

Message: "When Fighting's a Good Thing"

Scripture Lesson: I Timothy 6:6-19

⁶Of course, there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment; ⁷for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it; ⁸but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these. ⁹But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. ¹⁰For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains. ¹¹But as for you, man of God, shun all this; pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness. ¹²Fight the good fight of the faith; take hold of the eternal life, to which you were called and for which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.

¹³In 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 ¹⁴to keep the commandment without spot or blame until the manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁵which he will bring about at the right time—he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords. ¹⁶It is he alone who has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see; to him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen. ¹⁷As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. ¹⁸They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, ¹⁹thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.

I used to fight a lot. Yes, I mean fighting with my fists and my feet. Mostly with my little brother. Little brothers were made to be fought. That's what I thought when I was younger, anyway. Many of you know about some of this history, such as my confession to you in my first year as your pastor that my brother and I fought all the time, with fists and kicks and anything that lay at hand - might I recall to your memory the time I knocked my brother out with a shovel? Down he went, unconscious, me thinking he was dead and ready to leave the country in disgrace, all at around eight years old. When he stood up a few seconds later, I remember great relief, followed by horror that he was immediately running inside the house to tell mom. I am still grounded, I believe, for my act of violence.

I didn't just fight my little brother; I used to fight my best friend, who lived next door, and in winning those fights I lost that best friend over time; I fought during recess once and had that cherished privilege taken away for an entire week, which I thought was terribly unjust. Before you get the picture in your minds that I regularly had black eyes and bandaged fists, this was the kind of fighting that seven to nine year old's get into -awkward, uncoordinated, incapable of anything like serious injury; fists may fly, but nothing much makes contact, and while the mental and emotional damage was palpable, the physical damage was almost negligible (except for the incident with the shovel, I should mention).

The point that I have learned from my fighting days is that there are no real winners where fighting is concerned. At least fighting with fists and kicks.

I watched a two-minute segment of a Trump rally this past week - and I wish I hadn't. I watched it at the suggestion of a commentator who was highlighting the cultish aspect of the spiel - and how it was a fine example of a call to fight, to fight for our country, to fight for our rights, to fight for wealth and power and greatness, and especially to fight, and I quote, the "extreme liberal tyrants," which I thought was as interesting as it was horrifying. But one part of the speech by our former president stood out; he mentioned, with passionate volume, that in America, we only kneel before God.

I wonder what god he was referring to? Certainly not the God represented in Jesus. According to the speech, Trump's god was a god of violence, worldly power, military might, national superiority, and economic wealth. I can't think of a more opposite characterization to the God Jesus came to the world to share.

Oh, and did I mention, the crowd responded to several comments by Trump with a nazi salute (or something that looked remarkably similar - an outstretched arm with a hand pointing a finger towards the speaker). It is not only eery - it is profoundly dangerous, what is going on in MAGA country, which is in our country, where the attempt is being made to justify politically-motivated violence in the name of God -- and God will have none of this.

I feel like I've run out of ways to decry this, to denounce this type of ideology and rhetoric and messaging, filled with so much hatred and prejudice and hypocrisy and illogic and misinformation and outright lies; perhaps you feel the same. Like fighting with fists and kicks, fighting with ugly words and insulting language and divisive rhetoric and just plain lies leads to nothing good. It's wrong, but more significantly, it's dangerous; and, what makes me especially outraged is it intentionally misrepresents God, which is a whole other level of wrongness.

I think a lot of us feel this way, for the one question I hear from so many people experiencing the same sentiments is this: how do we fight this? How do we counter this movement of darkness and evil in our land, this extremism that denies facts, that is positional rather than rational, that blinds so very many to the wrongness of the platform?

Well, Paul's advice is to fight back - but in a completely different way. Paul says that we, as people of faith, are to "fight the good fight of faith." What does this kind of fighting entail, the good fight of faith? Thankfully, Paul gives us detailed insight into this manner of resistance, which is counter-cultural to say

the least. The good fight of faith involves the pursuit of righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, and gentleness; it involves fighting through employing the patience and endurance that sets one's sights on eternal goals rather than immediate victories; we are to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous in all manner of things, ready to share our resources, effort, attention, and time with any need that rises to our awareness. Above all, we are to be extremely careful of wealth, which Paul goes to great extremes to lift up - money so easily becomes what we really worship, in the forms of security and comfort and luxuries that our world justifies so easily. Material possessions are but a direct correlate to wealth, and deserve the same caution.

In other words, we Christians are called to fight back, but with the weapons of ordinary goodness. We need to fight the terribly skewed forms of Christianity out there, where the association of God with the powerful and the wealthy, with nationalism and whiteness, with violence and hostility, is horrifically proclaimed. We need to fight with the ordinary tools of goodness, truth, justice, equity, kindness, service, generosity, grace, peace, stewardship, and moderation. It may seem at first that these weapons are not up to the task, but an intentional look at history demonstrates that it is only the virtuous that endure; evil needs to be reborn and reinvented for every age, but what works for life - for all life, that is, not just humans and their great diversity, but all of creation, this planet and all the life therein - what works for life remains consistent - what works for life is an appreciation for the sacredness of all that we have, all that we are, and all that it means, and to shape all things according to that sacredness. Mohandas Gandhi once said "When I despair, I remember that all through history the way of truth and love have always won. There have been tyrants and murderers, and for a time, they can seem invincible, but in the end, they always fall. Think of it--always."

Let us continue the fight, then; but let us make sure that our methods align with the one we follow. Remember, it is never the right approach to ask if God is on our side; our constant challenge is to make sure we are on God's side.