

This sermon is about cliches and the danger of cliches - phrases made trite by overuse. In particular, the danger of religious cliches and their off-spring, political cliches.

The Second Letter To Timothy is attributed in the New Testament to St. Paul. But there is strong agreement among biblical scholars that this letter wasn't authored by Paul, but by someone living after Paul. This person, supposedly, in the custom of the day, used Paul's name, and what he knew of Paul's thought, to communicate Christian teaching to others. Here are the most famous lines from this letter: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race. I have kept the faith."

"Fight the good fight." I remember singing that line boldly when I was a boy in the choir. "Fight the good fight with all thy might." You know how it goes. "Christ is thy strength and Christ thy right." Now, I've never been much of a fighter. I've never been in the armed services, and never given my courage nor had it tested in that way. But, like most boys, I dreamed of glory. My early heroes were the boxer Joe Louis and World War One's Sargent York - played in the movie by Gary Cooper.

My one big chance to get into a fight came in my second year of boarding school. For some reason there arose some bad blood between our class and the juniors. There were several incidents, one of which ended by a junior being stripped of his pants and tied in his undershorts to the school flag pole. That was it - all out war. This was in 1950. It was almost *West Side Story* - the Jets against the Sharks - but in an earlier, bucolic New England.

However, we had a canny dean, and, as headmaster, a former Army Officer. They decided to let our two classes fight it out - but under their rules. We would meet on the football field, maybe a hundred boys in all. There would be no weapons of any kind, no punching, only wrestling. Since the offending act had been pulling off someone's pants, that was to be the sole object of this riot. No one was to get hurt, and there would be plenty of faculty present to make sure no one did. We had perhaps twenty minutes.

All I remember of this extraordinary fight was that somehow I got an elbow or maybe a knee in the groin - you know, where it all but kills you. I was out of service after the first five minutes. I can't even remember if I kept my pants on, or lost them. Soon it was all over. Most of us were exhausted, just as the teachers had wanted. Maybe some of the fellows felt that they had "fought the good fight." I was too sore to care one way or the other.

Back in junior high school I read a book by John R. Tunis called *The Iron Duke*. It was about a young man from the mid west who went to Harvard and became a great long distance runner. In a sequel he went on to win the Olympics. So began my career as someone who would "run the race." In boarding school. over four years, I ran ten out of the twelve trimesters. The longer the race, the better. No, longer wasn't always better. In my senior year we ran cross country against a Boston College freshmen team led by a fellow named Johnny Kelly - who would later twice win the Boston Marathon. In our race I tried to follow on Kelly's heels. A bad mistake. In less than a half mile he was out of sight.

By the end of those four years I'd run myself out. Looking back on all that racing effort I can remember one moment of truth. I was in the dentist's chair and he was drilling. Those were the days before Novocain. I remember saying over and over to myself: "This hurts. But not as bad as running a cross country. Not as bad!" So much for "running the race." In college I tried throwing the javelin. It was a lot easier, and, I thought, a lot more manly.

I don't know when I first heard the call to "keep the faith." Today *Keep The Faith* is the title of a song by the cajun singer Bon Jovi. It's also the name of a religious record company. But my first memories of "Keep the faith" harken back to movies, the kind that starred Sammy Davis Jr. and Dean Martin. And, as I recall, it was, "Keep the faith, baby." One guy would start to saunter off, put up a finger or two, and call to his buddy, "Keep the faith, baby!" I never really knew what that meant, so I never dared use it myself. But as an expression it seemed then, as it may still be, pretty cool.

But this sermon isn't about my running limitations, or my brawling limitations, or my street talk limitations. It's about the nature and depth of our Christian faith as against cliches such as "fighting the good fight," and "finishing the race," and "keeping the faith."

Because they carry the prestige of being found in the Bible and having been printed millions of times, these cliches have gained a weight that few cliches can hope for. They have spawned spin-offs, most particularly in the political area where the purpose is to influence people with short, catchy phrases.

"I have fought the good fight." Today we "fight 'em over there so we won't have to fight 'em here."

"I have finished the race." Today we strive to "stay the course."

"I have kept the faith." Today we "support the troops" and we "honor the flag."

Whatever the good intentions of this anonymous writer of the Second Letter to Timothy, I don't think he was doing St. Paul any favor. I'm sure Paul was not above using a cliche himself now and then. But when it came to a serious subject - for instance, the subject of love - Paul could not and would not lower himself to short cliches. We all know how the whole 13th chapter of his First Letter to the Corinthians begins: "Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal." And we know how that extraordinary chapter ends: "And now faith, hope and love abide, these three: and the greatest of these is love." Paul just couldn't say it in a trite phrase such as "What the world needs now is love sweet love." Which is why his words about enduring love are so consistently read at both weddings and funerals. They give us a depth of expression and of thought that is worthy of our faith.

And, finally, what of Jesus? I don't know that Jesus hated cliches, but I suspect he did. Like Lincoln long after him, Jesus chose to tell stories - parables - and to allow his listeners to find the truth in them. And the reason we today still find truth in his parables is because they are not cliches. Their truth is not superficial, but must be sought out.

And as for “fighting the good fight,” when the soldiers come to arrest Jesus and Peter wants to defend him, Jesus says, “Put your sword back in its place, for all those who take up the sword perish by the sword.” There would be no fight, no brawl.

As for “keeping the faith,” Jesus would do this in his own, very private way, with no fingers raised, and no glib phrase. “Am I not to drink the cup that the Father has given me?”

Lastly, again in John’s gospel, the final words of Jesus upon the cross are not, “I have finished the race.” There’s no mention of a race. Jesus says simply, “It is finished.” And you and I are free to delve as far as we want or can into the depth of what those words mean for his life, and what they might mean for ours.

Beware of cliches, religious cliches, political cliches, any cliches. They are tricky formulas posing as wisdom. As we slog through these next twelve months toward the 2008 national elections, we will read and hear all sorts of cliches - some perhaps well meant, but most revealing shallow thought and a glaring lack of imagination. Beware of being overly impressed by those who - on either side - make “preserving the American way of life” their highest goal. “The American way of life” is a cliché when we trumpet it, and it is a cliché when our enemies deride it. And beware of being entranced by those - on either side - who decry “Islamic facism” as “the deadliest threat of our time.” How nice to wrap up all the problems of this world into a cliché and make it our number one target. But the problems of this world are too complex to roll up into a cliché. And you and I, and our beloved country and its way of life, are involved in the world’s problems. Acknowledging this might be a great step forward in helping to relieve the world’s miseries.

It is always helpful, even essential, to remember that we find our deepest inspiration not in any combination of words, but in a real life lived in an extreme time under extreme circumstances. And our connection to this life is not primarily through the remembrance of his sayings, but through the very concrete, and very simple and silent elements, of bread and wine. Amen.

