

“DOING THEOLOGY WITH THE TERRIBLE TOWEL”

A Sermon by the Rev. John C. R. Silbert at Trinity Presbyterian Church, Butler, PA
January 22, 2017, the Third Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A

Text: *“For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.”*

-- 1 Corinthians 1:18, NRSV

Let us pray: Our Father and our God make us masters of ourselves that we may become the servants of others. Take my lips and speak through them; take our minds and think through them; take our hearts and set them on fire, for we would see Jesus this morning, in his name and for his sake, we pray, Amen.



Photo Credit: Stadium Picture, Jason Bridge, USA Today Sports

How hyped up do you get before a big game like the one this afternoon in Foxboro, Massachusetts? The AFC Championship game between the Steelers and the Patriots is one that many people have been anticipating for a long time. Do you have your Laz-i-boy recliner parked perfectly in front of the screen? Do you have the perfect party tray loaded with all the right stuff? Maybe you are wondering whether you should change into the Steeler sweater you wore when Pittsburgh won the AFC championship game a few years back . . . You can't put on THOSE ear-rings ever again! You wore them that year against Denver in the playoffs . . . How hyped up do you get?

Some years ago, during the fifth or sixth Super Bowl run in Pittsburgh, the Post-Gazette ran a story that was asking *“Is God on our side?”* The article sought to find a spiritual answer from Steeler fans

on the eve of the BIG GAME (I think it was Super Bowl XXX). It was trying to determine deeper metaphysical questions: Will God be influenced to help the Steelers if I wear my cow suit and twirl my terrible towel before the game? Or “God likes the number 7 – it’s the number for completeness . . . Neil O’Donnell wears 14 – hey! 2 x 7! Yes!!! . . . (Oh well, that didn’t work out so well against Dallas that year in Tempe.)

Come on, fess up, you know you’ve thought about the Steelers and especially the BIG GAMES in those terms before . . . Maybe once or twice? And how many of you have bought a new “Terrible Towel” – just in case . . . In case of what? Hm . . . ? While we’re on the topic: Does the “Terrible Towel” really bring good luck? . . . I mean does the late, great Myron Cope’s Terrible Towel cause fumbles, nudge receivers, clear running lanes, “an’at?” . . . Folks used to say that the Green Weenie of the Bob-Prince-announced-Pirates of the Sixties caused inexplicable events to occur, so why not the “Terrible Towel”?



(At left: Two Pittsburgh originals -- the late Myron Cope holding his signature Terrible Towel; photo from a Pittsburgh Magazine story, August 2010.)

I have it on good authority that the “Terrible Towel” was never meant to be a lucky charm, or a magic cloth; it is something completely different: it is meant to signal opportunity. According to the late Myron Cope himself, the Terrible Towel was a sign to the players that the time was ripe for them to rise up and seize the moment; to bring to bear in that time the skills and gifts and talents and heart that they had received and had applied. *“When I wave the towel,”* Myron once said, *“I am telling them, ‘Here we go Steelers!*

Now is the time to make your mark; to seize the opportunity at hand.’ The towel creates moments of opportunity, but it’s up to the players to make the most of it or not.”

As I heard Myron say this on the radio years ago, I found myself nodding in agreement – I like it! I like it! . . . It can even be a theological statement if you transpose the metaphor! The “Terrible Towel” is probably the chief sign for Steelers’ fans all over the world (I’m not exaggerating, there are “Te-reeb-blav Towelos” in Spain, they have them in Asia, wherever!). What if instead of the Terrible Towel you substituted the Cross of Christ? – The Cross being the chief sign of the great opportunity God has given the Church through the passion and love of Jesus . . . What do we make of our opportunities which come by it?

“The Jews demand signs, the Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles . . . (1 Corinthians 1:22-23, NRSV)” For many, the cross is of no meaning, because the cross is empty of any power at all. For whatever reason given, the work of Christ’s salvation is not seen as an opportunity but as an unfortunate incident better left to mystics, kooks, or people who can’t bear to live in the real world.

What Jesus has done and what the church persistently proclaims is an opportunity often missed – why?

Is it possible that we “church-types” fail to make the most of our opportunities when the cross is thrown up over our heads in life’s sundry situations? That we have talents and gifts for ministry – and we are all ministers of the gospel, all of us . . . which go unused or ill-used for whatever reason . . . That we have the ability to serve others, but can’t seem to get beyond ourselves, or what others think? This is akin to those inexplicable “dropped balls” by wide receivers hit square in the numbers by a good pass, who, nevertheless, heard footsteps, or started thinking about the victory dance before the ball was firmly in hand. . . Christians never get distracted from their ministries do they?

“Several centuries before Christ, Alexander the Great came out of Macedonia and Greece to conquer the Mediterranean world. He didn’t know it, but God was using him to prepare the way for the coming of the Messiah – for it was as a result of Alexander’s conquests that Greek was established as the common language of the Grecian and later even Roman Empire. On one of his campaigns, Alexander received a message that one of his soldiers had been continually and seriously misbehaving

and thereby shedding a bad light on the character of all the Greek troops. And what made it even worse was that this soldier's name was also Alexander. When the commander learned this, he sent word that he wanted to talk with the errant soldier. When the young man arrived at the tent of Alexander the Great, the commander asked him, 'What is your name?' The reply came back, 'Alexander, sir.' The commander looked him straight in the eye and said forcefully, 'Soldier, either change your behavior or change your name.'"ⁱ

It is possible for good, decent Christian people to empty the cross of its power by what they choose to do or fail to do in life's moments; making of it instead a stumbling block for some and foolishness for others. . . And what is meant to hang around our hearts is only hung around our necks on lovely chains, and what is meant to be carried on our shoulders with all heft and weight is born aloft on the winds of carelessness as light as a feather . . . Is it possible to ignore the cross when it is waved before us? When otherwise, average decent, Christian people, like you and me, turn the other way from what we think God is leading us to do?

Consider this image: God, looking a little, like Myron Copeⁱⁱ – (Yoi!) and just as excited – sitting up there in his press box, looking down onto the turf of our BIG GAME OF LIFE, waving that cross out the window and shouting, *"Yoi! And Double-Yoi! Look at this opportunity right before your eyes! Reach up and grab hold of the cross*



and all I have made of it for you – the hope, the courage, the skill, the talent, the dedication . . . and the love – and seize the opportunity! You can do it!"

I loved Myron Cope! I loved his expressive and explosive manner of speech. I loved his keen insights, but I found fault in only one particular mannerism. This: occasionally Myron used the expression, *"Zounds!"* (Spoken as if saying the word "sounds") – An exclamatory word that was a substitute for the word *"Amazing!"* He mispronounced the word entirely. *"Zounds!"* has an

unmistakable linguistic history. “Zounds” is Old English slang for the exclamation “God’s wounds” – the wounds of the cross – “God’s wounds!” . . . “Zounds!”

Standing excitedly in the press box, perhaps you could imagine God waving the cross for the team to see, shouting, “Zounds! . . . Zounds!”

And when the BIG GAME OF LIFE calls for you to make a play, what will you do with the opportunity God has given you through the cross of Christ Jesus?

What God requires of his players, he has taught them, through his Son’s obedience and willingness to bear the cross. And that cross stands empty because that work has already been done once and for all. But in the work and living and loving of the BIG GAME of YOUR LIFE of what meaning is that cross for you?

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



ⁱ This story is quoted by James S. Hewitt, Editor, in Illustrations Unlimited, Tyndale House Publishers, 1988; pp. 299-300.

ⁱⁱ Photo credit for picture of Myron Cope: taken from the “Steelers N Stuff.com” blogsite.