

This may not be smart on my part to let you in on this little secret, but with any time I pray for another person or an entire group of people, for that matter, I do not always come up with original material. Instead, there are some phrases I might resort to quite frequently: one of those is “fight the good fight” that we heard this morning. And it’s not that I beg God to fight on our behalf at that point in the prayer. It’s usually about convincing the person being prayed for to keep on fighting, as well as reminding them in that sacred moment between them and God that there are other people, sisters and brothers in Christ of theirs, who insist on joining them in that fight with all their possible might, whatever that respective struggle might be for that child of God: sickness, fear, worry, anger, whatever the case may be.

Now, I do not remember if I used those words, exactly, when I was praying for and with a man named Neal Nitz about four-and-a-half years ago. But as some of his family and I were with him in that hospital room, it was becoming rather evident that his mortal time was drawing to a close. And as we joined hands with him and the “amen” was spoken at the end, he gasped one final breath and he was gone. Some would say that was precisely what God had planned all along, some would say it was pure coincidence on the

timing, some might say the prayer helped usher eternal things along. As for me, I don't need to know the how or the why. I just know that man had endured a relentless fight with cancer, and it was more than time for some holy one to fully take over from that very sacred room, where life and death intermingled intimately for us all to see.

However, if you knew Neal Nitz, he was a living rendition of "fight the good fight." Again, it's probably not a smart idea on my part to let you know how he spent most of his adult years to make a living. Nevertheless, Neal Nitz was a politician. He was on the county board of commissioners for ten years before he moved up to a Michigan state representative for six years, not to mention serving on the local township commission along the way. Neal was most definitely a politician; and yes, that even carried over to several stints as the president of the congregation as well (not that politics and the church have ever intermingled in our entire history or anything).

And yet, when it came time for his funeral, the sanctuary had a fair share of politicians sitting in the pews, colleagues of his whom I had never met before. I wasn't sure, exactly, what original material I should come up with for that particular homily, making sure *not* to get too political and all, even if

it could somehow connect to Neal's life in public service. Again, I resorted to being *unoriginal*. I resorted to Neal's rendition of "fight the good fight." Because, what I learned from him is that the ultimate detriment to society, whether it be with government or local communities or the church, is not heated debate over social issues that leads us to cringe in our seats or talking points along party lines that make us roll our eyes. No, the ultimate travesty is apathy: when we reach the point of simply not caring anymore, when we are under the impression it is not worth fighting for, after all, when we feel as if the problems of homes or our nation or even of our very own lives are far too immense for plain 'ole us to make any difference whatsoever. We might as well just give up altogether, as if there is no good fight for us to fight at all.

Neal Nitz was the anti-apathy child of God. Even when I met him for the first time at his farm that had been in the family for generations: you would think he would be all relaxed and laid-back, as he leaned on his tractor smoking a cigar, seemingly with no care in the world. Instead, there was passion and insistence on doing so many things in the church, for the farm, for the township he continued to serve on that commission. And even towards the end of his life, only days after he received another round of devastating news

from oncologists, he didn't want to talk about his bleak outlook. Actually, he wanted to know about the future of Sunday school, for young people he would never see go through those doors of the church he called home, too. Time and time again when he went through treatments and therapy, it wasn't just for him to get better; there were more good fights worth fighting for in all aspects of his life, for people he cherished and complete strangers.

Now, thankfully, in the end, *we* do not need to come up with any original material in our prayer life, in our overall faith journey to convince God that *we* are worth the fight. God already showed us that we are more than worth it, not just in the dying, but in the rising. We are worth going into death for, we are worth living right by our side, as if we have a precious fight to give for our own good, for the good of family, friends and complete strangers; as if God tells us day after day after day that we are worth the greatest of the divine might in any fight that comes along. And for the Neal Nitz's of the world who will never let us forget that Great News, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen!