

Riding Shotgun on a Hearse
I Timothy 6:6-19
Colebrook Congregational Church
September 25, 2016 / 19th Sunday After Pentecost

For this week's selection, I chose to go with the Epistle lesson, because the Gospel lesson is more of the same as the last week's warnings about money.

Timothy was the Apostle Paul's assistant, and this Letter is one of three where Paul is writing with advice to fellow Christians. This is different from most of his Letters, where he is addressing specific issues that have occurred at a church. This is a more general letter.

The first part of the selection has Paul speaking in praise of contentment as a characteristic of godliness. He described how moderation, in resistance to temptations, is the path of faith. As Followers of Christ, we are to pursue righteousness, faithfulness, love, endurance, and gentleness. He advocated fighting the good fight, and charged us to keep the commandment.

Commandment. Singular. So, one commandment, which has to be the commandment to Love. Agape, the Divine Love that is shown for God through charitable acts to those in need, even if they are a stranger.

Most Wednesdays, I attend a clergy discussion group in New Haven, and I find that the long drive down gives me a good opportunity to meditate on the scripture of the week, helping me to discern it's meaning and applications.

This past Wednesday, I was listening to NPR and on the program Fresh Air, movie director Antoine Fuqua was being interviewed about his new movie, a remake of The Magnificent Seven. He was talking about how his version differed from the 1960 original and from the movie that all of these are based upon, The Seven Samurai by Akira Kurosawa.

I was only partially listening. I had seen the Kurosawa film and the 1960 film, and even the terribly cheesy sci fi version. But then, something caught my attention. Fuqua said that he wanted to keep the spirit of the original and the Kurosawa films as critical to its success. He said that he discovered that the word "samurai" comes from the word meaning, "to serve." He took that

as a watchword going forward with the story, always remembering that the Seven are meant to serve.

That stuck with me. Samurai were meant to serve. It reminded me about how Christians are also supposed to serve. And as Paul preaches, Christians are supposed to fight the good fight.

If you haven't seen the Seven Samurai or the Magnificent Seven, it is a story of a village that is terrorized by a gang who repeatedly steal the food and valuables of the villagers. The gang has taken nearly everything and their leader promises to return for the rest later. The villagers decide that they need help to fight back, so they sent out a delegation to find and hire some help...but they did not have much to offer whomever they hired.

Now, in the 1960 film, the Yul Brenner and Steve McQueen characters are introduced in a way that displays this characteristic of fighting the good fight.

A passing salesman, stopped in some town, saw a deceased man lying in the street for hours. He paid an undertaker to make arrangements, even though he did not know this person. The conversation was explicit about its religious significance, with the undertaker saying to the passing salesman, "you behave like a Christian and a brother." The passing salesman claims that he was only doing what any decent human would.

But there is a problem, some people living by the cemetery are trying to stop the burial from happening, for racist reasons, so the undertaker couldn't find anyone to transport the coffin. A crowd gathers to listen to the salesman trying to convince the undertaker to just take the coffin up the hill to bury.

Finally, Yul Brenner's character intervened by volunteering to drive the hearse himself, as if it's no big deal. He wasn't involved in any of this, and he didn't have to get involved. He wasn't even connected to that town, he too was just passing through! But there he went, and got onto the front of the hearse.

Then Steve McQueen's character, also a drifter, got involved. He borrowed a shotgun from Wells Fargo and got up to ride shotgun on the hearse to help out. Others agreed with the sentiment that the burial should go forward, but they did not have courage to act.

Those two guys were fighting the good fight. That person deserved to have a decent burial, and they made sure it happened. The other people had no right to stop it. This was a good fight, one worth fighting, and this showed us that those two guys were good guys capable of doing good things and pursuing good causes.

Yul Brenner was then met by the delegation and was hired to find some help for them. Now, they could only afford to pay about \$20 per person, so the people who accepted the gig had to be either desperate or a good person, moved by the villagers' story, and wanted to help fight. It seemed at first that it was desperation, but as the story progressed and the Seven got to know the villagers better, their motivations all turned into noble ones.

At one point, the Seven were captured and disarmed and then led out and away from the village, and let go. They could go cross the border and be home by morning. They was nothing to go back to the village for...except a good fight to fight. This was the moment where their motivations proved to be either desperation or righteousness. They could walk away, no strings. Each of them had to discern what their motivations truly were and make a decision. So they re-armed, and returned to the village, full of righteousness to finish the fight and free the village from its oppressors.

Those cowboy samurais fought the good fight, because it was the right thing to do. But that is just a story, written that way. So what is a real good fight, and what can we do about it?

A good fight is seeing an injustice of some sort and not sitting idly by and letting it happen. A good fight is defending someone who is being ganged up on. A good fight is standing as a true witness in the face of lies. A good fight is any act of charity, especially for a stranger.

In my final year of Divinity School, I was elected to the Graduate School Senate, and when a dear friend visited me, she insisted on coming with me to sit in on one of the sessions. She was disabled and when she needs to move around a lot, she used a wheelchair. I hadn't noticed until that day, that the building was not handicapped accessible. I suggested that I skip the session, or that I carry her up stairs. But she insisted on climbing up the three flights to the Session Hall; and when she got there, her pain was incredible.

After that day, I started to push the Senate to either move or make accommodation to the current building. I built a coalition of Schools that normally do not work together towards this end. The best that we accomplished was an alternate site being selected to use when we had advance notice of accommodations being needed. When I started this effort, I knew that ultimately, either of the original options was not really viable, but I knew that it was a good fight worth fighting.

We can answer the Call to fight the good fight with our God-given gifts, our talents, and our skills. Whatever we are good at, it can be harnessed to fight the good fight. We only need the courage to take action, and we can gain that courage from our faith in Jesus, who will never abandon us. When we fight the good faith, we can be certain that Jesus will be right next to us, sitting shotgun.

Please join me in the Spirit of Prayer:

Righteous God, we give you thanks for Paul's helpful advice. May we be filled with Your strength, to have the courage to stand up for oppressed, to stand up for those in need, and to stand up in opposition of injustices, confident with our faith in You, that when we do, we will never be standing up alone. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Intercessory Prayer

[PAUSE]

O God, You invite us to hold the needs of our sisters and brothers as dear to us as our own needs. Loving our neighbors as ourselves, we offer our thanksgivings and our petitions on behalf of this church and the world.

We give You thanks for all Your blessings and gifts. May we use them wisely, in the manner You want us to do.

We know that we do not always live up to the standards that come with being followers of Jesus. We ask Your pardon for any misdeeds and for failing short of loving all our neighbors, and we thank You for Your grace in forgiving all who come before You.

We pray for our neighbors. We ask for comfort to those in distress. We ask for wellness to those unwell in mind, body, or spirit. We ask for refuge for those uprooted by fire, flood, or famine. We ask for justice for those who are victims of violence, and their families. We also ask that You guide the hands of those who are in a position to use their gifts to help others.

We pray for ourselves. We pray for Your guidance in all that we do, and for Your strength of spirit to do what is right, and to act generously towards all, full of Christ's Love. We offer to You, the prayers of our hearts, both silent and spoken, confident that You will hear them and respond.

We especially pray for:

Loving God, open our ears to hear your word and draw us closer to You, that the all may be one with You, as You are one with us in Jesus Christ our Savior, Amen.

Psalm 146

Praise the LORD! Praise the LORD, O my soul! I will praise the LORD as long as I live; I will sing praises to my God all my life long. Do not put your trust in princes, in mortals, in whom there is no help. When their breath departs, they return to the earth; on that very day their plans perish. Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD their God, who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them; who keeps faith forever; who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry. The LORD sets the prisoners free; the LORD opens the eyes of the blind. The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down; the LORD loves the righteous. The LORD watches over the strangers; he upholds the orphan and the widow, but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin. The LORD will reign forever, your God, O Zion, for all generations. Praise the LORD!

1 Timothy 6:6-19

Of course, there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment; for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it; but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these. But 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. For 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.

But as for you, man of God, shun all this; pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness. Fight 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. 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 without spot or blame until the manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ, which he will bring about at the right time--he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords. It 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. As 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. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus 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.