pilot wrestled with the damaged plane, passengers started pulling out their cell phones and their credit cards and buying Wi-Fi so they could text their loved ones good-bye. One of those passengers was a WELS pastor, named Pastor Bourman. He and his wife were on their way to the same retreat that my wife and I went to a couple of weeks ago. They have three little girls, ages 6, 4 and 2 who were with their grandparents. That pastor had a few minutes to buy that Wi-Fi and text his father what might have been his last words to their daughters. Now, God is good and the plane landed safely – which is why I know he did that. You can actually read his account of the incident on the New York Times website. The words he sent to his daughters were simple: “Tell the girls we love them and that Jesus is with them always.” Now, I'm sure there was a lot more he would've liked to say. But he only had a few minutes and those were the best last words he could come up with.

Does that seem kind of dark for Confirmation Day? Today is rightly a day of joy here at Peace Lutheran Church. We're going to hear four young people confess their faith and promise to suffer all, even death, rather than fall away from the teachings of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. So why bring this up? In part, because of that promise to suffer all, even death, rather than fall away. And it part because the words that we're considering from St. Paul are his last words to Timothy. By testifying of his own faith, St. Paul used his last word to issue a call to faith, to Timothy and to us – and to you four young people: **fight the good fight!**

I.

Now, St. Paul was not on an airplane that had an engine explode. He was in prison in Rome. But he knew death was near. Soon he was going to be executed for the horrible crime of spreading the gospel. Timothy wasn't a small child. He wasn't even Paul's son. He was a missionary that Paul had recruited and trained. By this time, they had worked together for a number of years. As Paul prepared to lay down his life for the faith, he shared with Timothy his confidence in God's grace throughout that life. He did that to comfort his friend. God recorded it to encourage us. **Fight the good fight! Keep the faith!**

Now, we don't know if Timothy made it to Rome before Paul died. But either way, Paul wanted Timothy to know that they would meet again in heaven. That's what I want, too, first of all for our confirmands as they complete the two years we studied together. But also for all of you, my members here at Peace. By God's grace, we've gotten to spend more than a decade together here, studying God's word and growing together in our faith. Now, don't get the wrong idea: I'm not going anywhere, at least as far as I know. I'm not dying either, I don't think. But life goes on. Sooner or later, some of us will move away. Some of us will die. Whatever pulls us apart here, I want us all to be able to come together again with Jesus in heaven.

St. Paul said, **“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.”** Paul knew that Timothy would mourn when he died, so he offered him the only comfort a Christian can have when someone we love dies. And it is a comfort that every one of us should want our loved ones to have. If the Lord calls me home today, what do I want you to remember about my ministry to you? What do I want my wife and children to cling to for comfort? **“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.”**

What does that mean? The good fight is living as a Christian in a sinful world. In just a couple of months, our confirmands are going to start high school. Even if they go to HVL or MLS, it will bring a whole host of new challenges to their faith. Every day that we live here, whatever age we are, the devil attacks our faith. He uses pain and sorrow to try to get us to question God's love. He uses temptation to pull us away from the life we promised to live when we were confirmed. He incites the Old Man inside to rebel against God and

to fight the New Man. He conspires with the unbelieving society we live in to raise questions and doubts in our minds. And sadly, most of us can think of situations where he seems to be winning – people we know who seem to have drifted away from God and their confirmation vows. When our confirmands are lying on their death beds, years from now I hope, we want them to be able to reassure those they leave behind that they have fought the good fight.

How will those loved ones know? Our confirmands will keep the faith. That's what those promises are all about. They will promise to live all their lives the way God's word commands. They will promise to hold to the truths of Scripture that they have learned from the Evangelical Lutheran Church – and that's where the vow to suffer death rather than fall away comes in. They will promise to hear the word and come to communion faithfully for as long as they live on this earth. All those things are related. We keep the faith when we cling to Jesus no matter how much the devil tempts us, no matter how badly our lives hurt, no matter what doubts rise in our minds and what attacks the world around us levels against us. How can we possibly do that? Well, we can't, not on our own. We're sinners. That Old Man inside us never stops trying to kill the New Man. Left to ourselves, he would always win.

But we are not left to ourselves. Jesus is with us. He will never leave us. St. Paul kept the faith. He fought the good fight and finished the race because Jesus kept his faith alive. How did he do that? Through that gospel that these young people will promise to hear until they die. Through the message of forgiveness proclaimed to them when they confess their sins and when they come to communion. Through the good news of Jesus' victory which they will hear in church and read about in their Bibles. That message is God's power. It's what keeps our faith alive in this world. And we need it not just because we're weak. We need it because the fight is fierce and the warfare never stops. We need it because the devil never rests. But Jesus is greater than the devil. His word is more powerful than temptation and the false opinions of an unbelieving society and even the Old Man who lives in our hearts. The gospel triumphs over our doubt.

What is that gospel message? You already know it. These young people could tell you. Jesus took our place in life. We sin every day, so he came here and lived without sin. Not only did he never do or say anything evil or sinful, he never had a sinful thought. He never lusted or coveted or felt a sinful desire. His heart and his life were perfect for us. God counts them as ours. And God counts all our sin as his. So Jesus died in our place. On the cross, Jesus even suffered the hell that every sinner deserves. He paid for all the sins we just keep committing. Then on the third day, he rose. When he came out of that tomb, God was telling us that our sins are paid for and forgiven. God was promising us that death will not win. We will go to heaven when we die. We will rise from the dead when Jesus returns. And in that resurrection, Jesus was even promising what Pastor Bourman texted his father to share with his daughters: Jesus will be with us always. That message is the very power of God. That message is what will enable you young people and all of us old people to fight the good fight today and tomorrow and every day until we see Jesus. It will give us the power to keep the faith and finish the race. Trust it! Hear it! Cling to it!

II.

If Pastor Bourman and his wife had died that day, their little daughters probably would not remember very much about them. The six year old maybe. But the younger ones? Not so much. But I imagine their grandfather would've kept that text for them. As they grew up, that last reminder of Jesus' love would probably have become the thing they remembered most. Thankfully, our confirmands today are not in that situation. If the Lord called their parents home today, they would have much more to remember. But they would also have the memory of all those parents did to make sure they know Jesus today. As much as I value the time that my wife and I have spent with our children, as much as I hope they remember the vacations and the holidays and the conversations, the greatest thing that we have shared with them is the gospel. St. Paul said it a little differently than Pastor Bourman did. But it is the same promise for what comes after the struggle here. **Fight the good fight! Wear the crown!**

Paul said, **“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.”** That's the promise. More than a reward, it's the gift of God's grace. It is the last and greatest present that God gives to us just because he loves us. That crown of righteousness declares to the whole world that we are righteous because Jesus has taken all our sins away. But also, when we put on that crown, we will be truly righteous.

What is the greatest danger to the faith of these young people? What is the greatest danger to all our faith? Our own sinful nature – that Old Man I've been talking about. He lurks inside us. He leaps at temptation. He corrupts our best efforts to follow God. He even whispers in our ear in church and asks when that guy in front is going to be done. Well, when we put on the crown of righteousness, he will be gone. We will finally be perfect in our hearts and in our minds as well as in our words and in our actions. We will truly be saints who gather with Jesus in paradise.

And it is a crown. Paul wrote these words in prison. Roman prisons were not nice places. They were filthy, scary dungeons. They were dark and disease and brutality ruled. But Paul looked forward to receiving a crown. In his day, a crown meant that you won. It was the gold medal at the Olympics. And it meant that you ruled. Kings wore crowns. It means both of those things for us, too. On Judgment Day, the battle will be over. We will win. We will all tie for first place and get the gold medal. And we will live and reign with Jesus for all eternity. Instead of all the pain and sorrow we face now, we will have all eternity in glory to marvel at how God makes us all winners and all rulers with Jesus.

How do we know for sure that crown will be ours? Paul says that God will award that crown to all those who have longed for Jesus' appearing. Only a believer longs to see Jesus! Now, do you think that 8th graders do that? We grown-ups do. When life hurts, when we see how much worse our world gets every day, we long for Jesus to come back. When our children's faith is in danger, when the warfare drags on and on, we long for Jesus to come back because we know that's when the glory comes. That's when peace returns. That's when God will remake this world and set us free from all sorrow and pain forever. Of course, we long for that. You know what? Young people do, too, even if they haven't had as much experience yet with pain and sorrow. Their faith looks forward to Jesus. That is what we've been teaching them since they were little.

The crown is ours. We fight the good fight here not to win that crown, because we know it's waiting for us at the end. That's what you young people will confess today. That's why you will make your promises today. Keep them, with the power that God gives in Christ. Fight the good fight. Keep the faith. And then when the end comes, you will wear that crown! Now, we invite you to come forward and make those promises. Amen.