

A sermon preached by the Reverend Michael Anderson Bullock, Rector,
St. Martin's-in-the-Fields Episcopal Church, Columbia, South Carolina,
on 19 August (Proper 15):
Jeremiah 23:23-29; Hebrews 12:1-7, 8-14; Luke 12:49-56

“Strength to Do Your Will”

*I've come to start a fire on this earth – how I wish it were blazing right now!
I've come to change everything, turn everything rightside up – how I long for it
to be finished! Do you think I came to smooth things over and make everything
nice?*

[Luke 12:48-51: The Message,

Eugene Peterson]

That's how the first three verses of this morning's gospel lesson sound in Eugene Peterson's translation, called, The Message. These words startle us and grab our attention -- too much so, perhaps in these oppressively hot, dog days of summer. I doubt that anyone is overjoyed to hear this gospel, no matter how it is translated. As the preacher for the day, I could kick myself for not assigning one of the other clergy to preach today! I certainly have struggled with this passage all week, trying to move beyond its threatening sound to what I trusted would be its liberating truth, if not its “good news.” Nonetheless, it sure would be easier to preach about the 23rd Psalm!

I think most of us would say that life is already hard enough without us being pounded when we come to church, that somehow we come to church for a safe harbor's respite. Collectively, our nerves are already raw enough, as evidenced by the anonymous note I received from someone in last Sunday's congregation. The note chastised me for taking time to introduce new music to the congregation. It was

evidently not what this person wanted – or needed. Fair enough: The sad thing about the note was that it was sent anonymously, which means that there is no way to have a conversation, no way to know about the hurt that might be festering in this individual's heart.

But then, maybe the note had something to do with the weather. This kind of unrelenting heat and humidity can make anyone cranky. Of course, the emotional tinderbox in which we all live has been smoldering for quite some time. It is so easy for us to lose track of just how draining it is on the national psyche for our country to be at war. We are conflicted over this conflict, and because of that confusion and frustration we are more weary than we realize.

As a people, it seems that we can't quite figure out how to execute this war or precisely against whom to fight. Nor does it help, when our politicians seem to find their strategic thinking and sense of leadership in what they read in the latest polls. And for our part, we all cry, “Support the troops;” but most

of us are content to allow 1% of our population do all the dirty work, which leaves the rest of us free to demand lower taxes and to complain about gasoline prices.

This past week's stock market news does nothing to assuage our edginess, as the world's investors suck wind in the face of greedy mortgage speculation. As a result, our sense of insecurity increases, and our willingness to deal with hard things falls.

When I was writing this sermon, Bev called me and asked how I was doing. I told her that this was a hard gospel and that I was really struggling to get a handle on it. She groaned in sympathy and then said sheepishly, "don't make it too hard for us." My first thought was: "If Momma ain't happy, no one is happy." Then I began to wonder: Can hard words ever contain good news? What does it take to mine that "good news" from these hard words?

The answer to these questions is endurance. It takes a level of strength to withstand the disappointment of what is impermanent to make room for the eternal. It takes strength not to fade when things get hard. It takes the kind of strength that is rooted in love and in love's commitment to dig in, when all other signs scream for us to run away in fear.

To the question: Can good news come from hard words? we all know the answer, even if we would prefer that it come to us in easier, less threatening terms. And this "good

news" comes in more digestible terms from this morning's second reading.

The lesson from Hebrews contains the key to unveiling the good news from Jesus' hard words. The writer of Hebrews speaks about athletes in training, pushing themselves beyond their comfort zones in order to reach a level of performance that allows them to run with unflinching endurance. Listen again to the words and images of the epistle's opening lines.

Strip down, start running – and never quit! No extra spiritual fat, no parasitic sins. Keep your eyes on Jesus, who both began and finished this race we're in. Study how he did it. Because he never lost sight of where he was headed – that exhilarating finish in and with God...

Hebrews 12:1-2a – [The Message](#).]

So, hard words notwithstanding, this sermon's singular point is about building the spiritual strength we need in order to receive the life God gives.

It has been 26 years since I was last paid to be a football coach. August's approach, in spite of its predicable heat, still contains a hint of excitement for me with its promise of a new season. Now anyone with a clear head will recognize that running around in football pads in 100-degree heat is not fun. In fact, it is dangerous.

August football begins with what are known as "two-a-days." Double practices each day are the order of business, because there is a great

deal of work to be done by players and coaches alike, if the team is to be ready for the first game. No one likes “two-a-days.” To exert yourself fully, twice a day, is hard enough, but to do it in the August heat, in uniform, approaches torture.

Yet, to those who wish to contribute to the team, to those who wish to be able to do their best, no one hesitates to move beyond what makes them comfortable. For players and coaches all know that strength comes from challenging what makes us comfortable. Yet, such training is neither easy nor very often pleasant. If it were, everyone would be doing it.

Years ago, I remember having a conversation with a senior warden from my previous parish. Paul was his name, and we were having a rector/senior warden chat because I was struggling and losing heart. I was feeling this way because in order for the parish to prosper and grow both spiritually and in terms of numbers, it was necessary for us all to move beyond our present comfort zones. For my part, I was trying to guide them to this new place, but true to human nature, the congregation resisted, sometimes reacting hurtfully. But as a good Senior Warden, Paul knew all about this, and so after letting me vent my frustration, he turned to me and told me this story.

He told me that in high school he had been one of the top quarterback prospects in the State of New Jersey and that his high school football coach worked him hard, constantly pushing him toward excellence.

At this point in his reflection, Paul paused and looked at me. When he caught my eye, he finished the thought by saying with surprising vehemence, “and I hated that guy!”

I sat uneasily in the ensuing silence, not quite sure where this story was going, but soon thereafter my Senior Warden continued his story without the bitterness in his voice. Then he said to me, almost as if it were a confession: “It was only when I came to Duke to play that I finally appreciated what my coach was doing for me.”

What Jesus says in this morning’s gospel is undeniably hard. There is no getting around this fact. What he says can offend, disappoint; it may even cause some of us to turn our backs on Jesus. But we must remember that hard words can contain good news, especially when the hard words are rooted in love and commitment.

The fire that Jesus anticipates setting is the cauterizing fire of the Holy Spirit. It is God’s fire, given in love (“tough love,” if you will). The Spirit’s fire means to temper our human metal so that we may be strengthened to face the demands of this life. Jesus desires to set this fire loose upon the entire earth so that all God’s children may be strong enough to receive the weight of glory.

For in his crucifixion and rising, Jesus turns the world upside-down – or from God’s vantage point – Jesus turns the world rightside-up – to where it belongs, so that in Communion with our God, real life is

grasped, taken in, and truly celebrated.

The fire Jesus seeks to set, the transforming purpose Jesus makes through the offering of his own life is not about niceties and smoothness. It is about redemption and eternity. In the cross, the Lord defeats death and free us from our addiction to fear. And this is a battle – for him and for us.

So, in this gospel the Lord speaks hard words of deep truth and life. With these words, Jesus challenges us to train ourselves for endurance so that we can be strong enough to finish the race that he has already won for us. For it takes strength to receive God's new life. It takes strength to love.

You see, in Christ's triumph over death, he alone wins the race. He alone overcomes our ancient foe and wins the privilege of standing on the victor's platform. But Jesus has done this, not for his own glory, but for the Father's glory; and the Father's glory is meant for us.

The "good news," then, is that "in the tender mercy of our God" we are beckoned to stand in victory with the Lord, and all we have to do is cross the finish line to join Jesus on the gold medal stand.

That's it: Jesus has done what we cannot do. He has won the race and shown us that fear and death do not define our God-life. And the joyous and unexpected news is that he invites us to join him in victory, but in order for us to stand with the Lord on that victor's platform, we must be

strong enough to cross the finish line. No one else can do that for us.

It doesn't matter how we do this. Some are strong enough to run across the line. Others walk. Many of us will be forced to crawl on our hands and knees in the face of life's trials; but it doesn't matter. Just cross the finish line and join our risen Lord in sharing the gold medal of eternal life.

Don't be fooled. This takes strength and endurance, if we are to take into our own hands what God gives.

Being a mature Christian is clearly not for the faint-hearted. It is clearly not for those who want to do their own thing. Love and love's commitments require strength, strength to be present, strength to show up, strength to be in Communion.

So, as we pray and work for this strength, as we even move beyond what makes us comfortable, it is fitting that we offer the concluding collect, which often completes our Prayers of the People.

*Almighty and eternal God, ruler of all things in heaven and earth:
Mercifully accept the prayers of your people, and strengthen us to do your will; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Book of Common Prayer, page 394.