

Sunday, September 12, 2021

Rev. Robert W. Brown

SERMON

*Welcome to Your New Life:
an Orientation*

INTRODUCTION

I have no doubt that everyone here today (over the age of 30) remembers that aching feeling we shared 20 years ago on the morning of September 12th 2001, especially if you were part of this TriCon community. I do not know what it was like for all of you when you learned that one of your own beloved, Al Filipov, was among the thousands of casualties from the terrorist attack on 9/11.

To experience sudden tragedy and suffer great loss at the hands of unleashed evil is impossible to ever fully understand or reconcile. When violence and injustice so clearly appear to win the day, we find it takes all our strength, resolve and willpower to continue on. Yet, surrounded by the goodness of loved ones and in the company of those who mourn beside us, we slowly – very slowly – can find new life. The void is never really filled. The trauma is never really resolved. The loss becomes part of us. In time, for those who chose to live into this new life, a mysterious power emerges. This is a resurrection of sorts. This is a new life molded from the ashes of what felt like our total annihilation. To our amazement, we find this new life has a power greater than the horror and evil that took us down. We lost our life and found our salvation. There is nothing easy along this path. There are no short cuts or miracle cures. As we learn from today's Gospel reading, Jesus knows this road well and will walk ahead of us.

SCRIPTURE

Mark 8:27-38 (NRSV)

Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah." And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him. Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."

The word of God for the people of God.



PLEASE PRAY WITH ME;

Lord Jesus, we come before you this morning with willing and open hearts. Teach us the way of truth, the way of love. May we hear your invitation to receive new life and boldly calculate the cost. May my words and the meditation of all our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you our Rock and our Redeemer. AMEN

Life is a series of defining moments. Sometimes we choose them, like that moment you ask your beloved to marry you. Sometimes they choose us, like when, in a few short minutes, you lose all your possessions in a house fire. Chosen or not, these defining threshold moments carve out our life story. Both joy and sorrow braid together and weave the fabric of every life. Whether we walk willingly over the threshold or are pushed over the edge, the reality is that threshold moments mean that you leave one kind of life behind and are thrust into a new way of being in the world. Every birth and every death are clear examples of threshold moments. Our lives are a continual series of these defining moments, and each time it happens we are confronted with a choice. How will we choose to adapt to this new life?

Peter willingly crossed a threshold into his new life when he decided to walk away from everything he knew and follow Jesus. He had no idea why he was so compelled by this man but as he journeyed along with the other disciples, he witnessed astonishing events. With a word, Jesus could calm a stormy sea. With a single touch a deaf man could suddenly hear. He turned water into wine and fed thousands with a few loaves of bread. The haunting, perennial question for Peter and all who encounter Jesus is the same; who is this man? We are still wrestling that question today.

On the road to Caesarea Philippi, Jesus decides it's time for his followers to commit or go home. There is another threshold to cross into a new life but it will require an enormous leap of faith. To cross this threshold and follow Jesus into new life we must first leave behind the human things and entirely trust in divine things. The way of human things is to believe that liberation comes only through domination, the road to self-fulfillment is charted by enlightened self-interest, happiness, love and acceptance can be found in affluence, physical excellence and social standing. The human way is endless striving, constantly grasping for more - more power, more comfort, more wealth, more security, more self-esteem and acceptance.

What Jesus teaches here and lives out in his own remarkable life, utterly flips that script. The divine way, he insists, is the way of selfless love, grounded in deep humility and extravagant generosity. The divine way releases all striving, surrenders all ego, and abandons any effort to be successful. The divine way roots for the underdog and trusts that our true identity can only emerge when we lose our life, that life centered in the shallow, insatiable illusion of the human way.

The remarkable invitation Jesus offers is to follow him into a new kind of life. And, to be quite honest, following Jesus can be terrifying. “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.” In other words, the new life Jesus offers is going to cost you everything, and what’s more, when you live in the Way of Jesus, you will suffer. The “cross” we take up is the very real risk we take in being totally open and completely vulnerable. The way of love, humility and generosity subverts the tyranny of our times. It never seeks its own preservation, power, success and dignity apart from the preservation, power, success and dignity of all people. Taking this frightening leap of faith into the divine way of living awakens us to a stunning realization. For the longest time we have been chasing the wind. The ways of the world, the “human way” is exposed as an illusion, an elegant veneer over vapor. It turns out that there is nothing of substance there. “For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?” Jesus invites us to wake up to this deeper reality. He calls us to take up our cross and follow him into this new life. Today we begin a new chapter at TriCon Church. This is a new beginning, a chance to reclaim and redefine who we are and rediscover our relevance in a post-pandemic reality.

The mystic teacher Meister Eckhart put it this way. “Suddenly you know: It is time to start something new and trust the magic of beginnings.” TriCon Church, we have been thrust into a new beginning. As we emerge out of our forced lock down, we find we are different people, a different community with new expectations and new possibilities. We begin today, oriented toward Christ, leading us forward to join him on a new broader horizon. We have crossed the threshold and must let go of what was, what has been taken we can no longer get back. In this new life we now share there is a palpable sense of freedom mixed with disoriented discomfort. Thank God we have each other. Many of us have weathered this pandemic storm side by side and now stand ready to live into a new space, a new way of being church. We will have failures and perhaps not always make the best decisions, yet each time we fail, we find hope and comfort in receiving God’s grace and endless mercy. Stepping out in faith is both terrifying and exhilarating, but this is the invitation Jesus offers.

“To have faith requires courage,” wrote Erich Fromm. “The ability to take a risk, the readiness even to accept pain and disappointment...To be loved, and to love, need courage, the courage to judge certain values as of ultimate concern - and to take the jump and to stake everything on these values.” So, TriCon Church, what do we value? How do we put those values into tangible practice?

This is the perennial invitation to a new adventure, a new journey, a new challenge. Do we dare to take up our cross and follow him no matter the cost? Trust is the essential ingredient. Are we willing to truly trust God’s reliability and follow in the Way of Jesus? I don’t know.

I do know that faith and trust in the ultimate goodness of God does not magically clear away the confusion, or overcome uncertainty. Our faith and trust in a good and

just God is not what will not fix this broken world. Chaos monsters will still descend and we will still suffer the pain of loss, disappointment, dashed dreams and shattered expectations. Yet, even in these disorienting times we are offered a reliable compass to reorient our lives. When we trust, without reservation, that God is with us, we will forever echo the words of Jesus hanging on his cross, "Into your hands I commit my spirit" (Luke 23:46).

Let us begin today. Let us boldly step into our new life together. Our story continues and we have agency in how this next chapter is written. There are decisions to make, choices about our future to agree on. What exactly are the values TriCon Church shares? Will we set our minds on divine things or human things? Can we see beyond the veneer and vapor? Can we hold on to one another with a ruthless trust in God's promise for new life? Can we risk suffering for the sake of all who suffer? In this new day we begin our new life together. God is calling us, inviting us, to humbly open our hands, soften our hearts and risk loving without reservation. God is calling us to dispense kindness and generosity with reckless abandon. God is calling TriCon Church to stand up for justice, because we can, if we chose to do it!

Welcome to your new life! Can you believe that God is inviting **us** to co-author these next chapters? What story shall we write together?