Sunday, May 29, 2005
STARTING POWER AND STAYING POWER
Luke 14:28-32

All of you are familiar with the experience of having a strong beginning and a poor ending. It's obvious that the character qualities needed to make a good start are not the same as those needed to see a project through to the end. Starting power and staying power are not the same. That's the main point of the parable Jesus told, which is the basis for this sermon: "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 finish it, all who see it will begin to make fun, saying, 'This person began to build and was not able to finish.'"

As I was studying this parable again this week, it reminded me of one of Aesop's fables, "The Hare and the Tortoise." You remember the story. The hare (rabbit) makes a bet with the tortoise (turtle) that he can win in a race between them. If there had been wagering on the sidelines, most people would have bet on the hare. They would have known his quickness and speed.

The race begins. The hare makes a fast start, and the tortoise is soon left far behind. However, the tortoise seems to know the character qualities 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, so what if I get behind? I 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 — to cross the finish line. As the race nears its end, the hare realizes that he is now far behind, so he puts on a final burst of speed, but the tortoise crosses the finish line first and wins the race.

It's the kind of story that Jesus would have loved. It makes the same point as the parable read earlier. This story resonates again in today's culture because we live in a world where most people would bet on the hare. He's a more exciting character. People today are impressed by someone who makes a sensational beginning or a quick profit. It grabs your attention. This is a culture of the "quick fix," where the emphasis is on instant change, speedy success, and short-term gain.

It's a world of fast food, instant coffee and tea, microwave ovens, faster and faster computers, instant conversation with cell phones, quick love affairs, learn-to-play-the-piano-in-ten-easy-lessons programs, dial-a-prayer, sudden wisdom, and rapid knowledge.

Lest you misunderstand, this is not a polemic against all things speedy and in favor of all things slow. I am thankful for our microwave, but I also appreciate our crockpot. But in a time that worships quick starts and instant success, the Christian way, as lived and taught by Jesus, reminds you that there is also value in what the tortoise can teach you. There is much to be gained from an emphasis on endurance, staying power, and follow-through. A slow, steady pace 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. Do you have things in your life that you wish you hadn't quit? Maybe some of you regret quitting college before earning your degree, or quitting graduate school. Perhaps you are sorry you stopped taking piano lessons at age 11. I know people who wish they hadn't quit swimming lessons. And there are those who regret stopping the exercise program they began with such diligence.

On another level, there are those who regret quitting a promising career for another position that seemed more lucrative at the time because they wanted to make some quick money.

And what about your relationship with God? You made a commitment years ago in your confirmation vows or in some other way of walking with God, and you were doing it. The presence of God was an active power in your life. But then after a while, you began to take God for granted. You let down on your spiritual disciplines. You are no longer faithful in your regular participation in worship. Other activities have crowded that out, and now God seems far away.

Quitting, or a 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 your good commitments. It is the discipline of follow-through.

How many people look back and shake their heads with regret, asking, "Why did I quit when I had such a good beginning? Why did I drop out when I should've hung in there?"

Of course, there are some things you should quit. But why is it that bad habits are easier to hold onto than good habits?

In my continuing study of lesser-known people in the Bible, I've become fascinated with some of the minor characters who are such because of their lack of staying power. In one of his books, Harry Emerson Fosdick describes one of these minor characters in the New Testament whose name is mentioned three times, and then only in passing. His name is Demas. He's so minor that you may not have heard of him, but if you're honest, you are more like him than you care to admit.

You first meet Demas in Paul's letter to Philemon. There, Paul describes him briefly as being a co-worker in the church along with Mark, Luke, and Aristarchus. From what little is known of Demas, he was a devoted and promising disciple.

The second time his name is mentioned 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 he 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. Here 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 had no staying power and made a poor ending.

Luke and Demas knew each other as colleagues of Paul. Maybe Luke was remembering Demas and his lack of staying power when he included the parable in his gospel where Jesus said, as mentioned earlier: "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 finish it, all who see it will begin to make fun of you, saying, 'This person began to build and was not able to finish.'"

There are some things in life that require more than just a good beginning. This is especially true in the spiritual dimension. Deepening your spiritual life takes time and persistence. There's no way to hurry it. You cannot learn to pray or meditate in five easy lessons, or even ten, or twenty, or thirty. It takes patient, steady growth to develop the life of the spirit. Even those who have an instant "born again" life-changing experience discover that a long process of spiritual maturation is necessary. It never ends until the day you die. It's what the church has traditionally called "sanctification."

Unfortunately, too many people are like the hare rather than the tortoise. They will try worship for several weeks and then give up, forgetting that the spiritual giants throughout history spent years in regular discipline to deepen their spiritual lives. I see so many people who join this congregation and, like Demas, make a fine beginning in their spiritual journey, but then after a time, they fade. Their love for this present world takes over.

What's true in the spiritual life is true in other areas of your life as well. You cannot build a strong physical body in five, ten, or twenty days of quick exercise. It takes daily discipline over a much longer period of time. You cannot grow and mature from a child into an adult in a short time.

In sports, 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 practice and time.

The world is full of quick starters with no staying power. The landscape of religious faith is filled with spiritual dropouts who made a promising beginning or wanted a quick fix but lacked the staying power for deep faith.

What is the worst tragedy in life? To face suffering? To know grief? To be severely handicapped? Any one of you could face these challenges before you die. You've seen individuals who have faced these trials and have had the moral and spiritual staying power to come through to a great conclusion.

But here's the tragedy: to see someone born with extraordinary gifts, someone who makes a strong beginning, rises to a responsible position, and is loved and trusted — then to see that person betray life and give up. That's the real tragedy.

What helps you gain staying power, endurance? Here are three suggestions, which come straight out of the life of Jesus.

First, on a practical level, you begin to build staying power in your life by breaking through the quitting points. I'm not a runner or jogger, but friends of mine who are tell me that the way they build endurance is by breaking through quitting points. Let's say your goal is to jog twenty laps on the track. You've been working up to this for some time. Each time, you go a little further by breaking through a quitting point. Your life is filled with quitting points, but every time you break through, you are building staying power.

Think of some of the quitting points in your moral struggles. You've been trying to be an ethical person, but then you reach a point where you wonder whether it's worth it or not. Nobody else

seems to be doing it, and you're tempted to give in to the prevailing ethics of the day. Every time you break through a quitting point, you are building endurance in your moral life.

The same is true of those spiritual quitting points — those dry spells when God seems far away and you are tempted to give up on God. But when you keep to your spiritual disciplines, you are building staying power.

The second suggestion for gaining staying power 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 goal, something to which you can give your loyalty.

The third suggestion from the life and ministry of Jesus is that staying power comes from a firm faith in the goodness of God. That kind of faith gives you the assurance that there is an eternal moral purpose at work in creation, one that will outlast all the immorality and evil there is. That kind of faith gives you wide horizons, long outlooks, and steady hope. Even in the disappointment of some immediate expectation, you know that in the long run, God's goodness will prevail. That's the kind of staying power you can trust. Amen.