THINGS WORTH FIGHTING FOR

The year was 1771 in rural North Carolina. A young man, well respected in the community, was making his way in this young colony, along with his wife and four-year-old son. His name was Robert Thompson. Things were difficult enough but were aggravated by corrupt colonial government officials who overtaxed the people and took more than was authorized. A group formed to seek redress of these abuses who called themselves the Regulators. At first, their efforts were peaceful but, as those efforts were frustrated, they resorted to destruction of property and even roughing up at least one of these corrupt government officials. Things came to a head as Governor William Tryon ordered troops to march upon the Regulators and put down this rebellion once and for all. They gathered at Alamance Creek and battle was imminent. Robert Thompson, who may not have been a Regulator himself but certainly was sympathetic to their cause, rode out with two others to try to negotiate a deal to avoid bloodshed. William Fitch, in his 1905 thriller Some Neglected History of North Carolina, put it this way:

It was now about midday. Mr. Robert Thompson, who was leaving to go back to the Regulators, for whom he had been interceding with Tryon for a reconciliation on their behalf, was detained by Tryon as a prisoner. Indignant at such perfidy, he thereupon told the Governor some very plain truths. He was an amiable, but bold, outspoken gentleman, deservedly beloved and respected for his unimpeachable character. Being unarmed, therefore his leaving was not an escape, but simply retiring in the conscious dignity of a gentleman. At this moment, the irritable Governor snatched a gun from a militiaman and with his own hand shot and killed Thompson. Tryon perceived his folly the next moment, and sent a flag of truce toward the Regulators’ side of the field. Donald Malcolm, one of the Governor’s aides, was the bearer of the flag. He had proceeded but a short distance when the Regulators, enraged by the revengeful act of the blood-thirsty Tryon, immediately began firing with deadly aim. When the firing commenced, the bearer of the flag retreated with safety of his person, but had the misfortune to have the buttons of his small clothes leave their fastenings. Tryon, now all the
more enraged at the disrespect to his white flag, mounted on his white charger, handsome and commanding in his person, rising in his stirrups led his army to battle, crying “Fire! Fire!”

Needless to say, the Regulators were routed by superior firepower and that was the end of that. I am pleased to be able to share this story with you because Robert Thompson was my grandfather.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was born in Germany in 1906 to a very distinguished and respected family. His father was a psychiatrist and neurologist. His oldest brother would become a chemist who co-discovered the spin isomers of hydrogen. (I have no clue, but it must have been big.) Dietrich, who had a fantastic mind and was a great student, surprised his family by deciding to pursue Theology. He was ordained at twenty-five and quickly became known for his intellectual writings and lectures. But things were changing in Germany. In 1933, just days after Adolph Hitler began his infamous rule, Bonhoeffer delivered a radio address attacking Hitler and warning about the cult of the Fuhrer; his radio address was cut off mid-sentence. He then fought to stop Hitler from installing pro-Nazi members onto the ruling body of the German Lutheran Church via a rigged election. Upon failing, he became the leader of an underground seminary of the Opposition Church, soon to become known as the Confessing Church. He also became a thorn in the side of the Nazis.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a pacifist ... a pacifist who became a spy and was ultimately implicated in a plot to assassinate Hitler. He was arrested, imprisoned for two years and ultimately executed just two weeks before his concentration camp was liberated by United States soldiers.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer fought against the political and religious authority of his day and was clearly inspired by another who had fought against the religious authorities of his day: a carpenter, turned itinerant teacher.

Jesus of Nazareth was making quite a name for himself with his harsh criticism of the Jewish religious leaders of his time. Jesus was not very tolerant of the behavior he witnessed and was not very sensitive in the way he approached the leaders and his criticism of them. Why couldn’t he just call for a meeting with the Pharisees, Sadducees and even Herod himself and, after expressing some understanding of the difficult position they were in (being under
the yoke of the Romans), present his concerns and try to push reforms through? After all, at least the Romans were allowing the Jewish leaders to rule and practice their religion.

But Jesus kept accusing them, mocking them and undermining their authority. That is surely not the way to bring about change, and it’s really just not very nice. Or perhaps, sometimes talking with those who oppose you is just not going to work.

Herod Antipas, the same king who had John the Baptist beheaded, was Jesus’ nemesis, if you will. Jesus spared him no measure. “At that time a number of Pharisees came to him and said, ‘You should leave this place and go on your way; Herod is out to kill you.’ Jesus replied, ‘Go and tell that fox, “Listen, today and tomorrow I shall be casting out devils and working cures; on the third day I reach my goal.”’” (Luke 13:31-32) Jesus not only stood up to him boldly, he called his ruler a “fox” – a clear insult, in the meaning of the day. “Or what king would march to battle against another king, without first sitting down to consider whether with ten thousand men he can face an enemy coming to meet him with twenty thousand?” (Luke 14:31-32) While this verse is a lesson in understanding the cost of discipleship, it is also likely a dig at Herod, who did just that. Herod was married to the daughter of a powerful Arabian prince. When he divorced the daughter to marry Herodius, it led to a battle that went very bad for Herod. It was the same incident – the immorality of Herod marrying his brother’s former wife – that got Herodius upset and, consequently, John the Baptist’s head on a platter. With this illustration, Jesus made his point on the cost of discipleship, and did so while pouring hot coals on a wound of Herod.

How about towards the Pharisees? “You vipers’ brood! How can your words be good when you yourselves are evil?” (Matthew 12:34) And: “Woe to you, lawyers and Pharisees, hypocrites that you are.” (Matthew 23:13) And to the chief priests and elders of the temple: “I tell you this, tax-gatherers and prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you.” (Matthew 21:31) Not exactly taken from the pages of How to Win Friends and Influence People.

Jesus fought boldly to teach us The Way. He fought against the authority of his day. He fought with words and nonviolent actions. For Jesus, saving us was worth fighting ... and even dying ... for.

For us, what is worth fighting for?
THINGS WORTH FIGHTING FOR

That is for each of us to decide as individuals; we are good Congregationalists, after all. Hopefully this question is answered after much prayer and reflection. I am going to offer three things for your consideration: Our Children, Our Country and Our Faith.

Whether we speak specifically of our own biological children or of the children in our society, I am sure we all agree that children are worth fighting for. We are willing to fight to protect them from physical harm; for their health; that they are treated fairly; to see they are properly educated. We fight, often against popular culture, to instill values in them that we believe in and that we believe will serve them well. We fight to share our faith with them, that they too may find Christ in their lives and be strong in the Spirit.

Next, our country. Is our country worth fighting for? What does that even mean? This would not have been confusing a generation ago, but sadly it is today. Thankfully, it is not confusing to the brave men and women who stood before us earlier and those who serve in our military today.

For purposes of this message, I am not really talking about fighting for the land that is America, except to the extent that the land is what contains our unique founding principles – our Judeo-Christian values and faith and our freedoms guaranteed under the Constitution. No other nation’s founding followed from a statement like that contained in the Declaration of Independence: “that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” It’s the idea that our rights come from God and not from man or from government – a unique idea – that many in our current government are in opposition to.

The founders went on to guarantee us rights that no government of the United States was sanctioned to abridge. Since 1791, the Bill of Rights has guaranteed us:

- Free Speech – yet today many of our college students think the First Amendment should be repealed because speech that offends should not be allowed.

- Freedom of Religion – the right to meet as we do here today, speak freely, and openly express our beliefs and worship God. It is being chipped away at with those who seek caveats like “as long as it doesn’t conflict with any limitation
on free speech we might unconstitutionally pass” or “as long as you don’t wear a cross necklace to school or kneel and pray on the field at your high school football game” – in effect “as long as nothing you do offends anyone.” Didn’t we just cover how completely “offensive” Jesus can be?! As our world gets ever more lost in the secular wilderness, things that offended nobody twenty years ago are suddenly offensive. But I digress ...

- The Right to Bear Arms – clearly the most controversial, and I appreciate arguments on the other side. I will merely point out that its primary intent was not for hunting or sport, and it was only secondarily about personal protection. It was about having the ability for “the people” and free states – not the federal government – to be able to form militias and fight either a foreign enemy or even our own government if it exceeded its authority under the Constitution and denied the people and states their rights.

- The Freedom of Assembly. The Right to Petition. The Right to a Fair Trial. The intent that all power not granted to the federal government under the Constitution belonged with the states.

This is what our geography defines. This is what we praise (in addition to the brave men and women who serve) when we stand and sing the National Anthem. We praise the gift of freedom and liberty – that we have these rights which shall not be taken; that ours is a government of, by and for the people; that people in government work for us. This is what our Veterans have fought for. This is what my grandfather was shot in the back for. This is what our founding men and women risked everything for, against immeasurable odds. We do not praise a nation that is perfect or in which there are no problems. We were not perfect when we were founded, and we had the big problem of slavery to solve, once we gained independence from England. This was argued about at the time and led to a change in Jefferson’s wording in the Declaration of Independence from “property” to “pursuit of happiness.” But it was agreed: first things first, if we were to become an independent nation.

I believe these ideals and founding principles and our unique Constitution are worth fighting for. Many disagree, including many of our “Elite Rulers” in both parties in Washington, because they believe they are our betters who should be the Grand Administrators (which
naturally comes with a lot of perks, by the way). They consider the Constitution to be an old, outdated document written by a bunch of stodgy, self-interested, European white men. I beg to differ, while understanding that others may feel it is worth fighting on the other side of this contest. Still, while we may not all agree on specifics, I do think most of us agree that, as a nation, we are losing our way a bit, and I think there might be a reason.

Allow me an analogy: What if the hand of God was upon the founding of this new nation called America – based upon Judeo-Christian values and populated initially with a lot of people who were deeply religious. What if this land (and its Capitol) were viewed, in effect, as a temple where we were to honor God (maybe even print it on our coins lest we forget). “Jesus went into the temple and drove out all who were buying and selling in the temple precincts; he upset the tables of the money-changers and the seats of the dealers in pigeons, and said to them, ‘Scripture says, “My house shall be called a house of prayer,” but you are making it a den of thieves.’”

The temple needs cleansing.

There is a quote I am fond of that has been attributed (possibly incorrectly, but no matter) to Alexis de Tocqueville when he visited and tried to understand this new nation called America: “In the end, the state of the Union comes down to the character of the people. I sought for the greatness and genius of America in her commodious harbors and her ample rivers, and it was not there. I sought for it in the fertile fields and boundless prairies, and it was not there. I sought for it in her rich mines and vast world commerce, and it was not there. Not until I went into the churches of America and heard her pulpits aflame with righteousness did I understand the secret of her genius and power.”

A fitting segue into the final thing I propose as worth fighting for: our faith. This one breaks down to a few different levels. First, Christianity is worth fighting for. Why does that make us uncomfortable? It just sounds wrong and inappropriate somehow; maybe brings to mind the excesses of the Crusades, which academia has successfully simplified into a clear message: Crusades bad; Christians guilty; stand down and take whatever happens to you in the future. Well, I am not suggesting anybody go to war in the name of Christianity, but I am suggesting that Christianity is under attack. It is under attack by a secular, complacent society that ignores it. It is under attack by intellectuals and media that ridicule it. It is under attack
by politicians who give it the minimum required lip service to keep getting elected but who, in reality, seek to replace God with government as the bestower of all our rights and needs. To accomplish this (as was done in the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany and is spread throughout the pages of the history of tyranny), Christianity has to be marginalized, or at least modified.

In addition to Christianity, our church is worth fighting for – each of our local churches. Many of you have invested far more than I have as it relates to Community Church, Congregational. It is fitting that today is Covenant Sunday because part of what we are doing with our Covenants, in addition of course to the overriding call of the Spirit, is fighting for and supporting the ongoing existence of this small local community of believers in an ever-more secular society.

Christianity and Community Church, Congregational are worth fighting for, but there is another element of fighting for our faith: fighting for our own souls. Our souls are worth fighting for.

In First Corinthians, Paul states: “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God?” (I Corinthians 6:19) I don’t know about you, but my temple is in constant need of cleansing.

As Christians, we believe it is our soul that survives the grave, yet how often do we think of caring for it so it is in good shape when it gets to that next journey, not to mention during this one? Maybe we (or at least I) should think more often about nurturing and feeding our soul through prayer and opening ourselves to the direction of the Spirit more and more. I wonder if the Spirit nurtures that same soul to the extent we allow and encourage it. I sometimes ponder whether the condition of our soul when we leave this planet might have something to do with the future path and purposes of our soul in the next life. I appreciated Bruce’s assertion a while back that he did not think we were going through all of this down here so we could play a harp in the next life. (It was not exactly that but something to that effect, or at least I hope it was.)

These are all musings for which there are no concrete answers, but we do know we are called as Christians to do those things that would nurture and feed the soul in any case: prayer, reading Scripture, loving others, etc. They have such a positive effect on our lives in the here and now that we shouldn’t need any more motivation than that, but I know that often I do.
In Robert Thompson, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and, far more than either, Jesus, I see that there are things worth fighting for. But how should we fight? Fortunately, few of us face the choices they had to make.

There are no easy answers, and every situation is different and may call for a different response. Obviously, fighting nonviolently is preferred and, in our personal relationships, that is what Jesus has called us to do. We fight with words, actions and example – and we teach our children how to do the same, along with what those things are that we value enough to defend.

One of my favorite films is *The Mission* from way back in 1986. It stars Jeremy Irons and Robert DeNiro as, respectively, a priest and a slave-trader-turned-priest who help the indigenous tribe of Guarani in South America defend itself against the Portuguese after the mission lands were handed over by the Catholic Church to Portugal. In the climax of the story, the two priests choose different paths: Jeremy Irons’ character chooses not to fight with guns and arrows but to stand with the villagers who followed his example in peaceful defiance. Robert DeNiro’s character chooses to fight with force to defend the missions from Portuguese attack, and he had his followers as well. In the end, they both meet the same fate, and we are left to wonder which choice we would have made as a Christian. For me, the conclusion is that both choices are equally noble.

The more interesting character to me (not because I agree with his choice) is that played by Robert DeNiro. He transforms from a ruthless slave trader who hunted and kidnapped the Guarani and who murdered his own brother in a fit of rage, to a Jesuit priest – a Christian transformed by the Holy Spirit. He fought for the Guarani children and he fought for their way of life on the land that was their home. In the end, his victorious fight was for his own soul.

Let us pray, as Jesus taught us to pray: “Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for Thine is the Kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.”