

I HAVE KEPT THE FAITH
2 Timothy 4: 6-18 June 29, 2014
The Church of the Covenant

The General Assembly, the highest governing body in the Presbyterian Church (USA), voted last week to allow same gender weddings. I attended as a commissioner from Washington Presbytery. As part of the General Assembly they showed a video of the Presbyterian Church at reunion in 1983, when the Northern and Southern Churches, divided since the Civil War, reunited. There was a scene of a bunch of Presbyterians, men mostly, marching up a street in Atlanta, dressed in white shirts and ties. It was sort of the church as I remember it; it was a snapshot of the church in the year I was ordained as a Presbyterian minister. It then showed a picture of the new Moderator of the General Assembly, Randy Taylor, who was wearing the same tie that I had on watching the reunion 30 years later! Maybe I've become a curmudgeon. Maybe I am out of step with our culture and world. Some things change; some things remain the same. So in this week where I turned 60 and ordered my first senior citizens coca cola from Wendys, what does this old curmudgeon have to say about the actions of the General Assembly?

Our text from 2 Timothy is sort of the old Apostle Paul, writing to the young Timothy, his son in the Lord, and Paul is admitting he is at the end of his ministry. Personally, I can see myself giving one more good chapter to ministry; I have worked hard and believed harder in relation to the church I pledged to love and support more than 30 years ago through my ordination vows. I always prayed that I would give to the Lord a church, meaning the whole church of the Lord Jesus not just the Presbyterian part, that was at least as strong and faithful as the one I inherited as a gift 30 years before. I scaled that back a few years ago to say "some churches", not all churches. And just a couple of years ago I scaled back that bold promise I made to the Lord to say –I would like to give You, Jesus, just one really awesome, strong, loving, faithful church as a gift when I hang up my pulpit robe. I'd like to give you the gift of The Church of the Covenant –strong, united, faithful, loving, true and compassionate. Just one, Lord, just one.

So now I am at the point where I want to say, as the Apostle said, *"I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith."* (2 Timothy 4: 7)

Over the years I have learned to be a good and gracious loser. I have learned to fight a GOOD fight, with the emphasis on GOOD, not fight. I don't want to demonize the other side in a debate; I try to believe the best about folks, not the worst. I try to find Christ in them staring back at me. I think one knows what one believes, and has considered that over all those years, has prayed about it and studied about it in the Word of God, and then makes the best case, without anger or reproach, as kindly and gently as one can, understanding that these are brothers and sisters in Christ, not the "enemy". These are people to love, not condemn. In this last General Assembly I think I can honestly say as the Apostle said: *"The Lord stood by me and gave me strength to proclaim the word fully."* (v. 17) I have sought to "fight the GOOD fight" through Amendment A and Amendment B, and Amendment O, and the Authoritative Interpretation, and the issues of ordination and now the issues of marriage. I tried to count the number of times I have had to stand up and say, "THIS IS WHAT I BELIEVE" and I believe there have been at least 6 occasions over the course of my 30 years ministry. I have sought to love people, and especially those who disagree with me, and the church, with which I feel increasingly out of step. It is not easy to be a minority within one's own church.

My conclusions are twofold –Number one, I am not changing my viewpoints that the authority in the Protestant Church is scripture and no amount of saying that the Holy Spirit is leading the church, can confuse the subject that the Spirit will not contradict what the scripture already says. God will not speak

with a contradictory voice on matters. What HE has already said HE will continue to say; God is absolutely consistent over all of eternity; He is the unchanging God. And the second conclusion is this: It is not about winning or losing; it is about being faithful. It is not about people agreeing with me; it is about me seeking to be faithful to the One who has called me and claimed me and raised me up to be a preacher of HIS Word. I approach this with humility. I am not smarter than scripture; I don't know more than God; I am a minister of God's revealed truth through His Word. That's who I am; that's who I want to be; and by the grace of God that's who I will be till my life's end. I want to say with the Apostle – I have fought the *GOOD* fight...

I want to say with him as well, *"I have finished the race"*. (v. 7) I took a whole series of ordination vows in 1983 that promised among other things to further "the peace, unity and purity" of the church; I vowed to be a friend and colleague in ministry; I promised to participate in the governing bodies; I promised to serve you with "energy, intelligence, imagination and love". I didn't promise to keep my vows only when everyone agreed with me; I promised to keep my vows even when everyone disagrees with me. I didn't promise that I would be faithful to my promises to Jesus and the church only when things were smooth sailing and happy; I promised to keep my vows when the storms came, and the rocky shoals appeared on the horizon, and the ship was in danger of sinking. I didn't promise to be a friend and colleague to only those ministers I like and agree with; I promised to be a friend and colleague to all my fellow ministers. What I began in 1983 I intend to keep. I will not break my promises. I will not be moved to break my vows. I will not buy into any human arguments to suggest that because the church has changed that releases me from my vows. This is faithfulness in the same consistent direction and for a long time. God has kept His promises to me, Jesus is faithful, and it is my intention to keep my vows till life's end. The church may change, the world may change, but as the scripture says, *"Jesus is the same yesterday, today and forever."* And, God help me, so am I.

And I want to say with integrity and with the Apostle Paul, *"I have kept the faith."* (v. 7) I was praying at this last General Assembly and pouring my heart out to God; I was despairing over the dismantling and disintegration of the church I have worked tirelessly to support; I have raised millions of dollars for it; I have served it 80 hours a week for 30 years; I have been part of God's plan to take declining churches and through Jesus and the Holy Spirit, revive them and turn them around and give them a future and a hope. I love the church; I love the Presbyterian Church; I love the buildings and the committees and the people and the traditions; I love the institution of the church and so it is hard to watch this thing I love and cherish dissolve before my eyes. And in the quiet, as I was praying, I heard a still, small voice saying, "Its about me, Stuart." It *IS* about Jesus. Its about His life and death and resurrection. Its about HIM as the source of our life. Its about a Savior who loves all people and if HE be lifted up HE will draw all people unto Himself. Its about lives changed and transformed by His love and power. Its about people, all people, drawn to His message of hope in the Gospel. When we take our focus off of Him, when we make it about any issue other than HIM, when we focus on ordination or marriage or politics or culture and take our eyes off of Jesus, it is then we are plunged into discord, disagreement, dissolution and destruction. All people, all people, all people can come to HIM and be saved. Its not about all this other "stuff"; its about HIM. I don't have faith in the church; I have faith in HIM. I don't believe that a human institution, the church, as much as I love it, will get it right; I believe Jesus Christ has already gotten it right. I believe that every life that connects itself to HIM will be a better life. I believe all men and women, regardless of circumstance, find their truest life and their best self in HIM. He is the source of our life. He is the way and the truth and the life. IN HIM all things hold together. To receive HIM within our heart makes us His children. In His Gospel is the hope of the nations. He shows no partiality, no bias for or against, except toward those who love HIM. I will never stop preaching about HIM; I will never be silent about Jesus; I will never give up. For in HIM ALONE we all find our unity and our reconciliation.

May it be said of me, *"I have kept the faith"*; I have kept my eyes fixed upon Jesus; its about placing our hand into His hand and walking with Him in faith through these uncertain times. My faith is in the Lord Jesus Christ. Times may change; Jesus never changes. The world may change; God shall not be moved. I may lose *every* battle, humanly speaking, in this life but I know the One in whom there is eternal victory. The battle is over; *"it is finished"* as Jesus cried from the cross; the good fight is already won; what Christ has done at Calvary has already achieved the victory of life. The victory is His, not mine.

As I enter my 60th year of life and as I enter the last chapter of ministry, may it be said of me --*I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.* Thanks be unto God who giveth us the victory through our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

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IF THIS HAS BLESSED YOU, PLEASE PASS IT ALONG TO A FRIEND!