

“Fighting [f]or loving?” 1 Tim 6:11-16

“Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called and about which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses. I charge you in the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, to keep the commandment unstained and free from reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, which he will display at the proper time—he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see. To him be honour and eternal dominion. Amen.”

Grace to you and peace from God the Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!

Happy birthday, dear Brothers and Sisters! Happy birthday of the Lutheran Church! 491 years ago, on 25th of June the pure teaching of the Gospel was read aloud and confessed before the emperor Charles V in the city of Augsburg. Out of that confession the Lutheran Church was born. Our church was born.

Today, as we remember this magnificent event, for our meditation we have the verses from Paul’s letter to his fellow pastor Timothy. That section is often called “fight the good fight of faith!” Fight the good fight of faith!

What do you think about this ... fighting? Does it sound Christian... the whole fighting idea? Isn’t the Christian Church about loving one another as Jesus loved us? Fighting or loving – which one is it? What should we be doing?

I would say that it is pretty clear that we should be doing both. This is what I invite you to reflect on today. First, what is meant by the command to love one another, what kind of love Jesus had in mind? Second, what about this fighting, what does that mean? And finally, how do these two go together?

Let’s begin with loving, and let’s first consider what is not meant by that. When Jesus speaks about loving, He doesn’t have in mind some friendly community where people treat one another kindly. Sure, we all like to be a part of communities which are friendly and where people treat one another kindly.

But if the outwardly kindness was all that was meant by that, then how would Christian Church be different from every other friendly and supportive community? There are so many of them. Those are often people in such friendly and kind communities who claim that they are better Christians than Christians are.

When the Holy Spirit speaks about loving, there is a different love that He has in mind. In this same letter Paul wrote that the aim of our proclamation is “love, that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.” (1 Tim 1:5). See, this is different love, not just external politeness.

This is not about good manners and kind relationships. Everyone can learn those. Our society is still rather good with that. But this love comes from a sincere faith, which in turn gives us good consciences, which then purifies our hearts and then from these purified hearts true and genuine Christian loves issues forth.

This love is supernatural love. It is God's love in us, the transforming and new life-giving power of the Holy Spirit in us, which burns us from inside and easily overcomes what is humanly impossible.

This love doesn't simply love those whom we like and those who like us. This love is self-denying, it is self-sacrificial. This love loves others not for the benefits that we can get from them, but because of the benefits that we have gotten from Jesus.

This "love is patient and kind; it does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. [This] love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." (1 Cor 13:4-7).

You cannot teach such love like you teach good manners. You can only receive it as a gift. But how? As Paul wrote – it comes from a sincere faith and a good conscience and from purified hearts. Or we could say that only the Gospel creates such love.

When the Law of God pierces our hearts with all its sharpness, when we realize that we not only cannot live according to God's holy will, worse – we don't even want to, when we realise that our God sees our hearts – with all our dirty passions, twisted desires, and rebellious self-righteousness, when the Holy Spirits convicts us of our sin and it becomes clear that we do not deserve anything good.

And then we hear the new life-giving voice of the Gospel, as God's undeserved grace and forgiveness and mercy are poured over us as overwhelming ocean of God's love where we cannot stand, where we drown in His abundant goodness...

When we realize what our God Jesus Christ has done for us – that He gave up His life in exchange for ours – while we were still His enemies. When it sinks to the depth of our hearts that we are not worthy of our God's attention, but He ... He comes, He runs towards us and throws His arms around us and welcomes us in His family. "Come, come, I have been waiting for you!" This is what creates genuine Christian love.

The Gospel, the pure Gospel of God's underserved grace. Now, just think about this – what does Satan fear the most? Does he fear gatherings of outwardly friendly communities of good and well-behaved people. No! Why would he?

"Go for it! You like them, they like you, go and enjoy how good you are, and be proud of your goodness so that you would never believe when someone tells you that you are a sinner." And why would such good people need Jesus and His Church?

Our learned good manners don't threaten the ruler of this age. They actually may help Him, for the better behaved we are, the more we believe in our own goodness, the less we feel the need for God's grace and forgiveness. Satan wins.

Our niceness can't rescue anyone from the domain of darkness and transfer them into the Kingdom of God's beloved Son. The pure Gospel message can and does. It is the Gospel, as both God's holy Commandments and the message of His undeserved grace for the sake of Jesus Christ that threatens the ruler of this world the most.

So, think – what would he try to attack the most? Yes, the Gospel. And what is our attitude? What do we do? Often it seems that we don't care. That we are asleep. That we believe that nothing can ever happen to the life-giving Gospel. We are good.

It often seems that we don't need to hear it much, we don't need to study it, we don't need to protect it from distortions, we don't need to worry about practicing it in our lives, we may not even know what it is. But the Gospel will somehow magically remain pure in our churches on its own, and we will be saved, despite our complacency. Is that how things work in this world?

Is that what your experience has been? You know this is not so. How many of you have a garden? Or a house? Or a farm or a business, a workplace? What happens when you stop taking care for them even for a while? Yes, they descend into chaos.

We need to put in constant efforts to keep them in orderly way. Now think about the Gospel, the greatest threat to the ruler of this world – do you think that we can choose not to care about it, that it will just remain pure if we do not fight for it?

If there is something in this world that is under attack all the time, and if there is something in this world that is worth fighting for – it is the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We are the Lord's vineyard. We need to be pruned, we need to be fertilized, we need to have good and secure fences around us, otherwise we will be laid waste sooner than we can image. The Gospel does all of that... and if the Gospel is lost...

We can see the evil one working tirelessly to take the Gospel away. On the one hand, he distorts the clear Biblical message sowing doubts and disunity among Christians: "Did God really say that? Can we really understand that? Is it really clear enough?"

On the other hand, he twists the Lord's own commands to trap us. Remember how he used the words of Scripture while tempting Jesus in the desert? Similarly, today when we detect that the devil tries to cloud the Gospel or to bring in some false teaching, he immediately tries to slow us down reminding us that we need to ... love one another.

"Be patient, be gentle, don't offend anyone, don't hurt anyone, just be nice." And as the result, and this is to great extent our situation as well – we fear more offending those who try to bring in a false gospel, than we fear losing the life-giving Gospel message itself. That is sad, and that is very dangerous.

I just recently noticed something in Paul's letters. How different are the instructions of the Holy Spirit given to fellow-Christians from the instructions given to fellow-pastors in Paul's letters to Timothy and Titus! Writing to his fellow-saints Paul instructs them to love, to care, to encourage, to support, to rejoice and forgive and pray, and so on.

But when he instructs his fellow-pastors, he brings in instructions like – charge, wage the good warfare, guard, watch, reprove, rebuke, exhort, fight the good fight... What does this tell us? That the main responsibility of keeping and guarding the faith and fighting the good fight of faith is entrusted to pastors, as shepherds of God's flock.

The task of shepherds is not only to feed the flock, but also to protect it from all sorts of predators, from both, from those who come from outside and from those who come in sheep's clothing from among us. And I am not without guilt myself.

I keep failing you and falling into this trap myself. There are times when I have kept silent when I probably should have done as Paul urges – “rebuke them sharply” or “silence them”, but I have chosen to be too friendly and too gentle.

Forgive me for all those times! And, please, remind me that this is my responsibility to faith the good fight of faith, and please pray that our mighty Lord grants me and all the pastors all the wisdom and courage needed to continue faithfully in this ministry.

As Lutherans we are in a privileged situation. We have great examples of faithfulness and courageous confession among our forefathers in faith. You know what Luther's life was like. Constant battles, constant fighting. Many of his writings are polemical, that is, he wrote them fighting for the faith, guarding and keeping the Gospel, rebuking and reproving those who wanted to distort it.

491 years ago, on 25th of June, the heads of those territories and cities which had embraced the pure Gospel message stood before the emperor Charles V and empowered by the Holy Spirit confessed that the Gospel – as we have it summarized in our Augsburg Confession – is what they confess and believe and teach and that they reject all teachings that are contrary to it.

That wasn't just a friendly Christian conversation... what was at stake was their very lives and wellbeing of their subjects. And these brave Christians confessed that they would rather lose their lives, than compromise the wonderful and life-giving Gospel of God's grace which we have in Jesus Christ.

These brave Christians stood in the long line of God's courageous people. Jesus Christ made His good confession before Pilate, and was crucified. The apostles made their bold confessions and all of them but John were violently murdered.

Throughout the centuries many and many of our brothers and sisters have experienced the same fate. One day we will see all of them. We are heirs of this courageous Lutheran church, born of that bold confession in face of such adversity.

We have the same pure Gospel message entrusted to us. The same Holy Spirit dwells in us to give us all the wisdom and courage that we may need. Let us fight the good fight of faith with joy and passion, so that genuine Christian love, purified and cleansed by the fire of the Holy Spirit, can abound among us and through us shine brightly and far in this dark world.

Happy birthday, Brothers and Sisters! Amen.