

The Noble Prize
2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18

Charles Kuralt tells of a visit to Oslo, Norway. He wanted to do a story on the Nobel Peace Prize. He dropped by the Nobel Institute and asked the director if he might have the use of the Peace Prize gold medal for the afternoon....

The director was agreeable and asked the assistant to bring the medal to his office. It arrived in a fine, velvet-lined walnut box, which was handed to Kuralt.

Just as Kuralt was about to leave, the director said, "Oh, I suppose it might be a good idea for you to give me a receipt." He wrote one out on Nobel Institute stationery, and Kuralt signed it.

When he returned the medal, Kuralt was given the receipt. It says, "I have received the Nobel Peace Prize." He writes, "Of course, this makes me one with Mother Teresa. Except for the next line, which reads, 'and I promise to return it by 10 o'clock tomorrow morning.'"¹

What an honor it would be to receive the Nobel Peace Prize. This year is the 103rd anniversary of the prize. It will be awarded on December 10 in Oslo, Norway, as dictated by its founder, Swedish chemist, inventor, and philanthropist, Alfred Bernhard Nobel. The Peace Prize is one of five categories of Nobel Prizes awarded each year to persons who have conferred the greatest benefit on humankind. This year Kenya's deputy environment minister, Wangari Maathai, has been named the winner of the prize. She was Nairobi University's first woman professor before she left full-time academic life to found the Green Belt Movement, a women's environmental group fighting the clearing of forests for charcoal and property development. For nearly 30 years she has sought to empower women, improve the environment and fight corruption in Africa.²

Maathai joins the ranks of Martin Luther King, Jr.; Mother Teresa; Lech Walesa of Poland; Desmond Tutu, F.W. deKlerk, and Nelson Mandela of South Africa; Elie Weisel; Dalai Lama; and Michail Gorbachev, all recipients of the Nobel Peace Prize.

The Nobel Peace Prize is not necessarily awarded to someone like a prime minister, a president, or a powerful world leader. In 1999 the Nobel went to "Doctors Without Borders," and in 1997 it was awarded to an ordinary American named Jody Williams and her International Campaign to Ban Land Mines. One year one nominee was Stanley Williams, a death-row inmate who writes gritty children's books and coordinates an international nonviolence effort for at-risk youth.

The Nobel can be awarded to common, ordinary citizens, as can another high honor – the “Noble Prize,” described by the apostle Paul as “the crown of righteousness.” As Paul writes this letter to his colleague in ministry, Timothy, he senses that his death is near. This letter is like a farewell speech to his partners in ministry and in faith. He reviews his life, his goals and values, and sends greetings to specific persons with whom he has had relationships. Paul is not despairing that the end of his life is near; rather he is very content, for he has been faithful to his mission. He reviews his life, his goals and values, and sends greetings to specific persons with whom he has had relationships. Paul is not despairing that the end of his life is near; rather he is very content, for he has been faithful to his mission. He is confident that he will be awarded with the noblest of prizes for his work for the Lord: the “crown of righteousness.”

How is it that we earn this noble prize and have such assurance that we, too, might receive the crown of righteousness?

Paul tells us that he has poured out his life as a libation. He has lived his life as a sacrificial offering to God. He has not lived his life for himself. He has lived God’s purpose, God’s design for his life.

Paul learned God’s design for his life in a most radical way. Before he was known as Paul, he was Saul of Tarsus, a passionate persecutor of Christians. One day on his way to Damascus to arrest Christians, Saul had a mystical experience in which Jesus confronted him and challenged his mission of persecuting Christians. God reclaimed Saul, radically converting him from killing Christians to making Christians. Saul was baptized and took on his new mission of preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. He preached the gospel with as much passion as he had condemned it. Paul gave his life fully to his mission, enduring hardship and persecution, shipwreck and imprisonment all for the sake of sharing the good news of God’s love revealed by Jesus. He sacrificed his life to God’s service.

If we wish to earn the crown of righteousness, we, like Paul, must discern God’s claim upon our life and willingly offer our lives to that mission. Our foundational mission is to be in relationship with God, to love God with our whole being. Beyond that, the specifics vary with each person. Our mission may change as life circumstances change. When we are attentive, day-by-day to God’s purpose, and when we surrender ourselves to that purpose, we will be earning our way toward the Noble Prize.

The element of sacrifice is essential. The Christian life is not a life of comfort. Christ is always calling us out of our comfort zone to stretch and grow. Christ is always calling us to get outside of ourselves and to serve

others. Dr. Rose Sims says, “If you’re going to serve Jesus and win people to Christ, you’ve got to get involved to the point of inconvenience.” Serving God is not often convenient; it usually requires a sacrifice of our time and energy, a modification of our schedule and plan. If we are going to serve Jesus, we’ve got to get involved to the point of inconvenience.

In her acceptance speech for the Nobel Peace Prize, Mother Teresa told this story. “The other day I received \$15 from a man who has been on his back for 20 years and the only part that he can move is his right hand. And the only companion that he enjoys is smoking. He said to me, ‘I do not smoke for one week, and I send you this money.’ It must have been a terrible sacrifice for him but see how beautiful, how he shared. And with that money I bought bread and I gave to those who are hungry with a joy on both sides. He was giving and the poor were receiving.

“This is something you and I can do – it is a gift of God to us to be able to share our love with others. And let it be able to share our love with others. And let it be as it was for Jesus. Let us love one another as he loved us. Let us love him with undivided love.”³

The first step to the crown of righteousness is pouring our lives out as a sacrifice for God. The second hint Paul gives us is to fight the good fight, finish the race, keep the faith. There will be days and weeks when we are tempted to give up, to stop the sacrificial giving, and to wallow in our selfish desires. There will be times when the opposition seems so fierce that we will never be able to win, let alone finish, the race. Oftentimes we feel the pressure of meeting too many obligations and consequently feel weary and spent. Have you ever had one of those days when you just wanted to run away and hide?

Paul knew this pressure and temptation to give in as well. Paul tells the story of how he was abandoned by others in a time of need, but “the Lord stood by me and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it” (v. 17). He is writing this letter from prison, the church is being persecuted, and the opposition is fierce—even from those who call themselves Christian. Paul’s colleague, Timothy, is trying to stay true to the faith even in the midst of confusion and hardship. Paul’s letter is a stirring call to remain faithful under pressure. Keep the faith.

It is an encouragement to stay anchored in the faith while the storms rage around us. As life changes so quickly all around us, day by day, moment by moment, we need something to give us stability, someplace to stand secure. Keeping the faith means relying on Jesus as we run the race

that lies before us, keeping our eyes on the “crown of righteousness” that will be ours.

Paul assures us that the Lord will stand by us and give us strength in the face of every assault. We keep the faith because God gives us the strength to do so. What really matters is not our own faith, but the God to whom our faith is directed. The core of genuine faith is giving up on ourselves and trusting the God who will rescue us from every evil attack.

We can’t keep the faith alone. Left to our own powers, we will inevitably stumble and fall out of faithfulness. Authentic faith looks beyond ourselves and depends on God. God promises to come to our aid, not to help us escape all the difficulties in life, but to strengthen us for them.

Several years ago a group visiting the People’s Republic of China worshiped with Chinese Christians. During a worship service, one of the tourists sat across the aisle from an elderly Chinese woman. She lovingly grasped in her hands an old dog-eared and stained Bible. That Bible was probably hidden under the floor of her house during China’s Cultural Revolution. Now she could publicly bring it to worship. She knew what it was like to embrace faith in the face of opposition.⁴ She had kept the faith, and so can we, when we trust not in our own power, but in the strength of Almighty God.

God gives us the gift of life, not to give up and quit. God gives us the gift of life to enjoy, to tend with care, to share by serving one another. God gives us faith to sustain us through the ups and downs, the trials and tribulations. The crown of righteousness is reserved for all who offer their lives in sacrifice and service of our God and for all who keep the faith, even in the face of opposition. May we so live and service and in faith, that through our living we give glory to God. Amen.

¹ Charles Kuralt, “One with Mother Teresa,” www.RememberingCharlesKuralt.com, quoted in *Homiletics*, October 2001.

² *Christian Century*, November 2, 2004, p. 14.

³ Mother Teresa, Nobel Prize acceptance speech 1979, Oslo, Norway.

⁴ Robert Kysar, *Lectionary Homiletics*, October, 1998.

Rev. Lori Best Sawdon
Lafayette United Methodist Church
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