

“Talk About TALL Orders!”

A sermon by Pastor Steve Easterday-McPadden for FUMC
Grand Junction, 4th Sunday of Easter, May 22, 2022

This sermon can be listened to on the FUMCGJ
website: <https://www.fumcgj.org/worship-services>

Scripture Texts:

Philippians 2:1-11 [NLT]

OPENING

- “He was not what the experts expected...”
And so, the question, “Who was he?” follows quite naturally.
“Who was...[this man, Jesus] that, 2,000 years...[after his horrific execution], millions annually commemorate his gruesome demise?”
[Feasting..., “Hom. Persp.”, 171]
- Taking nothing away from Jesus, but a lot of folks have laid down their lives for others. As Jesus said in John 15:13, no one has greater love than this than to lay down their lives for their friends. We observe Memorial Day next weekend. We only need think that far to find a personal connection to those who have laid down their lives for us. And we’re indebted to them.
“However,” as Douglas Travis, former Dean and President of Episcopal Theol. Seminary in Austin, TX, writes, “we do not commemorate these deaths as *the* pivotal moment in history, nor do we make the peculiar argument that these deaths give rise to hope of eternal life” [Ibid.].

SERMON THOUGHTS

- Jesus’ death is remembered not simply as an instance of heroic sacrifice but as *the* event that ushers in new life and a new way of life” [Ibid., 171 over to 173].
While Jesus is much more than a hero, he is definitely not what the experts expected...”
- The Christ, as presented in Philippians 2 is clearly divine, but the divinity encountered there is NOT what was expected in the ancient world – OR ours! [Ibid., 173]
Let’s look at the passage...

TO THE SCRIPTURES

- (*An expository look at Phil 2:6-8, stopping short of v. 9ff.*)
- “He was not what the experts expected...”
- (*The thematic connection b/w John 1 and Phil 2*)
In John 1, there is no mention that “the Word made flesh” would, in the end, sacrifice His life and die as a common criminal, nailed to a Roman cross.
The divinity of Christ, extolled in such beautiful poetry in John 1, takes on so much more substance in Phil 2. Here, “Paul underscores that it is not *divinity* as such but *self-emptying obedience* that leads God to exalt the Christ” [Ibid.] as God does in vv. 9-11 (*Go back and look at that briefly.*)

SERMON THOUGHTS

- Thinking back to the start of the sermon, two thousand years after the fact, “we commemorate Jesus’ death, not because he was a hero, nor simply because he was divine, but because in his crucifixion and resurrection the truth is revealed that self-emptying, sacrifice, and obedience are of the essence of divinity” [*Ibid.*, 173].
- Now, we can start to get our heads around Paul’s TALL order. True, we can’t pull off the divine part of what Christ was about, but the part about self-emptying, the part about sacrifice, the part about obedience...those things...we are called to emulate those because the Spirit of the risen Christ living within us enables us to do so.

And it all starts with self-emptying: giving up on conceit, envy, pride, insecurity – all the things that come from a false sense of self, one based on our fleeting achievements instead of one grounded in the immutable love, grace, and affirmation of God.

You see, like Jesus, we don’t have to cling to or exploit a sense of self-importance. Our truest sense of self, the one that is most healthy, most secure, most mature is the one grounded in God’s Being, not ours. Only when that is our sense of self can we “think of others as being better than ourselves” and look to their interests, even putting them ahead of our own, as Paul urges in Phil 2:4.

- No, Jesus “was not what the experts expected...” In fact, the “experts” expected a “winner”, a power broker; one who would dominate by force of will;

one who subjugate others, not put them out front. But they were in for a big surprise!

Amy Plantinga Pauw, Professor of Doctrinal Theology at Louisville Presb. Theological Seminary in Louisville, KY, lifts from the realm of literature a powerful illustration of this surprise. She observes that “Flannery O’Connor imaginatively portrays [this surprise] at the end of her short story, ‘Revelation,’ when the protagonist, Mrs. Turpin, sees an enormous procession of ‘souls climbing upward in the starry field and shouting “Hallelujah!””.

Her wonder turns to shock as Mrs. Turpin discovers that all the people she considered inferior to herself are leading the procession, and that reputable people like her are pulling up the rear. The respectable types ‘were marching behind the others with great dignity, accountable as they had always been for good order and common sense and respectable behavior. They alone were on key. Yet, she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away.’

“Joining the triumphant procession to honor the crucified and risen Christ requires the humility to join the back of the line...” [*Feasting...*, “Theol. Persp.”, 174]

“He was not what the experts expected...”

♪ Ed Kilbourne’s “WWJD”

“He was not what the experts expected...”
“And they nailed him for that in the end.”

CONCLUSION

- Another Scripture passage with great power is this one, as recounted in Matthew 16:24-25 –
24 Then Jesus told his disciples, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 25 For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”
- Here, Jesus issues the TALL order, rather than Paul, and it, too, is one we’d rather not accept. But the truth is, eventually, the cross comes to each of us – if we’re going to be a follower of Jesus. And when it does, we are driven to our knees.
 - Our child dies.
 - We lose a job.
 - The pain in our side that we’ve been denying turns out to be stage 4 cancer.
 - Through no will of our own, we are faced with divorce.
 - We finally have to admit to having an addiction.Abraham Lincoln once said, “I have been driven many times to my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had absolutely no other place to go.” [Quoted by D. Travis in *Feasting...*, “Hom. Persp.”, 175].

“At times like this, the question is not, are we strong enough to bear the pain? We are not! The question is, are we pliant enough to accept the circumstance and give our lives and will to God?”
[Ibid.]

“Faith is demonstrated in relying upon God in these, the lowest moments of our lives.” *[Ibid., emph. added]* (*Ref. 1 Thess 5:16-18*) Redemption is seen to be the fruit born of the most bitter of soils. “Hope is...[found] in discovering that, indeed, God is with us. Love flows from the grateful heart.” *[Ibid., emph. added]*

And the TALLEST of orders turns out to be not a cruel taunt by a cynical God or pride-filled Apostle (Paul), but the way of salvation. The means by which we are not jaded by the dark underbelly of life. The means by which our hearts remain soft and pliable – made of flesh and not of stone (Ezek. 36:26).

“He was not what the experts expected...”
Thanks be to God.

REFERENCES

Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol. 2 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 170-175.