

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25

BETHANY LUTHERAN CHURCH
ELKHORN, NEBRASKA
FEBRUARY 25, 2007
PASTOR WENDA FRY

1 PASTOR FRY: We are telling the story during this
2 Lenten season and well over two thousand years ago on that
3 fateful day at Mt. Calvary there were some witnesses of the
4 crucifixion that had to be there, and those were the people
5 that were responsible for carrying out the task of an
6 execution.

7 So there are those witnesses. These are things I
8 think we normally don't think about

9 And then, of course, there were the curious
10 bystanders and the story of Jesus Christ, his healing power,
11 his work on the cross, his empty tomb, all of that always
12 piques the curiosity of innocent bystanders.

13 But a lot of people just don't do much more than
14 that. They just watch it from a distance and so there were
15 some of those.

16 And then, unfortunately, this is the part of our
17 story in Christ that I just can't get my arms around, it's
18 always difficult for me every Lenten season, but the
19 disciples, they ran, they fled.

20 One betrayed him and then the rest, when they saw
21 Jesus in the garden and the soldiers in the garden, they
22 thought I don't want the same thing to happen to me, so they
23 ran.

24 That's hard for me. I question, would I have done
25 that? I don't know. That's just something I struggle with

1 each Lenten season

2 And then there are those things that were closest to
3 the crucifixion, like the crown of thorns and the nails and
4 some of the other things that we are going to be listening to
5 the testimony of those on Wednesday nights.

6 But last Wednesday Karl Schaphorst, one of our
7 teachers here on the Bethany campus, mostly of our younger
8 disciples, he interviewed the crown of thorns.

9 And if you weren't here you missed something,
10 because it's a totally different perspective to listen to the
11 things testify as to things they saw and felt, but I want to
12 share just a part of her story.

13 "The soldiers holding us moved us towards the head
14 of the man on trial.

15 "I was on the bottom of the crown and I could see us
16 getting closer and closer to his scalp.

17 "We thorns were pushed into his scalp with a sense
18 of hatred and ridicule, driving the crown deeper and deeper.

19 "It's almost impossible to describe how I felt, but
20 let me try.

21 "I was one of the first thorns to touch his head.
22 At that instant there was a feeling that shot through me that
23 was beyond anything I had ever felt before.

24 "There was a sense of life and living that surpassed
25 ever being attached to my roots in the field.

1 "It was a different life flowing around me. It
2 caused me to feel warm and soft.

3 "Now, imagine that, a harsh, sharp, rigid thorn
4 feeling warm and soft.

5 "It wasn't my natural me. I went through a change
6 of feelings, a change in being, a change in character."

7 We often use the word character to describe a person
8 who is of notable personality, or someone who is distinctive,
9 or maybe even eccentric, or maybe they're funny, that's how
10 we tend to use the word character.

11 We are not born with character. Character is
12 developed over time.

13 I thought it was interesting that the crown of
14 thorns noted in herself a change in her being, a change in
15 her character, that was different than before.

16 I ran across this great quote about character, and
17 unfortunately I don't know who to attribute it to.

18 "Instead of smoothing out the contours of our
19 characters, we need to conscientiously commit ourselves to
20 deepening the grooves. Our souls should be deeply scratched
21 by the gouged clefts and valleys of our characters. It takes
22 a lifetime of experiences to create such a rutted and rocky
23 masterpiece."

24 When we refer to a con artist, it's a slick
25 character. There is nothing to grab onto there.

1 And that's why I like this definition of character,
2 because it refers to the scratches and the gouges and the
3 clefts and the crevices that happen to us in our life, and
4 that's what develops Christian character.

5 And that's really what Paul is talking about in the
6 scripture that I have chosen for today.

7 So let's go to that. I invite you to turn to
8 Romans, Chapter 5, Verses 1 to 8, and we'll read that and
9 then take a look at those verses.

10 I asked Martha if she could come up with a picture
11 of a crucible, if possible, and she found this one.

12 A crucible is a melting pot for elements or rocks
13 and different metals, and in the crucible, when you mix it
14 and heat it, it refines it and the beauty of the original
15 rock comes out

16 And I like that, because what Paul describes in
17 Romans 5 is as if in a crucible, so that is why I wanted her
18 to get a picture of that.

19 Chapter 5, Verses 1 through 8, Paul writes,
20 "Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace
21 with God through our lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have
22 obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast
23 in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that,
24 but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering
25 produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and

1 character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us,
2 because God's love has been poured into our hearts through
3 the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. For while we were
4 still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.
5 Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though
6 perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die.
7 But God proves his love for us in that while we were still
8 sinners Christ died for us." Here ends the reading.

9 You see why I wanted to choose a crucible picture,
10 because those things like suffering, endurance, and character
11 and hope seem to be all mixed in there.

12 And the fire of the Holy Spirit, and one of the
13 symbols for the Holy Spirit is fire, which is so beautifully
14 depicted in our glass sculpture here at Bethany.

15 That orange part and yellow part that is right in
16 the center of that is the symbol of the fire of the Holy
17 Spirit.

18 And right above that is the dove, that white dove,
19 and when we had the other church worship center we couldn't
20 see the dove.

21 Only like the first four rows of worshippers could
22 see that dove.

23 But that, too, is a symbol of the Holy Spirit and
24 from the Holy Spirit comes the fire.

25 And Romans says that God's love has been poured into

1 our hearts through the Holy Spirit, through his holy fire
2 that has been given to us. So it's his spirit at work
3 bringing about the faith.

4 So let's take a look at these verses. The reason
5 Paul says therefore right in the very beginning is because he
6 has just spent the last several verses talking about
7 Abraham's faith.

8 Chapter 4, Verse 1 says, "What then are we to say
9 was gained by Abraham, our ancestor according to the flesh?"

10 And then he goes on in that whole section there to
11 talk about Abraham's faith, and he gets to Verse 19. Look at
12 that with me.

13 Paul writes about him, "He did not weaken in faith
14 when he considered his own body, which was already as good as
15 dead, for he was about one hundred years old, or when he
16 considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb."

17 He did not weaken in faith.

18 In Verse 21, "No distrust made him waver concerning
19 the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he
20 gave glory to God, being fully convinced that God was able to
21 do what he had promised."

22 So when Paul says in Chapter 5 now, "Therefore,
23 since we are justified by faith," he's saying Abraham was
24 justified by faith, and so are we, and yet it's not a passive
25 thing.

1 If you grew up in the Lutheran church you probably
2 know that phrase justification by faith through grace.

3 That's a very old Lutheran concept, if you will,
4 that we are justified by faith, and that used to make a lot
5 of pew potatoes out of Lutherans.

6 Well, I'm saved by grace through faith and I don't
7 have to do anything. It doesn't call for a response.

8 But if we look carefully, especially at some of the
9 original words in this scripture, we'll see that it does call
10 for a response.

11 And in 21 when Paul writes, "Abraham was fully
12 convinced that God was able to do what he promised," that
13 takes a decision.

14 If you're going to convince me of something, then I
15 have to make a choice whether to believe you or not.

16 So when Paul writes there in Chapter 5, Verse 1,
17 "Therefore, since we are justified by faith," see that little
18 "q" there, if you drop down to the bottom of the page you'll
19 see, "Other ancient authorities read let us."

20 So let us have peace with God through our lord Jesus
21 Christ.

22 That implies, to me anyway, that there is a choice.
23 We are justified, but we have a choice.

24 We can choose to enjoy the peace of God or not. We
25 can choose to enjoy all the gifts that he gives us or not.

1 We can just sit and be justified by faith, or let us
2 have peace with God, that implies a choice, through our Lord
3 Jesus Christ.

4 So we can choose to have that peace or not and we do
5 that through Jesus.

6 Remember our crown of thorns? It wasn't until the
7 thorn, she pierced the flesh of Jesus that she felt something
8 different.

9 Through contact with him she felt a new life flowing
10 within her.

11 I can't help but think of Kathy's testimony this
12 morning, her story.

13 "I feel differently than I've ever felt before."
14 She testified to that new life flowing within her and around
15 her and through her. She's different now.

16 Just like the crown of thorns said, "I wasn't my
17 natural me. How can you take a thorny, rigid, sharp, pointy,
18 unyielding crown and how can that be soft? How can that be
19 changed? How can that be warm? How can that be flexible
20 now?"

21 It's the same thing. It was only through contact
22 with his flesh for our crown of thorns.

23 It was only through Jesus Christ that we can have
24 that peace. That's what Paul is saying there.

25 And then in Verse 2, "Through Jesus we have obtained

1 access."

2 That's a curious word. In the original language
3 access relates here to like a social introduction, which I
4 think is really interesting.

5 We have access. In other words, when the crown of
6 thorns touched Jesus's head, she was introduced to royalty.

7 That's what Paul is talking about here. Through
8 Christ then we are introduced.

9 It's as if we were at a party and we were with a
10 friend and our friend introduced us to someone else, you know
11 how that is, imagine that, you're standing now in the
12 presence of that person you have been introduced to. That's
13 what this means.

14 The access there is we have been introduced by Jesus
15 to God, and so because of this friend, Jesus, we can be in
16 the presence of God.

17 That's what that means. It's an access. It's an
18 introduction there, in the same way that our crown of thorns
19 was introduced to Jesus.

20 And so we can stand in that, which I love that, and,
21 disciples, you see the reason Paul spends so much time on
22 this in both the First and Second Letters to the church at
23 Corinth, and in Romans, let's pretend that this step was the
24 Holy of Holies in Jerusalem.

25 You couldn't get up this step without seeing a

1 priest.

2 And you couldn't get up the next step without seeing
3 another priest.

4 And you couldn't get into this area, or by the
5 table, or near the feast, the bread of sacrifice, unless you
6 saw another priest.

7 So that is why Paul spends so much time on it,
8 because it's like the way has been thrown open through Jesus.

9 We have been introduced. All of this just falls
10 away and through Jesus then we can stand on our own in the
11 presence of God. I think we still struggle with that.

12 I was proud of you young disciples standing up here
13 in this area, because some people think that they can't stand
14 here. They can't be up here.

15 That's partially why we have the prayer ministers
16 and people come up here, because we have access through our
17 Lord Jesus Christ.

18 And you don't have to hear the voice of God through
19 me; you can hear it directly. That's what Paul is talking
20 about here.

21 And so because we can stand, that's why we boast,
22 and it's not a brag here, "We boast in our hope of sharing
23 the glory of God."

24 Glory is presence. It's God presence, and I knew
25 that, but I hadn't really understood it until Mike Breen came

1 to our house.

2 Mike Breen was our guest speaker a few weeks ago and
3 he has been helping us with the way of discipleship here at
4 Bethany and whenever he comes to Elkhorn he stays in our
5 home.

6 And I was downstairs the first time showing him his
7 room and he walked down the hall and he walked in there and I
8 walked the other way and I just heard "Glory."

9 I stopped in my tracks and then I heard it again.
10 "Glory."

11 And I thought, yes, that's right. What Mike is
12 doing is proclaiming God's presence, and he is here, he's
13 everywhere, and we need to claim that.

14 So we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God.
15 We get to stand, remember, we have been introduced to God
16 through Christ, and we stand there.

17 It's not a bragging, but it's a confidence that we
18 are in his presence. And so we claim it. Glory.

19 Try that sometime. Try that when you are driving in
20 your car by yourself, turn the radio down and shut it off and
21 just think about God's presence, just shout glory. Just try
22 it.

23 Who cares what they think? If someone sees you at
24 the stoplight, we don't care.

25 We are supposed to look different and sound

1 different anyway.

2 So we boast in that confidence that we are in his
3 presence.

4 Now he goes on to talk about, this is really good,
5 we're at the crucible part, the sufferings, we boast in our
6 sufferings.

7 I think we really misunderstand suffering. What is
8 the first thing you think of when I say the word suffering?

9 Pain. Exactly. We think of pain. We think of the
10 book "Why Do Bad Things Happen To Good People", right?

11 We think of those things. We think of AIDS maybe.
12 We think of the state of our world.

13 We think of the suffering of our neighbors, or the
14 suffering of people in Afghanistan, pain, and bad things, and
15 awful things, and we misunderstand that.

16 I think a really helpful understanding of this, the
17 reason that we can boast not only in God's presence, but it
18 says there in our sufferings, it's not a bragging; it's a
19 confidence that God is with us in our suffering.

20 This is what it is. It's not really about pain;
21 it's about the fact that God is with us.

22 The best description of this I think is from the
23 Message Bible in First Corinthians.

24 "All praise to the God and Father of our Master
25 Jesus, the Messiah, Father of all mercy, God of all healing

1 counsel."

2 Here it is, "He comes alongside us when we go
3 through hard times, and before you know it he brings us
4 alongside someone else who is going through hard times so
5 that we can be there for that person, just as God was there
6 for us. We have plenty of hard times that come from
7 following our Lord Jesus Christ, but no more so than the good
8 times of his healing comfort, we get a full measure of that."

9 So what Paul is saying is that we are confident.
10 Boast is kind of a bad word.

11 Let's be confident that we are not alone in our
12 suffering. That's just all over scripture.

13 The last thing Jesus says to his disciples is teach,
14 baptize, and then remember that I'm with you always.

15 My favorite free verse poet, George McDonald, says,
16 "You are nearer to me than I'm able to ask."

17 How near is that?

18 So we boast, we are confident that in our suffering
19 God is with us.

20 And we have to remember right alongside our
21 suffering is those times when Jesus loves us, when God just
22 blow us away with answers to prayer, or times of counsel or
23 comfort, or an opportunity opens right alongside the
24 suffering.

25 So we are confident in both those things. We are

1 confident in the healing counsel, and we are confident in the
2 witness of God in our times of pain.

3 So that suffering then produces endurance and some
4 translations, maybe even your Bible would say produces
5 patience.

6 That is a bad translation, because patience, I
7 think, is difficult for us, number one.

8 Number two, it implies that we're just kind of
9 hanging in there, just waiting it out.

10 But endurance is more like courage. That would be a
11 better word here actually.

12 Endurance is not waiting it out, or like just
13 gritting our teeth and baring it and see if good will ever
14 come.

15 It's not that. It's wading right in. It's getting
16 in there, believing that God is all the while at work in our
17 lives. All the while at work in our lives.

18 I want to believe, and I do believe, that God has
19 been at work in Kathy and Austin and Kaitlyn's lives and the
20 lives of our young disciples long before they were able to
21 stand up and talk about that.

22 But we have not done a good job in the Lutheran
23 church of celebrating those moments when disciples of all
24 ages say I believe, I've seen it now with my own eyes. We
25 have kind of shied away from that.

1 That's what was so beautiful about your stories
2 today and your presence with us, younger disciples. I'm so
3 thankful for you here today.

4 Because when we wade in, instead of wait, that
5 implies action, and that produces character.

6 And character, remember as I said, we are not born
7 with it, it develops over time.

8 A couple weeks ago Mark and I were in Southern
9 California for a conference and we rented a car and drove up
10 the Pacific Coast Highway.

11 That's the way to travel up north in California,
12 especially as you're nearing Los Angeles, because then you
13 miss all the congestion, the smog, and you can see the
14 beautiful ocean on the west side and you keep moving.

15 Even though it's fairly congested, you at least keep
16 moving.

17 We stopped at one of my favorite places, which is
18 called Thousand Steps Beach.

19 And it isn't a thousand steps, I counted them,
20 although Mark was trying to get me off when I was counting
21 them, one, two, three, he was counting louder, but it's 209
22 steps, not a thousand.

23 And we went down there, and I like that area because
24 it's sand and rock, and it's black rock, and I had not ever
25 really examined it carefully.

1 So I waded out a little bit and I checked it and the
2 block rock is so completely full of black barnacles, mussel
3 shells, but every now and then, I had never seen this before,
4 every now and then there is like a small little white rock,
5 like quartz, that's just embedded in the rock, and it's pure
6 white, I guess I don't know, I'm not a geologist, but it just
7 gave me a great picture of what Christian character looks
8 like.

9 Because the storms of the sea and the scorching sun
10 and wind and erosion have made beautiful marks, there is not
11 a lot of them, but just every so often a beautiful pure white
12 rock.

13 And I tried to extract one, but I couldn't because
14 it's just like major in there.

15 And I thought it was a great picture. I wanted to
16 share that picture with you.

17 It's a great picture of Christian character, and
18 wouldn't it be great if someone couldn't extract us from the
19 rock of ages.

20 That we are so embedded in our life in Christ that
21 we can't be extracted from it, and yet we show forth beauty
22 and purity, and that we have endured some scorching sun and
23 some stormy gales and it's made us more beautiful.

24 I thought that was a great picture of Christian
25 character.

1 And that character produces hope, and the definition
2 of hope that I have is joyful expectation that good will
3 come.

4 Hope is not like, well, I hope so. Hope is joyful
5 expectation.

6 Because, see, we are confident, we are practiced, we
7 have been suffering, we have been enduring, we have been
8 seeing we are getting a few wrinkles, maybe a few extra
9 pounds, maybe a few gray hairs, but we're growing in our
10 faith and our understanding of Jesus's connection with us.

11 So that produces a hope that doesn't disappoint.
12 It's unwavering. It's unshakable.

13 Julie, let's show that picture of that. I just love
14 this. I think this is a great picture of the whole process.

15 Therefore, since we are justified by faith, let us
16 choose to have peace with God, because we've got access, we
17 have been introduced to God through Jesus and his blood.

18 We don't have any other go-betweens anymore, we are
19 in his presence, and we can be confident in that.

20 We can boast in that. That's what that means. We
21 can be confident in that.

22 And we can also be confident in the fact that Jesus
23 is with us in our suffering, and he give us healing counsel,
24 same amount, not always more suffering and less healing
25 counsel, it's usually the same.

1 We can be confident in that, because that confidence
2 will produce endurance.

3 We'll have more courage for the rest of the stuff
4 that is coming.

5 And that courage produces character, white pure
6 beautiful rocks, living stones of faith.

7 And that character then produces hope that doesn't
8 disappoint.

9 We don't have to be shaken when the stormy gales
10 come, because we are embedded in the rock of ages. We are
11 embedded in the strength of his love.

12 I told you that we are sharing stories, listening to
13 testimonies of inanimate objects on Wednesdays, and then
14 Sundays live people, friends and family of Bethany.

15 And Joyce couldn't be here today because she is in a
16 wheelchair, and her daughter is legally blind, Wendolyn, and
17 so I say that because then when it snows, she's the
18 commander, Joyce drives, they have a van there, she can drive
19 in the wheelchair, and then her daughter is the commander in
20 the passenger seat.

21 Well, when it snows, because she doesn't have a
22 cornea, everything is white, and when it's windy it swirls
23 and it's just a whiteout for her, so she can't be the
24 commander in the van.

25 And I understand that, but she called me at 7:30

1 this morning and she said, "I hope you understand."

2 And I said, "Yes, I do, and I'm grateful that you'll
3 share your testimony."

4 She wanted to be here so bad, but she's praying for
5 all of us. She wanted me to tell you that.

6 She is my prayer advocate as well, and she was here
7 at Christmas time, I think it was in December that she shared
8 a story, so maybe some of you remember her.

9 "I started wearing two leg braces at a very young
10 age after contracting polio as an infant during the polio
11 epidemic of 1946.

12 "By 1960 I was fourteen years old and had just been
13 to my last doctor's visit after a surgery that took up my
14 whole summer.

15 "I asked the doctor if I could ever get rid of both
16 of my leg braces, and he said perhaps one, but never both of
17 them.

18 "The only experiences I had with faith in God were
19 with Christians who visited the state hospital in Lincoln
20 where I spent a lot of my childhood, and with a church from
21 Fremont that would have vacation Bible school in the country
22 grade school I went to.

23 "So who was this Jesus who died for me in a far away
24 place?

25 "I only knew that I didn't think it would be cool to

1 wear braces to high school.

2 "I didn't have many indulgences as a child, but I
3 did have a pair of saddle shoes and dreams of wearing them.

4 "So in the quiet of my room I said a very primitive
5 prayer, maybe my first prayer, "Jesus, will you be with me?
6 Because tomorrow I'm not putting on my braces; I'm putting on
7 my saddle shoes."

8 "At first I used crutches to help with balance and
9 fell down a lot, but I was filled with a power that was not
10 my own.

11 "I never wore braces for twenty years after that. I
12 remember my first car ride without the weight of steel on my
13 legs.

14 "I remember walking to Ben Franklin in Blair to blow
15 my twenty-five cents weekly allowance on candy.

16 "But most precious to me I remember carrying my baby
17 girl nine months but never once falling down.

18 "I'm older now and with time my body is no longer as
19 strong, but I am not without my Savior every day.

20 "I wear a gold high heel pendant around my neck,
21 much the same as people who wear a cross.

22 "My shoe is in honor of Romans 8:18. I consider
23 that the sufferings of this present time are not worth
24 comparing to the glory about to be revealed to us.

25 "The coming glory, compared to high heels, it's a

1 no-brainer."

2 Joyce, about the second or third week that she came
3 to my office to pray for me, she gave me a gift.

4 She gave me this high heel, and Joyce is a gift to
5 me, and I know and trust that she's a gift to you.

6 For me personally I had a daughter in high school
7 who desperately wanted to wear high heels and couldn't
8 because of her cerebral palsy, so it has a special meaning to
9 me.

10 So I think it's important for us to look to our
11 sisters in faith and hear their stories and allow their
12 stories to melt away, as Mark was saying earlier, defrost our
13 hearts toward other people who suffer, because we may be
14 called upon to stand alongside them. It might be us that is
15 called upon to do that.

16 One of Joyce's favorite songs is "God Will Make A
17 Way Where There Seems To Be No Way".

18 I love this picture. Joyce has red hair. By her
19 admission, it comes out of a bottle.

20 But here you can't see if this woman is a wheelchair
21 or not, but Joyce believes she's healed. She tells me that
22 every week.

23 She has unshakable and unwavering faith and we look
24 at someone in a wheelchair and think they are not healed, but
25 she says she is, because she has Jesus's life flowing in her

1 and through her.

2 Let's thank God for Joyce today, and pray for her,
3 and ask God to help us in our suffering, endurance, and
4 character building.

5 Lord, we want the kind of hope that does not
6 disappoint, the kind that Joyce has.

7 We are thankful for her and Wendolyn. We ask a
8 special anointing upon them today as they watch the storm
9 from their warm home.

10 We thank you for sending them to Bethany and for
11 their courage to share the power of your life in their lives.

12 We want to have that kind of faith, and we want to
13 have Christian character

14 So help us. Help us to trust in you for everything
15 and to know that in times of suffering, and times of courage,
16 you are building character, the character that will not
17 disappoint us when we meet you face to face.

18 Thank you, Jesus. This is our story and we are
19 thankful.

20 Bless us now as we depart from one another. In your
21 Holy name. Amen.

22

23

24

25