

This sermon was originally delivered on June, 22, 2008 at Mount Jefferson Presbyterian Church.

The texts for the sermon were Genesis 22: 1-19 and Matthew 10: 26-39

### *“Who Do you Love”*

After our first child, Scottie, was born, and after a few months had passed, someone asked me how I felt about fatherhood. I replied that before Scottie was born I knew I would be willing to die for another. But now that Scottie’s in my life I was surprised to find that I was willing to kill for someone. If anyone dared to harm or threaten her, I’d tear them to shreds. I’ve always been a rather peaceful fellow, so this new feeling scared me a little.

As Will Willimon notes, “it interesting that our family, for all its positive value, would have the power to render us into killers. Such is the power of our loves. What we love determines how we act and what we do. And we have few loves that are deeper than the love we have for our families.”<sup>i</sup>

That’s why we find our text from Genesis so disturbing. That’s why we second-guess Jesus’ words in today’s text from Matthew; surely God wouldn’t seek to destroy one of the most sacred things on earth –family. And yet, there it is in black and white. Apparently, when God said that He was a jealous god and we were to have no others before Him, he wasn’t kidding; for he demands Abraham to sacrifice Isaac there on the rocks. Jesus threatens to sever the family with a sword.

Barbra Brown-Taylor writes that “if Jesus were in charge of an average congregation I figure there would be about four people let there on Sunday mornings, and chances are those four would be fooling themselves. Jesus would greet newcomers by saying, “Are you absolutely sure you want to follow this way of life? It will take everything you have. It has to come before everything else that matters to you. Plenty of people have launched out on it without counting the cost, and as you can see they aren’t here anymore. The other thing is, if you succeed, if you really do follow me –it will probably get you killed. Why don’t you go home and think it over? I

would have for you to get in over your head.” Yep, Jesus isn’t the kind of guy you’d want on your “Church-Growth Committee”.

God calls Abraham to follow, wherever he may lead. Jesus calls his disciples to follow him: the person who tries to preserve his life will lose it; and he even says that his followers will have a cross. And that’s a rather striking statement, because thus far in Mathew’s gospel there’s been no mention of a cross –not Jesus’ cross, there’s no indication at this point that Jesus will be crucified. Jesus says *we’ll be the ones crucified...* for following him!

If you notice in the text, Jesus did not say to his followers, “take up my cross,” but a man must take up “his own cross.” Many people over the years have interpreted carrying the cross, or bearing the cross, as a way to explain their own personal suffering. Campbell Morgan writes,

*“I have heard good people speak of some suffering of their own, some physical disability, some mental trouble, some loss in material things, some very real personal suffering, as being the cross. They say of such experiences, “Of course, we have our own cross to bear.” Morgan states, “that is not **the cross**.....For **the cross** is not about us and our personal pain. We never touch the realm of **the Cross** until we are suffering vicariously; until our suffering is the suffering of sympathy with others, and strength is being poured out in order to help others. That is **the cross** –the Cross of Jesus Christ.”*

Bearing the cross is a consequence of our obedience to Jesus Christ. Cross bearing requires deliberate sacrifice and exposure to risk and ridicule in order to follow Jesus.

Here in the United States we keep thinking that somehow we have found a way to follow Jesus without getting tangled in some of his more pesky proclamations: like it’s more likely for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for the wealthy to enter the Kingdom of God; that we must hate our family; that we must lose our life to find it, or that we must bear the cross.

In the United States, being a Christian is roughly synonymous with being a caring, sensitive, and compassionate *American*, an all around

good citizen. Why, our politicians and TV preachers are constantly yoking the name of *Jesus* to the term “*family values*”. Why it’s almost as if Jesus’ ministry were somehow conducted within a Norman Rockwell painting, and instead of multiplying bread and fish, he’s sharing hotdogs and apple-pie from the tailgate of his pickup truck. (I guess maybe there’s nothing wrong with that. I know a farmer-pastor who once held communion in a tobacco field with grape Ne-Hi and a Little Debbie oatmeal cream pie.)

Two years ago, **Raed Jarrar**, Iraqi-born blogger and political analyst. He is the Iraq consultant for the **American Friends Service Committee** (you may know them as the Quakers) was stopped from boarding a JetBlue flight in New York at JFK Airport. He was headed to San Francisco. They said it was the Arabic script on his T-shirt.<sup>ii</sup>

So the security officers and the JetBlue officers at that time told me that wearing an Arabic T-shirt and coming to an airport in the US is like going to a bank while wearing a T-shirt that reads, “I am a robber.” And I was made to cover my T-shirt, they prevented him from speaking to any supervisor, by making him change shirts they prevented him from exercising his rights of free speech. In an effort not to scare the other passengers, they changed his seat on the airplane from the front of the airplane to the back of the airplane.

And just what did the offending t-shirt say in Arabic and English?  
**“We will not be silent”.**<sup>iii</sup>

What the TSA agents and JetBlue staff didn’t know was that the phrase “We will not be silent” was a reference to the White Rose Society.

Hans and Sophie Scholl were German teenagers in the 1930s. Like other young Germans, they enthusiastically joined the Hitler Youth. They believed that Hitler was leading Germany and the German people back to greatness. But over time they became disillusioned with the Nazi party.

But they also knew that open dissent was impossible in Nazi Germany, especially after the start of World War II. Most Germans took the traditional position, that once war breaks out, it is the duty of

the citizen to support the troops by supporting the government. But Hans and Sophie Scholl believed differently. They believed that it was the duty of a citizen, even in times of war, to stand up against an evil regime, especially when it is sending hundreds of thousands of its citizens to their deaths.

The Scholl siblings began sharing their feelings with a few of their friends, Christoph Probst, Alexander Schmorell, Willi Graf, as well as with Kurt Huber, their psychology and philosophy professor.

One day in 1942, copies of a leaflet entitled “The White Rose” suddenly appeared at the University of Munich. The leaflet contained an anonymous essay that said that the Nazi system had slowly imprisoned the German people and was now destroying them. The Nazi regime had turned evil. It was time, the essay said, for Germans to rise up and resist the tyranny of their own government. At the bottom of the essay, the following request appeared: “Please make as many copies of this leaflet as you can and distribute them.”

Another leaflet appeared soon afterward; and then another, and another. Ultimately, there were six leaflets published and distributed by Hans and Sophie Scholl and their friends, four under the title “The White Rose” and two under the title “Leaflets of the Resistance.”

People began receiving copies of the leaflets in the mail. Students at the University of Hamburg began copying and distributing them. Copies began turning up in different parts of Germany and Austria.

The Gestapo was driven into a frenzy. It knew that the authors were having to procure large quantities of paper, envelopes, and postage. It knew that they were using a duplicating machine. But despite the Gestapo's best efforts, it was unable to catch the perpetrators.

One day, February 18, 1943, Hans' and Sophie's luck ran out. They were caught leaving pamphlets at the University of Munich and were arrested. A search disclosed evidence of Christoph Probst's participation, and he too was soon arrested. The three of them were indicted for treason.<sup>iv</sup>

As a Presbyterian, as a Christian in the Reformed tradition, the White Rose Society is part of your heritage. It is the same faithfulness that prompted the Confession Church's to risk their lives in publishing the Barmen Declaration.<sup>v</sup>

And so, before I boarded a plane for Boston four weeks ago, you know what I did... Everyone looked at me a little funny, the TSA agent questioned me, my bag was somehow randomly selected to be searched, I got to the gate, and while waiting to board the plane, found an empty seat at the gate across from a gaggle of elderly Jewish men and women who kept shifting in their seats eyeing the Arabic script on my t-shirt. But of course, Christ calls us to bear a cross heavier than an organic cotton t-shirt.

As the pastor who based part of his Easter sermon on the Rolling Stones, you knew I couldn't let Bo Diddley's passing go unmentioned. One of his most famous songs is "Who Do You Love." In light of this morning's texts it is a fitting question: who do you love, who do you love more than the Lord of Life Himself? As we said, we are known by our loves, and loving Jesus brings disruption and conflict with our other loves and loyalties.

If Jesus' call to discipleship seems too daunting or overwhelming to you, remember this. You are not left alone to fulfill them. Jesus may be the last person you think of to put on your Church Growth Committee, but He's the first you want on your side. Or as Taylor writes, "*Jesus made a [perfect] savior, and I do not think he is through saving us yet. His best tool has always been the very thing that killed him, that cross he ended up on, the one he was carrying long before he got to Golgotha. He is always offering to share it with us, to let us get underneath it with him.*" And when the weight of the Cross becomes more than we can bear, Jesus throws his shoulders under it and helps us carry it.

May the grace, peace and love of our Lord Jesus Christ help carry you through this, and every, day. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> William H. Willimon, “Pulpit Resource”, Vol. 36, No.2, Year A, April, May, June 2008. Pg. 50.

<sup>ii</sup> Excerpted from an August 17, 2007 article from Democracy Now.

<sup>iii</sup> I ordered my t-shirt through CafePress.com.

<sup>iv</sup> Adapted from the Jewish Virtual Library’s entry, “the White Rose: a Lesson in Dissent”

<sup>v</sup> The Barmen Declaration is part of the Presbyterian Church (USA)’s constitution and may be found in her Book of Confessions.