

"What If...?"

Psalm 77:11-15; 2 Timothy 2:8-15

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

April 26, 2015 – 4th Sunday of Easter – Rev. Ronald Botts

"If" may be the biggest little word in scripture. We find that word in the opening sentences of Genesis to the closing verses of the New Testament. "If" plays an important, often decisive role, in the affairs of the people we meet in the Bible. Over 1500 sentences in the text begin with this word.

If my people ... humble themselves then I
will forgive their sin and heal their land.
If you be the Son of God...
If salt has lost its saltiness...
If your right eyes offends you...
If any person will come after me...
If any person has ears to hear...
If we walk in the light...
If we love one another...

We could find hundreds of additional examples from the Bible, but this sampling show how important that little word is. It places one thing conditional upon another.

In our Epistle reading from Paul today, we find a whole series of "if" statements in his writing to Timothy. Here he lists four "ifs":

If we have died with Jesus, we will also live with him.
If we endure, we will also reign with him.
If we deny him, he will also deny us.
If we are faithless, he remains faithful-- for he cannot deny himself.

Two positive "ifs," two somewhat negative. You see, "ifs" can go either way.

Life pretty much swings on that little word "if." Success or failure often hinges on it. Games are won or lost depending on if a tackle is made or missed, if a batter gets a base hit or strikes out, if the ball goes through the basket or hits the back of the rim, if the golfer considers the slope of the green or mistakes it.

Business succeeds or struggles depending on if a big sale is made, or if holiday sales are good, or if a future contract is landed. Students often pass or fail depending on if the final exam tips them one way or the other. A person's health might depend on if one loses weight or stops smoking.

Winston Churchill, who was fascinated with American history, once wrote an article titled "If Lee Had Won the Battle of Gettysburg." This particular clash was the most significant invasion of the North by the Confederates, and the South came very close to winning it. If Lee had succeeded at Gettysburg, Washington might have fallen the next day. A vast corridor

would have then been opened through the Central Atlantic states and on into New England. If... Lee had won at Gettysburg.

Another historian wrote a piece in which he conjectured, "If Booth Had Missed Lincoln." He contended that strong forces were forming against the President and, if he had lived, his presidency might have ended in disappointment. Instead of being pictured on the \$5 bill and being our most revered leader alongside Washington, he might have largely slipped into oblivion. If... Booth had missed Lincoln.

History is full of "ifs." Something small or trivial has often turned the tide of events. What if Napoleon had won the Battle of Waterloo? What if Britain had not cracked the Axis code in WWII? What if the first American space launches were all failures? What if John Kennedy had not ridden in that open car in Dallas?

I still remember a commercial that ran on television for a watch company. The ad shows a man and woman walking briskly toward the same intersection on busy city sidewalks. It said something like this: "John doesn't know it yet, but he's about to run into his future wife, the mother of his two children, his helper in becoming a U. S. Senator."

All the time it keeps showing them moving closer and closer to running into each other, literally, as they approach the corner at the same time. Then you see her cross the spot of intersection a second or so ahead of him and they just keep going, oblivious of how close their lives had almost been totally changed forever. Of course, the point is if the fellow had been wearing a good watch, he wouldn't have been late for his rendezvous with destiny. Another big "if."

The slugger Harmon Killebrew was inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fames in 1984. At the ceremony he told a story about his early start in the game. He said his father spent endless hours playing catch with him and his brother outside their Idaho home.

One day, said Harmon, his mother protested that all the base running and chasing of grounders was ruining the grass. To which the father replied, "We're not raising grass here; we're raising boys." What if Mr. Killebrew had prized his lawn over his boys?

Bishop Desmond Tutu says that he first considered becoming a priest the day in his childhood when a white minister broke convention and doffed his hat in public to Tutu's mother. What if the minister had not done that? How differently might the modern history of South Africa be written?

Then there are the "if onlys." If only I were young again. If only I had gone to college. If only I had taken out insurance. If only I had been more careful. If only I knew then what I know now. If only ... the words that complete this phrase are seldom happy ones, but they also make the point that some of the pivotal decisions of life center on that small word "if".

Sometimes, too, we try to turn those "ifs" around on God. If you get me out of this predicament, I will do thus and so. If you will heal my child, I will go to church every Sunday. If you make my business prosper, I will tithe. Perhaps it's a bit naive to think that we can bargain with the Lord and even set the terms. It can't be said that humans are lacking in a sense of self-importance.

Our bargaining attempts to put the burden on God but Paul, in this letter to Timothy, instead put the onus on us. Where things are conditional, the responsibility is ours.

Look particularly at these two assertions from today's text: "If we have died with Jesus, we also will live with him. If we endure, we will also reign with Jesus." Paul certainly knew what it was to suffer for his faith. The world of his day did not take kindly to those who called themselves Christians.

Earlier in the letter he refers to suffering for his witness to Christ. He mentions it not for sympathy, nor to complain. Instead, he says he wears his suffering as a badge of what he holds critically important. To suffer for what one believes is an honor and a privilege. His comfort and assurance is grounded in God's love for him, as shown in Jesus, and it gives him courage.

Now he urges Timothy to follow his example. He reminds him that all suffering for the cause of Christ ultimately advances the purposes of God. Therefore, endurance in faith is part of our calling and will be rewarded on the day of judgment. If we die with Jesus, we live with him. If we endure, we will also share eternally in his reign. If

Paul suggests that there is a choice in life for each of us. We can choose the seemingly harder way, but it will prove—in the end—to be the better way. Or we can choose the course of least resistance, the less demanding path, and find ourselves lost forever. This decision is entirely up to us.

Who wouldn't admit that it is work to be faithful? It's certainly easier to sleep in on Sunday mornings and leisurely read the paper. It's more financially profitable to keep all the money that you might give in response to human need. It's less demanding to relax than work at a food pantry, or walk for a cause, or fix a meal for another who is ailing. It's less taxing to watch television than to visit someone in the hospital or at a nursing home.

And what if we should be called upon to put ourselves in danger for the benefit of another? With the anniversary of the carnage at the Boston Marathon we're reminded of the extent people there extended themselves to help those who had been hurt. Without strong inner convictions, why would anyone have responded as they did? Care for neighbors, known or unknown, is a complementary response to love for God.

"Ifs" abound in life. The spiritually-aware person is the one who realizes the importance of the choices set before us. He or she sees the way of life and death ahead, and opts for the road less travelled. More difficult, surely; more challenging, indeed; more fulfilling, absolutely. There are a lot of "ifs" we are presented with; none, however, is more basic than your decision to continue to follow in Christ's footsteps. Jesus said, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

Each day life hinges on that little word "if" and it is up to us to make our decisions accordingly. One thing is conditional upon another. We have been shown the way for which Jesus willingly died, but we have to choose to follow. It all really comes down to this: the choice is ours. You have everything to gain, but only **if** you choose to respond.