Sunday, May 28, 1995
BETTING ON THE TORTOISE
Psalm 90:1-4; Luke 14:28-32

Most of us are familiar with Aesop's Fable, The Hare and The Tortoise. As I remember the story, the hare (rabbit) makes a bet with the tortoise (turtle) that he can win in a race between the two of them. If there had been betting persons on the sidelines, most of them would have been inclined to place their bets on the hare. They would have known of his quickness and speed.

As the race begins, the hare takes off quickly, and the tortoise is soon left far behind. However, the tortoise seems to know the habits of the hare and is not fooled by the quick start. The tortoise hits his stride and keeps a steady pace. The hare, on the other hand, jumps so far ahead that he becomes overconfident and decides he can rest and take a nap. After all, he reasons, even if he gets far behind, he can always catch up.

As the day wears on, the tortoise continues his steady pace. He keeps his mind on the goal he wants to attain — crossing the finish line. As the race nears the end, the hare realizes that he has fallen behind and tries to make up for lost time with a burst of speed, but the tortoise crosses the finish line first and wins the race.

This is the kind of story that Jesus would have loved. It's similar to some of His parables. I tell it now because it's a story that needs to be heard again in our time, for we live in a world where most people would also bet on the hare. He's a more exciting character. Most of us are impressed by someone who makes a sensational beginning or a quick profit. It gets our attention. Furthermore, we live in a world of the "quick fix," where the emphasis is on instant change, speedy success, and short-term gains. I read this past week about the "New Era Foundation" in Philadelphia, where institutions made large investments because they were promised they could double their money in six months.

We live in a world of instant breakfasts, fast diets, instant coffee and tea, fast food restaurants, microwave ovens, quick love affairs, learn-to-play-the-piano-in-ten-easy-lessons courses, dial-a-prayer, sudden wisdom, and rapid knowledge.

Lest you misunderstand, this is not a polemic against all things speedy in favor of all things slow. I appreciate quick solutions as much as the next person. But in a time that seems to worship quick starts and instant success, our Christian faith says we also need to pay attention to the tortoise way of doing things — to the quality of endurance and "follow-through," rather than always betting on the hare. A slow start is not always bad, nor is a fast start always good.

Although in Aesop's fable the hare finally finished the race, there are also those who make a quick and flashy beginning and then quit altogether along the way. They drop out and never start up again.

Think about your own life — what do you wish you hadn't quit? Maybe there are some of you who wish you hadn't quit college before you earned your degree or quit graduate school.

Or perhaps you wish you hadn't quit taking piano lessons at age 12. I know people who wish they hadn't quit taking swimming lessons. And there are others who wish they hadn't quit the physical exercise program they began with such diligence.

On another level, there are those who wish they hadn't quit a promising career for another because they wanted to make some big money quickly.

And some of you may be wishing that you hadn't quit on God. You made a commitment years ago in your Confirmation vows or in some other way to walk with God, and 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. You used to be faithful in your participation in worship, but then other activities crowded that out, and now God seems far away.

Quitting and lack of endurance can have a high cost because it's so difficult to get started again. Endurance can be defined as staying power, being faithful to one's good commitments. It is the ability to follow through.

I meet so many people who look back on their lives and shake their heads with regret and ask, "Why did I quit when I had such a good start? Why did I cop out when I should've hung in there?"

Of course, there are some things we should quit. I've often wondered, what is it about bad habits that makes them easier to hold onto than good habits? In my study of Biblical characters, I've become fascinated with some of the minor ones who are such because of their lack of endurance. For example, in one of his books, Harry Emerson Fosdick describes a minor character in the New Testament whose name is mentioned three times and then only briefly. His name was Demas, and some of us are much more like him than we care to admit.

We first meet Demas in Paul's letter to Philemon. There, Paul describes him briefly as being a co-worker in the church, along with Luke and Mark. At that point, we know Demas was a devoted and promising disciple.

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

The third time Demas is described is in the second letter to Timothy, in one of 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 is the brief biography of an individual who made a fine beginning but lacked the character quality of endurance and 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 of Luke and the book of Acts in the New Testament. Since Luke and Demas were both close companions of Paul, we can assume that they 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.'"

We are all familiar with the experience of a strong beginning and a poor ending. It's obvious that the qualities that make a strong 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. Are you the kind of person who would bet on the hare, or would you place your bet on the tortoise? I think Jesus, had He been a wagering person, would have bet on the tortoise rather than the hare for this reason: Jesus would have bet on the tortoise because He knew that some of the best things in life require slow and steady progress and growth. There are some things that cannot be hurried. This is especially true in our spiritual dimension. Deepening one's spiritual life takes time. There's no way one can develop the life of the spirit in five lessons, or even ten, twenty, or thirty. It takes slow, steady growth. Even those who have an "instant born-again life-changing experience" discover that a long process of spiritual maturation is necessary. It's what the church has traditionally called "sanctification."

But too many people bet on the hare. They will try worship for several weeks and then give up, forgetting that the spiritual giants throughout history spent years in a regular discipline in order to deepen the life of the spirit. I see so many people who join this church and make a good start, but then after a while, they fade. Like Demas, their love for this present world takes over.

In a similar way, one cannot build a strong physical body in five, ten, or twenty days of quick exercise. It takes a daily discipline of keeping at it over a much longer period of time. One cannot grow from a child to an adult in a short time. It's the same story in many areas of life. Rarely does a star college quarterback become an instant success in professional football. Developing a keen eye, gaining mature judgment, and a sense of timing — all this and more takes a lot of time and effort. Jesus would have bet on the tortoise instead of the hare.

The world is full of quick starters like the hare, but we lack among us those who, like the tortoise, keep a steady pace and follow through. The landscape of religion is filled with spiritual dropouts who made a fine beginning or wanted a quick fix but lacked the staying power to keep a steady pace and thereby keep growing, deepening, and maturing in the Christian faith. 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 come through to a great conclusion.

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

How then do we get endurance? How can we obtain the staying power of the tortoise? The answer is found straight out of the life of Jesus.

First, on a very practical level, you begin to build staying power in your life by breaking through the quitting points.

I'm not a runner or a jogger 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 goal over a period of time. Each time you go a little further by breaking through a quitting point. After running a certain number of laps each day, you think you're not able to go any further, but you break through that quitting point.

Our lives are filled with quitting points, and every time we break through one, we are building endurance. Think of some of the quitting points in your moral struggles. You've been wrestling with trying to be a godly man or 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 in your moral life.

Or what about those spiritual quitting points? Those 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. Jesus did this over and over again.

The second suggestion for obtaining the staying power of the tortoise is to keep your life connected to something greater than yourself. Staying power is always associated with the experience of being captured by a worthy cause, something to which you can give your loyalty.

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 that I felt deep down that God wanted me to do this. The same was true when I reached some very low points of discouragement early in my ministry and thought about quitting and doing something else. The sense of God's purpose for me in my life gave me the endurance to continue.

The third suggestion from the life of Jesus is that endurance — staying power 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 know.

If you have a strong faith in God and God's goodness, then you know that there is an eternal moral purpose at work in creation that will outlast all the immorality and evil there is. 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, you know that in the long run, God's goodness will prevail.

Of all the crazy things in history, can you think of anything more improbable, with the Roman Emperor on his throne and Paul in prison, than believing that the Christian faith for which Paul stood would outlast and wear down the Empire? The Christian faith, like the tortoise, plods steadily on. Our growth and progress in this congregation over the years have been more like the tortoise than the hare.

In your spiritual journey, in mine, and in the continued journey of this congregation, I'm betting on the tortoise. Amen.