

**Diocesan Council Sermon, 2008**  
*Thursday, February 21*  
*First Presbyterian Church, San Antonio*

First, thanks to First Presbyterian and her Senior Pastor, Rick Kannwischer, our hosts for tonight's service

- a. What kind of person are you?
- b. What kind of person do you want to be?
- c. What bridge is needed in your life to move from (a) to (b)?

**Deny Yourself. Take Up Your Cross. Follow Me.** (Matt 16.24, Mk 8.34, Lk 9.23)

*In the Name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.*

Welcome to this 104<sup>th</sup> Annual Council of the Episcopal Diocese of West Texas.

That means that this is the 104<sup>th</sup> time a sermon has been preached to a Diocesan Council in West Texas.

Does anyone remember anything about the first 103 sermons?

Kind of puts things in perspective for the preacher, doesn't it?

The Rev. Lawrence Brown wrote *A Brief History of the Church in West Texas* (1959) and let me begin by sharing a bit of what he writes of our early history:

The year was 1874. The General Convention of TEC authorized the Diocese of Texas, our mother diocese, to limit its boundaries.

So, depending on your perspective, we were either born that year or abandoned that year by Diocese of Texas

In any case, the General Convention of 1874 created two missionary jurisdictions out of the territory no longer included in the Diocese of Texas:

*The Missionary District of Western Texas and the Missionary District of Northern Texas.*

In the early days Western Texas had parishes or missions at Cuero, Victoria, Gonzales, Goliad, Chocolate, Lockhart, San Marcos, Seguin, and San Antonio.

Down the coast was Corpus Christi, with Rockport as a satellite; while at the southern tip, Brownsville, was a completely isolated enclave, accessible only by steamer, which generally had to be boarded at New Orleans, thus necessitating a detour from Corpus Christi of some 900 miles

Westward there were no congregations until you reached El Paso; you traveled from one Army fort to another

In 1874, of the 9 clergy in the territory transferred to the District, only 7 were active.

In case you are wondering, that's telling us that 78% of the clergy present in the diocese at that time were active.

I wonder what the math would be today? Just kidding.

Total communicants in the entire region in 1874 numbered 427.

General Convention elected the Rev. Robert Woodward Barnwell Elliott, the Rector of St. Philip's Church, Atlanta, to be the bishop of the Missionary District of Western Texas.

He was the son of the Rt. Rev. Stephen Elliott, Bishop of Georgia from 1841-1866.

Our Bishop Elliott was born in 1840, making him 34 years old when he came here as bishop.

After ordination to the diaconate in 1868, he served four missions in Georgia, then as assistant minister at the Chapel of the Incarnation, New York, while studying at General Seminary

It was likely during this time that he came to know many of the friends who would later assist him in financing his work in West Texas.

Elliott was consecrated bishop on November 15, 1874 in Atlanta, and by December he had arrived in Luling, which was at the time the end of the Galveston, Harrisburg, and San Antonio Railroad.

High water prevented him from keeping his appointment in Seguin on December 20, so he arranged for a service in a railroad passenger car

This gave the 8-month old town of Luling what was doubtless its first religious service of any kind

Elliott worked tirelessly for our missionary district, and traveled back East regularly to raise funds to build churches and carry on ministry

Lawrence Brown writes:

*In all of this work the Church must be true to her own genius, the Bishop believed, neither watering down her message nor compromising her position for easy gains that would not last. She must exhibit a true catholicity.*

In his address to council in 1875, Bishop Elliott said:

*For myself I willingly add that I mean by a true catholicity neither a narrow Protestant Episcopalianism – nor a weak limitation of the Papacy. Our heritage is Anglicanism; whatever we find there acknowledged as a school of theology must be treated with respect and forbearance, whether their views be taken from (the 16<sup>th</sup> century Anglican Divines or the Library of Anglo-Catholic Theology containing the works of the 17<sup>th</sup> century Divines).*

Brown notes: *In the day to day work of the Church, as long as these very broad limits were observed, individuals could differ in their opinions without vitiating the witness the Episcopal Church was sent to bear.*

Elliott believed deeply that our Church had a particular contribution to make in the mission of Christ.

He wanted to have it represented in every place in the District, and was grieved when he could not keep up with the demand.

Elliott wrote in 1884, ten years after arriving in Luling: *There are such terrible losses of which you know nothing – a great unwritten record of people who longed for the things which the dear Lord has committed to us...*

There were many who helped, including the bishop's friends back east and the bishops and clergy of the Diocese of Texas, who were vitally interested in the success of their daughter missionary jurisdiction.

There are some wonderful stories of support from the clergy of the Diocese of Texas – and I'm talking about clergy who came to us under a variety of very difficult, and sometimes tragic, circumstances

One such story is that after the disastrous hurricane of 1875 had drowned the Rev. Robert Jope and his family, destroyed the Indianola church and rectory, and blown down or damaged other church buildings in the field...

...The Rev. Francis Starr, the esteemed missionary under Bishop Gregg in the Diocese of Texas, came to work in an area that was larger than some dioceses in the East.

He took under his charge Indianola, Lavaca, Chocolate, Cuero, Goliad, and Victoria.

In Indianola and Lavaca, other denominations abandoned the communities, and for 8 years our services were the only ones available.

The Rev. Mr. Starr is just one example of many who were willing to answer God's call on behalf of the people of West Texas.

Throughout his episcopate in Western Texas, Bishop Elliott did not enjoy good health.

After one year, his health began to deteriorate – largely due to the challenging demands of his office and his unwavering spirit to serve as a good and faithful servant.

In 1874, when he arrived, there were only six church buildings, and two of those could not be used.

Three of the six were lost in the 1875 hurricane.

After the loss of the Indianola rectory, there was only one rectory in the entire district.

By 1887, thirteen years after Bishop Elliott's arrival, there were 27 churches and 10 rectories.

An amazing feat, considering most of those resources were raised from Episcopalians in other parts of the country by the good Bishop himself.

Bishop Elliott went to Chicago for the General Convention meeting of 1887.

He was a sick and worn out man. Never of strong health, he had contracted dengue fever.

In spite of this, he not only attended to his duties in the House of Bishops, but fulfilled a strenuous series of meetings and engagements to speak on behalf of the missionary work of the Church...meaning on our behalf here in West Texas.

Friends in New York insisted he should go to Europe to rest and recuperate, and they not only raised the funds to send him, they sent monies for our district which he badly needed to raise.

He never made it to Europe, for he died along the way at Sewanee, Tennessee, on August 26, 1887, at the age of 47.

His energy, his charm, his wisdom, his witness, his Christ-like spirit, his theological commitment, his forward looking vision, and his missionary faithfulness endeared him to many....

...both in and out of his own Church, in the wider Episcopal Church, in the broader Anglican Communion, and most especially in his own missionary district, Western Texas

To use an image from St. Paul, Robert Woodward Barnwell Elliott literally poured himself out as a libation for the gospel.

Deny Yourself. Take Up Your Cross. Follow Me.

Of course, Bishop Elliott is only one example of thousands of followers of Jesus over the centuries who literally lived into these words.

And these same words are our diocesan theme, our call to action, for our life together in 2008.

The focus of this council is on mission, and mission was certainly the focus of the life of Bishop Elliott and the lives of those who joined him...

...in shaping the Missionary District of Western Texas - which grew and matured into The Episcopal Diocese of West Texas – which we now know as our spiritual home.

### **Deny Yourself**

The mere mention of these words sends many people scrambling.

In modern day America, this is so counter-intuitive as to be mind boggling.

Despite this, scripture is consistent in its call to this essential element for a balanced spiritual life.

Deny self. It doesn't come naturally, does it?

When our three kids were younger, everybody wanted to be first. No one wanted to be last.

The mantra, "Many who are first will be last, and the last will be first" (Mt 19.30) fell on many a deaf ear in the Lillibridge household.

“I want the first popsicle; I want to be first in line; I want to bat first”; running to the car, “I called ‘shotgun’ first” etc...

In short, “first” = “the anointed one”.

“Deny ourselves? Okay, dad, – someone else can be first in taking a bath, getting a shot, and going to bed.”

For adults, recoiling against denying ourselves is more subtle, but the issue remains, doesn’t it?

If this wasn’t such a big spiritual challenge, Jesus would not have spent so much time on it.

Do you find it difficult to deny yourself?

I’ve learned that I have to keep this discipline in front of me on a daily basis or I inevitably have the tendency to put myself back in the place in my life where I want others to be.

To paraphrase St. Paul: Why is it that I do what I do not want to do; and cannot do what I want to do?

Do you struggle with these things as well?

Perhaps denying self is difficult because we have become comfortable with life; and we have an ever increasing set of wants that we call needs, that we consciously or unconsciously feel must be met.

Or maybe it’s not comfort. Maybe it’s fear? Or, maybe it is the fear of being uncomfortable?

Yet, on a much deeper spiritual level, perhaps the reason that so many of us resist this requirement laid upon us by our Lord...

..is that when we get right down to it maybe we don’t trust the giftedness that God wants to work in us, through the power of a strong faith.

Spiritual self denial, in its fullest understanding, is not some kind of arbitrary check-list that from which we decide what is okay and what is not okay in the Christian life.

That falls in the realm of a spiritual discipline.

On the most profound spiritual level, self-denial is the denial of self deep within our being – where we live in here (heart).

In other words, we are talking about a life changing, spiritual transformation, not simply exercises in denying ourselves a few amusements.

Joost de Blank, writing in *Uncomfortable Words* (1958), says this:  
*Self denial lifts our Christian faith and practice out of the realm of personal hobbies into the realm of divine power and redemption.*

And all of this talk of divine power and redemption is exemplified in Christ’s work on the cross.

**Denying Yourself** is closely tied to Taking Up Your Cross, because the *way of the cross* is realizing that you have been grasped by unconditional grace.

And in this grace there is the unlimited power of God in Christ in your life...so you are willing to make the sacrifices needed to share this grace with others.

I encourage you, then, to say YES to the *way of the Cross*; and then listen for the gifts that God wants to give you to walk this path.

Taking up one's cross means to take on the burden of another.

It means to live for the well being of others.

So you cannot take up your cross if you haven't first denied yourself and put others in the place that you yourself are inclined to occupy.

"My Will Be Done" becomes replaced with "Thy Will Be Done."

I know this sounds strange, ill-logical – but it's true.

It doesn't sound like it makes for good business, but it does make for a wonderful life.

Yes, a life lived like this can baffle the mind, but it also warms the heart.

You can't use logic to explain it.

You can only demonstrate it by living it.

I think it is interesting to notice the words Jesus used to make his point about crosses.

He doesn't say, "bear your cross" as if you have to wait for someone to hand it to you.

Jesus says, "**Take up your cross**" – anticipate occasions to deny yourself and pick it up – and in the words of Luke's telling of the story –do this **daily**.

In each of the gospel accounts of Jesus saying, *deny yourself, take up your cross, follow me*; it is in the context of Jesus asking his followers, *Who do people say that I am – Who do you say that I am?*

After a brief exchange of answers, Jesus then goes on to say what it will mean to follow him – and it is not a pretty picture.

*From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things, be killed, and on the third day be raised...*

In other words, he's telling us that in following him, you will be a little – and perhaps a lot – out of step with the world.

But, with the promise of the resurrection, your deep need to give and the world's deep hunger to receive will come together.

Following Jesus - real discipleship - brings both pain and joy.

It's all part of that "peace that passes all understanding" (Phil 4.7) thing.

The peace of Christ means a lot more than the absence of conflict.

If the peace of Christ was easily understood or made sense according to the world's standards, Paul wouldn't have told us that it passes all understanding.

He would have said, "It's the peace you can understand."

So don't worry if you don't "get it."

You can't use logic to explain it – you use your faith to live it.

And when people see it, they and you, know that it is the real thing.

It is genuine and it is part of the mission. The faith is in the following.

Denying self. Taking up crosses. Following Jesus.

This is the great vocation to which we all are called.

The question is, "Will you sign up? Will you go? Will you follow?"

And like all of scripture, the main question is not simply "what does this passage mean"...

...but rather, "how is this scripture calling me to change?"

Perhaps during the days of this council you will be moved to ask yourself this question – how is this passage calling me to change?

For our life in Christ is not simply about information, it is about transformation.

The Collect appointed for Proper 19, the one we used tonight, has us pray: *O God, because without you we are not able to please you*

Do you ever think about what it might mean to please God? To serve God? To do God's will? To follow Jesus?

These questions are part of my daily bread, and I hope that they are part of yours as well.

Everyday, in all circumstances, I try to remember these short, yet terribly significant questions...

..because how I answer them defines what kind of follower of Jesus that I am.....and what kind of follower that I am becoming.

I hope that you will find ways to make the exhortation “*Deny Yourself, Take Up Your Cross, Follow Me*” a part of your life in new and profound ways...thus turning this exhortation into a blessing for you and for others.

As we continue to expand our missionary endeavors far and near, I want us to remember some words of Martin Luther King, Jr. that I heard recently.

He said, “I admire the Good Samaritan, but I don’t want to be the Good Samaritan. I want to fix the road to Jericho so no one gets beat up going there.”

I think of all the Jericho roads that Bishop Elliott traveled in those early days– fraught with difficulty and danger.

I think of all the Jericho roads in our own day.

And I think of our mission in light of these Jericho roads.

To build a better road requires much more than simply an awareness of the danger and an awareness of the need.

It requires us to step forward and offer ourselves as instruments in the healing work of Jesus.

I began this sermon with three questions:

- a. What kind of person are you?
- b. What kind of person do you want to be?
- c. What bridge is needed in your life to move from (a) to (b)?

In the course of this council, I hope that you will take the opportunity to seriously and prayerfully reflect on these questions in light of our theme:

***Deny yourself. Take up your cross. Follow Jesus.***

May God bless our efforts to live simply, so that others may simply live.

When we are able to do these things, we certainly will discover the truth of what Paul told his young apprentice Timothy, namely that we will “*take hold of the life that really is life*” (1 Tim 6.19).

Amen.

