

WHY FOLLOW THIS JESUS?

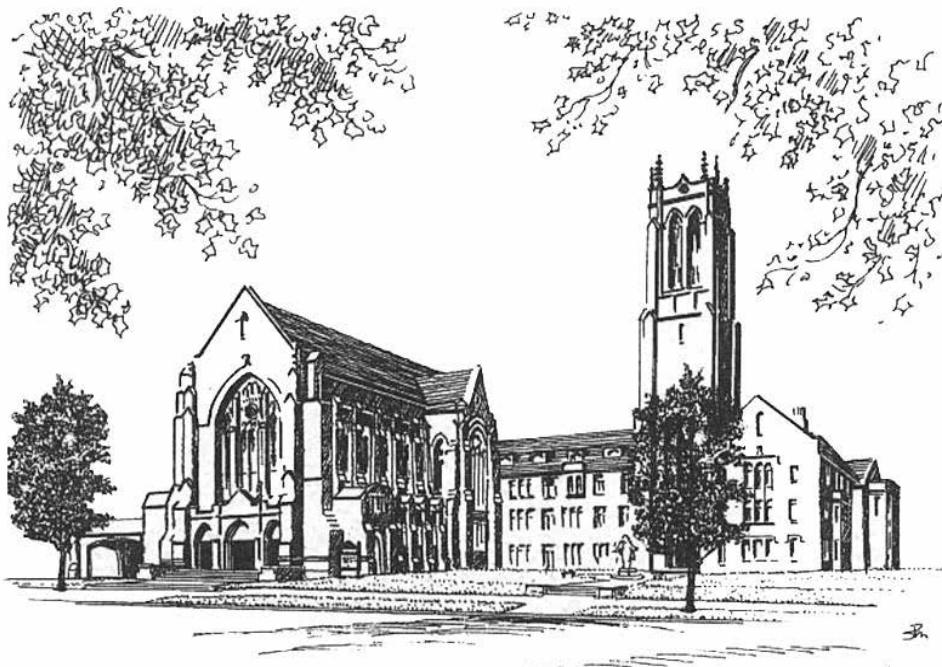
by

Rev. Thomas A. (Tommy) Williams

March 1, 2015

Second Sunday in Lent

8:30 and 11:05 a.m.



ST. PAUL'S

UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

5501 Main Street
Houston, Texas 77004-6917

713-528-0527

www.stpaulshouston.org

Texts: Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16 • Psalm 22:23-31 • Romans 4:13-25 • Mark 8:31-38

Rodney Eschberger was my kindergarten T-ball coach. Mr. Eschberger, as we called him, was a big guy with a big heart. We practiced, sort of. And we played the games, best we could. And we have a lot of fun, which was always Mr. Eschberger's goal, all the way to a winless season!

Pat Conroy famously wrote the novel *The Prince of Tides* a number of years back. But it was his memoir *My Losing Season* that I read and resonated with.

In the book, he describes his season as a point guard on the Citadel's basketball team and the winless season it was. All of the difficulties, all of the personal challenges in his life and the lives of the others and what he learned that year.

It in each of these cases, it is out of pain often that new things can be born. Whether it is a kindergartner's desire to win or a college team's goal to be victorious.

We all want to be on the winning side.

Peter's protest is understandable. Who would follow a Messiah who projects out his own demise? This is not a team that many of us would sign up for. Rather than victory, this sounds like defeat and death.

The 19th-century author Mark Twain said, "Many people are bothered by those passages in Scripture which they cannot understand; but as for me, I always noticed that the passages in Scripture which trouble me most are those which I do understand."

This close of chapter 8 is one of those for me. Great suffering, lose my life, a cross, being ashamed of by Jesus if I don't respond...

The late Quaker philosopher Elton Trueblood understood this complicating nature of the Christian way. "In many areas," he wrote, "the gospel, instead of taking away peoples' burdens, actually adds to them."

On a number of occasions, Trueblood told the story of John Woolman, a successful Quaker merchant in the 18th century who lived a wonderfully nice life until God convicted him one day of the offense of holding slaves. After that, John Woolman gave up his prosperous business; he used his money to try and free slaves and even started wearing undyed suits to avoid relying on dye that slave labor produced.

Says Elton Trueblood, “Occasionally we talk of our Christianity as something that solves problems, and there is a sense in which it does. Long before it does so, however, it increases both the number and the intensity of problems.”

I wonder if your Christian faith causes any problems for you?

I don't mean are you going looking for problems. There are people who do that.

I mean, do your convictions cause any problems for you simply as you live your life?

The way you love people, the sacrifices you make, the virtues you hold to in the face of temptation.

Does your faith cause you any problems these days?

On the one hand I hope it doesn't. I want to live a peaceful life and so do you.

But I'm caught in a place, a cross-shaped place you might say, where I hope that the faith causes problems for you and me.

It is hard for us to put ourselves in the place of the first disciples. Their world was in uproar. In the time Mark's Gospel was written, there was revolt, the temple was soon to be destroyed, a new Roman emperor was coming to power, and people were caught in this same middle.

Should they solve problems, make peace, or should they mix it up and demand positive change? How should they show up in that context?

The early disciples faced a literal cross, depending on their choices.

Well, it may be hard for us Western Christians to imagine such a scenario; we know though that in other parts of the world Christians face a similar scenario.

There is enough blame to go around every religious and ethnic group for their behavior throughout history, but the summary killing of Coptic Christians in Egypt represents a modern day literal example of cross bearing. These martyrs faced their deaths because of who they followed, and their families and churches grieve today, but they also are giving thanks for the faithfulness of their sisters and brothers.

Their witness faces us this Lenten season with the realities of following a Savior who carries death on his shoulder.

I have been told that at the height of the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa, when Christians were literally suffering and dying for justice and redemption there, Archbishop Desmond Tutu used to gather his staff around him in the mornings for prayer. And often as he was closing, he would ask, “If being Christian became a crime, would there be enough evidence to convict us?”

How is your love, your generosity, your attitude, your disposition, your convictions, your dreams, your pocket book, your calendar different because you follow Jesus?

If these things were a crime, would there be enough evidence to convict you?

Jesus has many titles in the Bible but Mark uses Son of Man here in part to indicate Jesus’ solidarity or oneness with us — he is fully divine but also fully human figure as well.

Peter rebukes Jesus. Peter’s rebuke of Jesus is the same Greek term Jesus used to rebuke demons in other occasions.

Peter may think Jesus is out of his senses here but Jesus brings down the gauntlet with a stronger rebuke calling Peter Satan.

We like the thought of God that Peter seemed to be trying to hold on to. We want an invincible God who shields us from our own vulnerability.

Strength in weakness, gaining by losing, the power of the cross — that still seems foolish to those who measure strength by gross national product and nuclear bombs, those devoted to finishing first.

But the Bible bears witness to another God, a suffering God who hears our cries, defends the orphans, widows, and immigrants. The God of the Bible suffers with the people. God comes among us as a vulnerable baby born among the homeless, lives as an immigrant who had to flee the country when a baby, associates with the outcasts, and compares the kingdom to receiving a little child. God is then executed as a criminal and buried in a borrowed tomb.

Our image of a triumphalist God who only wins in the way we define victory is not what we signed up for. That, Jesus said, is a human vision, not a divine one.

Denying self, taking up the cross, following Jesus.

What does it profit us to gain, to win, over the whole world and lose our life/soul?

There are plenty of opportunities to win short term and lose our soul in the process. All of us have made those choices and lived with those consequences.

Jesus has tough words for us who would blur our commitments and walk an easy, non-committal life.

The mortality rate is holding firm at 100 percent. We will all die one day.

The good news is that Jesus offers you and me a way to die and a way to live. By denying ourselves, facing death, by taking up my cross and following Jesus, we discover a life that really is life.

When I first arrived here, one of you shared with me a study published about family narratives. Its results in brief were that those who had a strong family story usually did better than those without one. That is, those who told the story of their family's beginnings, the ups and downs, their sacrifices and their victories together, and how they came out of it — those families, children in those families, typically did better in life than those who only saw crosses as instruments of death, we might say.

Those with a strong family narrative, family story, saw, we might say, crosses transformed from instruments of death into a sign of life.

The key about them was that it cut across families who made money and those who didn't. It cut clean across those who had great tragedies and those families that seemed to get by those.

Denying self, taking up the cross and following Jesus is not ultimately a fool's errand, or a march to martyrdom, or a cause for pity, but a pathway that leads to life and life eternal.

I invite you to follow this Jesus and live.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.