

The Twenty-sixth Sunday of Ordinary Time

(Year C)

<i>First Reading</i>	Amos 6:1, 4-7
<i>Response</i>	Praise the Lord, O my soul!
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 146:7, 8-9, 9-10
<i>Second Reading</i>	1 Timothy 6:11-16
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	Though our Lord Jesus Christ was rich, he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.
<i>Gospel</i>	Luke 16:19-31

The 26th Sunday in Ordinary Time for Year C continues our journey through Paul's first letter to Timothy, but it takes us to chapter 6 where Paul has a famous section on fighting the good fight, where he actually uses the language of athletics and athletic training to describe the spiritual life. Let's see what he says to young Timothy in 1 Timothy 6:11-16:

But as for you, man of God, shun all this; aim at righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith; take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses. In the presence of God who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, I charge you to keep the commandment unstained and free from reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ; and this will be made manifest at the proper time by the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no man has ever seen or can see. To him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen.¹

So just a few aspects of this passage that are important to highlight. First, remember Paul's writing this to a young pastor, Timothy. He's giving him instructions about how to lead others in spiritual life and life in Christ, and he's ending here with an exhortation to Timothy to build up his virtues, to strive for

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

growth in virtue. So he lists several virtues here. He says, I want you to aim at acquiring the following virtues: “righteousness, godliness...” That means piety. So righteousness is living according to God's commandments. *Dikaiosune*, it's a very similar term to when Paul talks about justification. Okay, so living according to God's commandments. “Godliness”, that's piety. So reverence for God, honoring God. “Faith, love, steadfastness, and gentleness.” So we see these different virtues that Paul's singling out for Timothy to grow in. Well, how's he supposed to do that? Well, this is fascinating. He says:

Fight the good fight of the faith; take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.

So there are two terms here that are interesting, “fight the good fight” and “[make] the good confession.” So what are those referring to? Well, it's interesting that “fight the good fight” is one of these consecrated phrases from scripture that we continue to use in our language today. It's an idiom. It's an expression people will often utilize, they'll say, "He fought the good fight" or "You got to fight the good fight.” Now, when we tend to use that today, idiomatically, we tend to just mean they fought for some principle of justice. They did what was right in the face of wrong. And we tend to use it in an earthly context, but that's actually not what Paul means here. Paul's actually inverting it. He's taking an earthly image in order to describe a spiritual combat. So you can see this in Greek a little more clearly. When Paul says, "Fight the good fight," the word for fight that he uses there for the noun is *agōna*. It literally means a fight, or a contest, or a competition. So agony or *agōna*, this Greek word, is the root word for athletic contests or athletic competitions, like a wrestling match or some other kind of athletic competition. You can actually see this elsewhere in Paul, where he'll take athletic imagery from the Greco-Roman world and use it to describe spiritual combat, or spiritual contests, or spiritual competition.

The best example of this is from 1 Corinthians 9:24-27. So Paul uses the same language in 1 Corinthians 9 to describe the spiritual battle. Listen to how he puts this. In 1 Corinthians 9:24, he says:

Do you not know that in a race all the runners compete, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete...

And the Greek word here is *ho agōnizomenos*. So every one who agonizes, everyone who competes in athletic context...

Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. Well, I do not run aimlessly, I do not box as one beating the air; but I pommel my body and subdue it, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.

So notice, Paul uses the same root word there for *agōna*, the contest, to describe or to compare spiritual conflict, spiritual battle, or should I say, spiritual exercise to two athletic kinds of competition, to racing and to boxing. So he's saying, "Look, if you're in the race, only one person receives the prize." They didn't give out participation awards in the ancient world, okay? You get the prize if you win the race. So he says, "Well, run as to win it," right? Aim to be the best. The same thing, in terms of boxing, you don't punch at the air, you punch at your opponent's face. And so Paul says, "I'm not boxing at the air. I don't want to sit here aimlessly boxing at the air." Rather, he says, "I pommel my body. So as to subdue it, so as to gain the virtue of self-control so that I myself am not disqualified from the match after having preached to others."

So if we take that same athletic imagery and we transport it over back into 1 Timothy in the reading for today, when Paul says, "Fight the good fight," the good fight that he's describing is the spiritual battle for virtue. He wants Timothy to grow in virtue. He wants him to acquire the virtue of righteousness, and piety, and gentleness, and patience, and faith, and love. But in order to do that, he's going to have to train like an athlete. It's not going to come easy. It's not going to be as if you're just baptized and all of a sudden you have all the virtues. Timothy, who is not just baptized but ordained a minister, still has to fight to acquire the virtues. So just like the athlete has to subject his body to discipline in order to acquire physical strength, so too the spiritual athlete has to subject soul and the body to discipline in order to acquire spiritual virtues, in order to win the prize, in order to compete in the race. So what Paul's saying here is I want you to:

Fight the good fight of the faith; take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.

Now, what is the good confession? This is a little obscure. There's some debate about exactly what he means here. The Greek word *homologia* means to confess,

but it also means to profess, I to publicly declare something. Like when Jesus will say in the gospels, "Whoever confesses me before others, I will confess him before my Father." So if you're faithful and profess me to be the Christ, I will profess you to be one of my members and you'll enter into the kingdom of God. If you fail to profess me or to confess me before others, then I'll reject you.

So this may be a kind of public profession of faith that Timothy made at his baptism, that he professed Jesus to be the Christ. It may also be a similar profession that maybe he made at his ordination, because in the context of the letter Paul also will allude to when Timothy had hands laid on him and he was ordained to be a minister of the gospel. Well, we'll look at that in another video.

Let me just say, I'm inclined to the first interpretation that this is Timothy's profession of faith because the analogy that he draws here is with Christ Jesus before Pontius Pilate. When Pontius says, "Are you the king?" And Jesus says, "You say so" or "You have said so." He implicitly affirms his identity as Christ, as king of the Jews in the presence of Pontius Pilate. So it seems to me that Paul is suggesting to Timothy that he too has made the good confession by confessing Jesus to be the Christ, the Lord, the Savior, in the same way that Christ affirmed his identity in the presence of Pilate, and it cost him his life on the cross.

So, that is the good confession, it's the confession of Jesus as Messiah. The confession of Jesus as Messiah, which he ends this paragraph, this section by saying:

I charge you to keep the commandment unstained and free from reproach until the appearing...

The Greek here is *epiphania*.

...the appearing [epiphany] of our Lord Jesus Christ; and this will be made manifest at the proper time by the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light...

So you hear Paul here almost launching into a profession of faith, identifying Jesus not just as the Lord, not just as the Christ, but as the King of kings and the Lord of lords. And I think it's interesting there, you'll notice that Paul says, "Until the appearing or the epiphany of Christ." Now you might be thinking, "Wait a

second. The epiphany happened when the magi found him, or the epiphany happened at his baptism, or sometimes in some Christian traditions, the wedding in Cana is described as the epiphany, the appearance of Jesus Messiah." But here Paul is using that word to what elsewhere he refers to as the parousia. So in some passages the second coming of Christ will actually be called the epiphany of Christ, the final epiphany. Can we call it the second epiphany? We probably shouldn't because there's actually several epiphanies in the early stages of the gospels there. But Paul here is describing the eschatological appearing of Jesus Christ at the end of time, at the final judgment. So he's encouraging Timothy here, eschatologically, to keep the faith, to fight the fight, to make the good confession, until he who is King of kings and Lord of lords will come again.

So in closing, I would just, from the living tradition, like to take an interesting passage from Tertullian, one of the early Latin Fathers. He's really called the father of Latin Theology in the West. He wrote a book on the martyrs or a letter to the martyrs actually, where he takes this athletic imagery that Paul uses in the letter to Timothy, and he applies it to the martyrs who are preparing to make the good confession, the one that will lead to their death. And this is what he says about these spiritual athletics:

In like manner, O blessed, consider whatever is hard in your present situation as an exercise of your powers of mind and body. You are about to enter a noble contest in which the living God acts the part of superintendent and the Holy Spirit is your trainer, a contest whose crown is eternity, whose prize is angelic nature, citizenship in heaven for ever and ever.²

I love this imagery here because what Tertullian is saying is, if you are in Christ, if you're a Christian, and especially if you're a Christian preparing for martyrdom, then you need to realize you are fighting the good fight and you are making the good confession, but you're not doing it alone. Every good athlete has a trainer. And who is your trainer? The Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is your trainer. The living God is your superintendent, and they are guiding you, training you to acquire the virtues, to acquire the strength, to make the good confession, so that you might obtain eternal life.

And being from the time period I'm from, I can't read this passage without thinking about the movie, *Rocky*, and the trainer from *Rocky*. What does a trainer do? A trainer doesn't just encourage. A trainer also castigates you, presses you to do more

² Tertullian, *To the Martyrs* 3.3; trans. R. Deferari.

than you ever thought you could on your own. And that's what the Holy Spirit is. He's our trainer in the spiritual life, who in order to help us grow and acquire virtues we might have thought not possible for us to acquire., He's going to push us, He's going to press us, but also empower us and give us the strength to make the good confession and to fight the good fight even unto death.