

# LESSONS IN LIVING

## *Love Wins*

A St. Andrew's Sermon  
Delivered by Dr. Jim Rigby  
Easter Sunday, April 24, 2011

Scripture Readings: John 20:19-23 and I John 3:11-17 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

It's almost a shame that the Easter service has the most people coming to it, because in some ways it's the hardest part of the Christian year, especially for people who don't come to church that much. The images are very violent, superficially, and maybe profoundly, sometimes. And certainly the church has used these images in a way that is nothing short of abusive. I'm always a little bit reticent when Easter comes, because I know that there are loving people who are here, and when you come to church every week, you sort of get numb to the horrible parts... (laughter) in the worship service, and you don't realize how abusive some of this has been in people's lives.

I am more and more convinced that my job is like somebody trying to teach baseball to people who have already been beaten with the bats (laughter), and you're trying to teach people how to bunt, and they're just...you know... (laughter) If you've never seen a baseball bat used for *baseball*, if you've only seen it used to *punish* people, it may be really hard to understand that Christianity is about love...to realize that everything in the theology is about love, it illustrates some aspect of love and none of it is about guilt or shame or abuse...even if the church has used it that way.

A couple of weeks ago I did a newsletter article, and I'm sure that most of you that have had a job where there are times when you just have to pump something out, so you write your newsletter article and you're not trying to write an encyclopedia article, it's just something that needs to be done. But what I love about my job is that people will write or call, and say, "That bothered me." Let me share first what I wrote, in trying to keep the cross, which is the central image in the religion...kind of hard just to drop that out.

I wrote, "Easter is primarily a celebration of life, but it is set against a backdrop of suffering, which is precisely the time when life is the hardest to affirm. While it is pathological to compose our life story around disappointments, it is also pathological to celebrate a *painless* life, and the superficial connections that such a life would require." So far, so good?

But I was very grateful to have gotten an e-mail from somebody who had been away from the church for a long time, and came back and is still in touch with the pain associated with that image of an angry God who liked to punish us, but Jesus said, "No, my heavenly parent hurt me instead." That image of God makes God look extremely ill, but you can become numb to it. Not to this person. The question they raise comes down to whether the cross or the Easter basket is a better symbol of Easter, and this is kind of a tongue-in-cheek response in defense of the Easter basket.

They wrote, "First the idea of Jesus versus the bunnies: I do understand the notion that brightness seems a lot brighter if you've been sitting in the dark, but to say that life isn't celebrated if the crucifixion isn't focused on seems pretty good stretch. The bunnies, as I know you know, come from the initial (Pagan)

focus on spring/fertility, etcetera. And while I get the gist that a life worth living holds both joy and sorrow, the process of experiencing and communicating both of those is critical. The wounds of Christ replacing the joy is (in my view) the evidence of such.” One last phrase here. “It’s one thing to acknowledge and another to implicitly or overtly endorse. To choose a path of life and affirmation is, to me, making ‘use’ of suffering - and it does not necessitate singing over the sad songs.”

Now see, theology is to be a conversation, and the harder the questions are, the better the conversation is going to be. If you don’t start with hardball questions, then you’re going to wind up with Tee-ball answers...it’s a conversation thousands and thousands of years old. So I want to honor that question, I want to honor that concern, and to go even further, to look at some of the ways that the church has used the image of the cross.

If you’ve been going to church for a long time, you find that we’ve fallen in love with these old hymns, but then you listen to the words, and you’re going, “Oh my God, what are we saying?” Here are a couple of songs from our former hymnal.

*Alas! and did my Savior bleed?  
And did my Sov'reign die?  
Would He devote that sacred head  
For such a worm as I?*  
[from *Alas! and Did My Saviour Bleed*]

(laughter) That’s kind of nice...kind of nice. But my favorite of all time, when I was a kid - it gave me the heebie-jeebies - went like this:

*There is a fountain filled with blood drawn from Emmanuel's veins;  
And sinners plunged beneath that flood lose all their guilty stains.*  
[from *There Is A Fountain Filled With Blood*]

It’s a phlebotomist’s dream. (laughter)

Now, as I said, when you come to church long enough, you get numb to that imagery – it doesn’t bother you as much. But we are not in the business of comfort for ourselves, we’re in the business of taking the message out into the world, and so we’re the ones that need to go through the changes and the transformation to make sure that we’re bringing out the best possible communication of a God of love and not defend the pathologies of the past that the church has done.

Now we have a double whammy because when you live in Texas, you also get used to insanity. (laughter) I mean you just do. I got a message from our Central Presbytery office that said that the governor has asked us all to pray today for rain. (extended laughter) And my question is, “How is that different than the most primitive religion there is?” How is that different in any way, shape, or form from a rain dance? That it’s not that we’ve had poor water conservation, it’s not that there’s global warming, it’s not that there’s just a drought; it’s that God is not opening up the windows of Heaven. So let’s all pray. And you’ve all been in that situation before: you see thirsty people, you see fires burning everywhere, and animals dying of thirst, and you say, “I’m not going to give you water unless you beg.” *That God is pathological!* And a lot of people have left religion and Christianity not because of anything that Jesus said or did, but because of these horrible expressions of superstition. For us to pray for rain says that it’s God’s fault! At least with a rain dance, you get some exercise! (laughter) It’s like the worst of all worlds.

Most uses of the atonement I think are very sick, and they leave you with an idea of God that you don't want to worship. Let me give you an example. Let's say you check into a hotel. The owner both owns the hotel and built the hotel from scratch. When you get to your room you find that the plumbing doesn't work. So you call the manager and tell him that the plumbing doesn't work, and the manager says, "Well then I'm going to have to punish you." (laughter) So you say, "Well, I didn't build the hotel, you did. You built the hotel from scratch, and the plumbing isn't working. How can you say it's my fault?" He says, "Well you have to understand that thousands of years ago, some relatives of yours ate an apple." (laughter) "And ever since then, I've kept a torture chamber underneath, in the basement."

It's horrible, and you can't even blame it on Satan, because God would have made Satan, too. And anybody that can't figure out that if you make a creature with horns, and a pointy tail, and goat feet, there are going to be problems. (laughter) And even if he's nice when you make him, when he looks in the mirror, he's going to be really ticked off! (laughter) "What is this, goat feet? (laughter) I have two legs, how am I supposed to keep my balance with goat feet? *Somebody will pay for this!*" (laughter)

I'm not laughing at the sacred; I'm laughing at the ridiculous way the church talks about the sacred sometimes. If our passage today is correct, then the message from the very beginning has been to love. That's what the passage says, that's what Jesus says, what John said over and over again. *The point of it all is to love.* Then God must be the most loving being of all, and to paint God in a way that makes Charlie Manson look kind is a problem...it's a problem for me, anyway.

So we're going to look at this notion of the cross, and say what does it reveal about love to us? But to hear this, you're going to have to get past the culture, and every week that's a major problem for us. We're talking about a day before the cross had been converted to jewelry...cuff links. It wasn't furniture in churches; it was a threat of the Roman Empire against anybody who stood up for the little people. That's why they put it on the hill. "You don't stand up for each other. You don't question our power. If you do, this will happen to you." That's what the cross meant.

Now there's two sides to the cross...two sides to the cross. And probably as an American, you're standing on the wrong side of it, and you don't even know that. When you're well-to-do, as you can see I am, (laughter) and you see a police car or a badge, it's reassuring. When you're poor and struggling, that badge doesn't look the same...the gun doesn't look the same. You're standing on two different sides of things, because at some level, every person here knows in their bones that the purpose of the law is to protect the rich from the poor. This is why you can have the kind of scandals we've seen on Wall Street – horrible crimes – and almost nobody gets punished...because they're rich. They're above the law. Now in the same way, the cross was intended as a threat, and as people born into an empire, that's not our fault, but it means we have a tendency to look at law enforcement and armies as good, because they stand between us and the terrorists, which means the wretched of the earth. Yes, some of them are criminal, but most of the violence that is dished out to the rest of the world is keeping the poor, the wretched of the earth, in their place.

I gave a talk this week at UT on sweatshops. The University of Texas has dealings with sweatshops, and there's an organization there that's trying to get them to hold themselves to a higher standard...fat chance. Now what I want to suggest is that the cross is something we don't want to see, and when we think we're superior to it, when we think that because we're so comfortable, that we're peaceful, and that the cross is a sign of violence, yes, it is a sign of violence, but it is a sign of our violence against the weak of the earth. What people hated most about Jesus was he revealed to them the violence they were doing to the very

weakest. This is why you don't hear that message in a church. You hear a message about a one-on-one relationship; God was mad, Jesus suffered, blah-blah-blah.

Three things I want to point out about the cross that we need not to lose. The cross feels really different to the weak and the poor. Did you ever notice that? It's the bourgeois of the world that says, "I'm above that kind of violence." That's not the way the cross feels to people who have been kicked in the teeth their whole lives. It's a symbol of empowerment and a symbol that there's nothing that can frighten you, nothing that can take your dignity from you, nothing that can rob you of hope, but you do have to choose which side of the cross that you're going to stand on.

So here's how it goes. First, the cross is a symbol that love hurts sometimes. *It just does*. If you don't believe me, ask a parent. Sometimes it hurts to love. The way it says it in our passage is, and time and time again the way John talks about it is, there's no greater love than this, that you lay down your life for your brothers and your sisters. The reason the church doesn't like the real Easter is because it's not really talking about Jesus' cross, it's talking about your cross. It's talking about whether you and I will lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. That's the message we don't want to hear – that's the gospel we don't want to hear. But that's the gospel that would save the world...to give our lives to love...and for me not to have a view of personal happiness that doesn't include your happiness, too. To not have a sense of personal peace that doesn't cut me off from your misery and your pain. That's the pain of the cross.

The Easter Basket...now the Easter basket has got some good things going for it. But I do think it summarizes the good and the bad of American religion. It's actually perfect to symbolize American religion, I think. It's junk food in a non-bio-degradable thing of plastic grass in a basket probably woven in a sweatshop. It covers the bases of all the things we don't want to think about, *we don't*. To look at the cross and see a twelve-year-old who works in a Nike sweatshop in Micronesia or wherever it is in the world. How much of the world tolerates child labor, and how many of our companies turn our head to that. The cross doesn't let us forget it. The cross doesn't leave us on the wrong side, *it haunts us* – it bothers us. But then *it heals us, it restores us*.

Have you ever known anybody who was in really good shape? I haven't, either. (laughter) Because they tick me off too early, you know? (laughter) They talk about how good they feel, but I'm in such bad shape that I don't understand it. When I think of exercise, I think of pain. (laughter) In the same way, the gospel is talking about a type of joy that doesn't feel that happy when you first start. When you break a bad habit, or take up a good habit, usually it hurts somewhat, but to realize that now you're healing, it's setting the bones of the whole body.

Another thing that the church doesn't want you to think about is that the risen Christ is not just an individual; it's the community of humankind. It's the lovers of humankind. So when I leave my separateness, it hurts, because all my joy, all my self-esteem has come from turning my back on you. But when your pain means as much as mine does, then I'm willing to go through the pain of having the broken bones reset.

I got another letter this week from someone else. "I listened to your sermon on suffering and I really think it helped me with my own pain and suffering in a lot of ways. But now I have some questions because I've been really looking toward Buddhism and enlightenment during my times of trouble and trying to look for happiness that lasts. I don't think it's even possible but I want that happiness and that love that enlightenment supposedly offers. But the problem is that the definition of enlightenment is freedom from pain and attachment! And if people who love the most suffer the most, how can that be the same? I know when I am in pain I don't want to be in pain, but I know it's a part of life and it will pass, but I get upset

with people for not wanting to stand the pain when the love in it is really worth it.” It’s a very young person who is struggling with and getting in touch with some insights about things. Love hurts, then it heals.

The final part of the message, and what makes it Easter, is that love wins. Now it doesn’t win probably in the sense we want it to in the beginning. It doesn’t mean that you’re going to get the job you want. It doesn’t mean that your health will work out the way you want it to necessarily. It doesn’t mean you’ll win in the traditional sense. What it means when you stop playing the game where you’re destined to lose. I’m talking about the game of Empire, about the game of Culture. I’m talking about all the things you pretend to be to get worth... all the ways that both you and I sell out and numb ourselves to it to get ahead in a race that we don’t really care about winning, anyway. When we’re called from that race to this one, we’ve already won in so many ways. Every person here at some level knows that culture is in decline, and we may turn some corners every once in a while, but ultimately we’re ready for a new chapter.

There’s a story that I’ve always liked about a priest, and it was a Catholic priest because they are assigned, and that’s necessary for the joke, but it’s not necessary otherwise. So this priest is going to move on, and he’s doing his last sermon, and he looks out and a little old lady in the back is crying. He’s very moved by that in an egotistical kind of way, so he goes up to her and says, “Betsy, what’s wrong here?” And she says, “Father John, we’ll never get another preacher as good as you.” He says, “Now wait a minute. We don’t know who’s going to take my place; they may be perfectly adequate as a preacher.” (laughter) But she said, “No, Father, I’ve been here through ten different priests, and each one was worse than the one before.” (laughter)

Now that’s funny or not funny depending upon if you have the humility for it. (laughter) If you’re praying that God changes, brings us rain, brings kindness, ends war; if you think it’s God’s fault, and you’re an innocent bystander, it’s not a very funny joke at all. But when you realize that you’re a human being and you go after comfort sometimes to your own ill, you wouldn’t be normal if you didn’t do that, but there’s a calling within you to greatness, to give yourself to a new type of life and a new type of love.

Now the problems with Christian theology again, it’s like the baseball game, and you pull the bats out and everybody takes in a breath, but just as it’s a shame if a child never had the experience of a home run, or of teamwork, it’s even greater poverty when because the church has made so many mistakes, we lose the lesson of the symbols.

That love sometimes hurts, but it’s a pain that’s worth paying the cost for. I don’t want a happiness that leaves out your happiness. So even if it makes me less happy at first, I say yes to that pain. And a second thing is that love heals. I stop living my own separate, selfish life and I join with you in a new body, a new life. It doesn’t end. Even if I’m struck down, I know that life goes on. And finally the knowledge that love wins. This is not a “Parade of Despair” as Rumi used to say. That when you say yes to this love, there is nothing in heaven and earth that can separate you from it.

*Transcribed and edited by a member of the St. Andrew’s Sermon Transcription Project.*



***St. Andrew's Church***

*Loving ♦ Progressive ♦ Presbyterian*

14311 Wells Port Drive, Austin, Texas 78728 · (512) 251-0698 · Fax: (512) 251-2617

www.staopen.com