Sunday, November 18, 1990
ENDANGERED CHARACTER QUALITIES (No. 5 in a Series: Endurance)
Luke 14:28-31

As you look back on your life, what do you wish you hadn't quit? Think about it for a minute. What do you wish you hadn't quit? For some of us, it's easier to answer this question than others. Maybe some of you wish you hadn't quit high school when you were 16 and were no longer legally required to attend. Others among you may wish you hadn't quit college before earning your degree, or perhaps you regret not finishing graduate school.

Or maybe you wish you hadn't quit taking piano lessons at age 12. Perhaps when you hear our choir and the soloists who sing from time to time, you think, "I wish I hadn't quit taking voice lessons." I know people who wish they had not quit taking swimming lessons. And there are others who regret quitting the excellent physical exercise program they began with such diligence a few months ago. Or maybe you're bemoaning the fact that you quit the diet that was working so well.

On a deeper level, there are those who wish they hadn't quit a promising career for another job that seemed more lucrative because they wanted to make big money quickly, but it didn't work out that way.

And some of you may even be thinking, "I wish I hadn't quit on God." You might have made a commitment years ago to walk with God in your life, and for a time, you were doing it. The presence of God was an active power in your life. Then, after a while, you began to take God for granted. You let down on your spiritual disciplines, your regular times of prayer. You used to be faithful in your participation in public worship, but other things crowded that out, and now God seems far away.

Quitting, a lack of endurance, can have a high cost because it's so difficult to get started again, to get back on track. Endurance, which can be defined as staying power, being faithful to one's commitments, and the act of following through, is an endangered character quality, especially in our time.

I meet so many people who look back on their lives, shake their heads with regret, and say, "Why did I quit when I had such a good start?" "Why did I cop out when I should've hung in there?" "Why is it that it's often easier to quit than to endure?" "What is it about bad habits that makes them easier to fall back into than holding on to good habits?" You can see why endurance is a constantly endangered character quality.

What does our Christian faith have to say about endurance?

In one of his many books, Harry Emerson Fosdick tells about a character in the New Testament whose name is mentioned only three times and then only very briefly. I had never heard of this individual until I came across his name in Fosdick's writings. I suspect there are few people who know of this man. His name was Demas, and some of us are much more like him than we are like other New Testament people whose names are more well known.

We first meet Demas in Paul's letter to Philemon. There, Paul mentions him briefly as being a co-worker in the church, along with Mark, Luke, and Aristarchus. From what little we know, Demas was a devoted and promising disciple.

The second time his name is mentioned is in Paul's letter to the Colossians. Again, he is mentioned along with Luke, the beloved physician. Reading between the lines, Demas is not quite as promising a disciple as he first seemed. He is beginning to fade.

The third time Demas is mentioned is in the Second Letter to Timothy, in one of perhaps the last paragraphs that Paul ever wrote. Now Paul says of Demas, "Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica." Here, in brief, is the story of an individual who made a fine beginning but, lacking the character quality of endurance, made a poor ending.

We frankly don't know what the relationship was between Luke and Demas. Incidentally, this Luke is the same person who wrote the Gospel according to Luke in the New Testament and the Book of Acts. Since Luke and Demas were both close companions with the Apostle Paul, we can assume that Luke and Demas knew each other quite well.

I like to think that Luke remembered Demas and his lack of the character quality of endurance, and that is the main reason Luke included the parable in his Gospel where Jesus says, "For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether you have enough to complete it? Otherwise, when the foundation is laid and there is not enough money to be able to finish it, all who see it will begin to make fun of you, saying, 'This individual began to build and was not able to finish.'"

Aren't all of us familiar with the experience of a strong beginning and a poor ending? Isn't it obvious that the qualities that make a good start possible are not the same as the qualities that see life through to the end? Starting power and staying power are not the same in any realm.

We're all familiar with the story of the race between the tortoise and the rabbit. The rabbit makes a grand beginning, while the tortoise seems slow by contrast. But it is the tortoise who perseveres and wins the race. So we see in Demas a familiar figure, capable of good impulses, generous responses, and strong loyalties, but he lacked endurance.

We live in a culture today that, perhaps more than any other time in history, has stressed the value of a good start. To give a child a good start, we are told, is one of the most crucial things that can be given to a young human life. And we all recognize the truth in this idea, but it is not the whole truth. I see so many people who have had the benefit of a fine beginning, but there has been no follow-through. I know of parents who never missed a parent-teacher conference when their child was in preschool, kindergarten, or first grade. But as that child grew older, there was less interest. Endurance is an endangered character quality because, while emphasizing a good beginning, we have not stressed endurance — staying power — in an equal way.

Or look at our own lives. Many of us here have had a good start. We have no complaints about that. In church, in family, in school, and in our early Christian upbringing, we had a fine beginning, but we know that there are times when we have lacked endurance. We have been like Demas.

There is something else that has been going on in our present-day culture that has to do with making endurance an endangered character quality. We live in a time when too many of us expect overnight success, instant stardom, instant wealth, quick promotions, fast growth, speedy solutions to our problems, and even instant spiritual maturity. And if our expectations

aren't met quickly and easily, there's a strong tendency in this culture to quit. So it is that people give up and quit jobs prematurely, quit educational programs prematurely, and quit on their spiritual growth prematurely. I see so many people who join this church and make a fine beginning in their spiritual journey, but then after a while, they fade. Like Demas, their love for this present world takes over.

Our Christian faith reminds us that the qualities of character that make for a good beginning are not the same as those that see life through to the end.

Secondly, our Christian faith reminds us that, however strong, grand, and beautiful one's beginning may be, it doesn't do much for human life without a good ending. Our faith here is not speaking of success in the way the world defines success, as in some sentimental novels where everything comes out all right, where everyone lives happily ever after with no grief, no pain, no suffering. Stories like that are not about staying power or endurance.

The character quality of endurance is summed up in the Apostle Paul's words when he wrote near the end of his life, while he was in prison because of his faith, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith." If that can be said about you and me at the end of our lives, then we've had endurance. Or think of the staying power of Jesus and the rich meanings of his ministry that have come to us because he had the endurance to go through to the end, where he could say from the cross right before he died, "It is finished."

What is the worst tragedy in life? To face suffering? To know grief? To be severely handicapped? I don't think so! We have seen individuals who have faced these trials and have had the moral staying power so that they came through to a great conclusion.

But here's true tragedy: to see an individual who is born with many extraordinary gifts, who makes a strong beginning, rises to a responsible position, is loved and trusted, and then betrays that trust, deceives his friends, and then gives up on life and takes his own life.

How then do we get endurance? What is the source of that character quality?

First, on a very practical level, you begin to build endurance in your life by breaking through quitting points, and the earlier you begin to do this and keep doing it, the more you will begin to build endurance as a character quality.

I'm not a jogger or a runner of any kind, but friends of mine who are tell me that the way they build endurance in running is to break through quitting points. Let's say your goal is to jog twenty laps on the track. You've been working up to this over a period of time. By the 18th lap, you think you're not able to jog another yard. You're at a quitting point, but you keep to your goal of twenty laps and break through that quitting point. Our lives are filled with quitting points, and every time we break through one, we are building endurance. When we keep on going even though we don't feel like it, when we stick to a job until it's finished, we are building endurance.

Or think of the quitting points in your moral struggles. You've been wrestling with trying to be a godly man or godly woman, and then you come to a point and wonder whether it's worth it or not. Nobody else seems to be doing it, and you want to give in to the prevailing morals of the day. If you break through this quitting point, you are building endurance.

And what about those spiritual quitting points in your lives? Those spiritual dry spells when God seems far away, and you want to give up on God. But when you keep to your spiritual disciplines of regular worship and prayer, you are breaking through a quitting point and building endurance.

Secondly, if you want the character quality of endurance, you need your life connected to something greater than yourself. Staying power is always associated with the experience of being captured by a cause, something to which you give your loyalty — a worthy goal in life, a particular vocation. If I can be personal for a moment, the only thing that kept me from quitting in earlier years when I began my studies to be a minister was because I felt deep down that I wanted to be a minister and that God wanted me to be a minister. That goal, that vocation, that sense of God's purpose in my life gave me the endurance to work my way through four years of college and four years of seminary.

Thirdly, endurance in human life comes from a firm faith in the power of God, which can give us an inner strength that surpasses any other power that we have ever known! And that power is ever-present and waiting to replenish our own.

If you have a strong faith in God and in God's goodness, then you know that there is an eternal moral purpose at work in creation that will outlast all the immorality, no matter how strong that evil may seem to be. That kind of faith gives a person wide horizons, long outlooks, and steady hopes so that when one loses heart over the disappointment of some immediate expectation, such faith still has standing ground and carries on.

Of all the crazy things in history, can you think of anything more improbable than to have believed that the Christian faith for which Paul stood would outlast and wear down the Roman Empire? Maybe that's what got Demas. He was impressed with the tremendous power of Rome against the seeming weakness of the church. However, as time would tell, he put his faith in a false god. A vital faith in God gives a person available resources of inner power so that we have endurance.

And what are the rewards for endurance? First, the knowing that one has fought the good fight, finished the race, and kept the faith. But deeper still, the Bible reminds us that "suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us" (Romans 5:1-5).

Instant success or instant anything never produces character. Endurance produces character — in other words, a spiritual understanding and depth that can be gotten in no other way. "Blessed are those who endure," says the Bible, "for they shall receive the crown of life." Amen.