

"The Long Defeat"

A sermon taken from Philippians 2. 5-11 and preached on Palm Sunday, 2011 at
Providence United Methodist Church in Charlotte, North Carolina
by Dr. Ken Carter.

When I first started going to Haiti years ago I came upon one of the best books I have read in my life, *Mountains Beyond Mountains*, written by the Pulitzer Prize winning author Tracy Kidder. It is a biography of a man named Paul Farmer, who grew up in the rural poverty of the Deep South, attended Duke as an undergraduate and then Harvard Medical School, and now divides his time between Harvard, where he teaches, and central Haiti, where he operates a medical hospital.

I enjoy reading, but it is unusual for me to read a book more than once. I have read *Mountains Beyond Mountains* three times. It is passionate and funny, and is about the best portrait of the Haitian people I have come across. I was on a panel discussion with Paul Farmer a few years ago at Wofford College, and I found him to be a wonderful human being, not arrogant in any way, and genuinely interested in the students. I took Jacques Lamour, who is from Haiti, with me that day. On the ride back Jack said: "it was a great day; Paul Farmer got to meet Jack Lamour!"

I was alerted recently to a passage in *Mountains Beyond Mountains* that I had missed the first times around. Farmer is reflecting on the dilemma of living such a divided life, teaching at a place like Harvard, where most everyone is successful, and practicing in Haiti, where most everyone is desperate.

Toward the end of the book an emaciated young man is flown to Boston for emergency surgery, with funds raised by Farmer's non-profit organization. Later the young man would die, and one of the staff would question whether this was an appropriate expenditure of the twenty thousand dollars it took to fly him there. This gets back to Paul Farmer and he has a conversation about it with Tracey Kidder.

Could the money have been spent in a better way? Farmer responds, "*Yeah, but there are so many ways of saying that? For example, why didn't the airline company that makes money...why didn't they pay for the flight? That's a way of saying it. Or how about this way? How about if I say, I have fought for my whole life a long defeat. How about that? How about if I said, that all it adds up to is defeat?*"

"A long defeat. I have fought the long defeat and have brought other people on to fight the long defeat, and I'm not going to stop because we keep losing. Now I

actually think that sometimes we may win. I don't dislike victory....No, no, I'm not complaining. You know, people from our background...we're used to being on the victory team, and actually what we're really trying to do is to make common cause with the losers. Those are two very different things. We want to be on the winning team, but at the risk of turning our backs on the losers, no, it's not worth it. So you fight the long defeat."

Where did Paul Farmer get the phrase, "the long defeat"? It is from his favorite book, *The Lord of the Rings*, where Galadriel says, "*Through the ages of the world we have fought the long defeat.*" And Galadriel had sprung from the profound imagination of JRR Tolkien, who once wrote, in a letter to a friend, "*I am a Christian....so I do not expect history to be anything but a long defeat—though it contains some samples or glimpses of final victory.*"

Palm Sunday flows into Passion Sunday, the events of Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem, the King of Glory, becomes a story about betrayal (by one of the disciples) and abandonment and denial (by another). It is the journey that began when Jesus set his face toward Jerusalem, but it began even earlier, when Herod slaughtered the innocents, when those worshipping in Capernaum drove him from the synagogue. Holy Week is the culmination of the events of Jesus' life, the natural and inevitable conclusion, maybe, of the one who gained so much of his identity by reading the suffering servant passages in Isaiah, "**surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows.**"

It is the way of Jesus, this road of suffering.

**He emptied himself,
taking the form of a servant,
and became obedient unto death,
even death on a cross**

Have this mind in you that was in Christ Jesus, the apostle Paul writes to the Philippians. And so those who follow Jesus will encounter grief, sorrow and suffering. We can choose to become passive, stoic, or cynical all of this-----"*only the good die young,*" the popular song expressed it, or, in the words of Tolkien and Paul Farmer, we can learn to fight the long defeat.

Why do we fight the long defeat? On Christmas Eve each year I have stood in the center of our sanctuary, the room filled with candlelight and repeated the words of Howard Thurman, about the work of Christmas:

*To find the lost
To heal the broken*

*To feed the hungry
To release the prisoner
To rebuild the nations
To bring peace among brothers and sisters*

These are inspiring words, and I think he gets it exactly right. And yet...some of the lost remain lost, some of the broken are still broken, children go to bed hungry, prisoners are released and then return to prison, nations are rebuilt but then they are crushed again, and violence and warfare continues. So what do you do?

Do you chalk the words of that poem up to the idealism of a great preacher and prophet, and then maybe give up, the benefit is not worth the cost, do you throw in the towel and have a seat on the sidelines? Or, do you fight the long defeat?

Two weeks ago Dr. Eugene Macklin from Haiti was with us. What name do you give to an experience of a country that has extreme poverty and then hurricanes and then an earthquake and then cholera but the long defeat? "*Is it getting any better?*", someone asked the doctor, who listened, and smiled and talked about the lives that have been saved.

We fight the long defeat for a simple reason: we are followers of Jesus, and Jesus seemed to constantly be making common cause with those the world called losers: gentiles, lepers, the poor, children, women, the sick, the mentally ill, the hungry. Why did he do that? **It was his mission in life: the son of man came to seek and save that which is lost.**

Now none of this sat well with the religious authorities, and it was finally what got him killed. You can feel the tension building in the gospels, and if you are here on Friday evening at the Tenebrae service, you will hear the words, and sense the deepening darkness, and feel the impending finality of the long defeat.

So why such extravagance, why such a gift, poured out in that way, what a waste, God dying for the ungodly, why such a sacrifice for a world that had turned its back on him? It is all beginning to unravel in the readings for Holy Week, the last chapters of any gospel, take your pick. And yet, Jesus fights the long defeat. Jesus makes common cause with the losers. Why does he do this? Listen to the explanation of Will Willimon, who was with us on Friday:

"The significant thing is that Jesus willingly accepted the destiny toward which his actions drove him, willingly endured the world's response to its salvation...And he did it for Love: the cross is not what God demands of Jesus for our sin but rather what Jesus got for bringing the love of God so close to sinners like us."

Sinners like us...finally the motive for such an extravagant, costly grace is the life of each person, that each person matters to God, that young Haitian lying on an

operating table, a young woman struggling to find herself in this world, a man at mid-life wondering if he has made the right sacrifices or if they have simply been compromises, a woman at the end of life who also feels betrayed or abandoned. On the cross Jesus makes common cause with them, with us, on the cross Jesus does not turn his back on them, or us, it is, in the words of Wesley's hymn, love's redeeming work ...

*To find the lost
To heal the broken
To feed the hungry
To release the prisoner
To rebuild the nations
To bring peace among brothers and sisters*

And that is not only our making the world a better place, not only what we can do in this world, but more crucially---there is that word, related to the cross---more crucially it is what God does in us and for us, we are lost and broken, we are hungry and imprisoned, we inhabit the ruined cities and live with our own irreconcilable differences. The cross is what Jesus got for bringing the love of God so close to sinners like us.

People like us, we are used to being on the victory team. But in holy week, we journey once again into the heart of darkness, into the mystery of our faith, into the clearest image we have of the long defeat:

**He emptied himself,
taking the form of a servant
And became obedient unto death,
Even death on a cross.**

Sources: I am grateful to Alan Jacobs for his reflection on the concept of "the long defeat" in *Mountains Beyond Mountains* and its origin in Tolkien. William Willimon, *Why Jesus?* Howard Thurman, "The Work of Christmas".