

Rams Player-Turned-Pastor Speaks out on Ferguson

In a dark high school auditorium, hundreds gather every Sunday to listen to a former St. Louis Ram who has traded in an athletic career for a life of coaching.

Aeneas Williams is specifically interested in coaching souls.

Williams is pastor of The Spirit Church, a congregation that meets Sunday mornings in the auditorium of McCluer South-Berkeley High School.

For his sermon one recent Sunday, Williams used the biblical story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead as a way to focus on a message he says is too often lost: It's not the faithful's love of God that is important to remember, but God's love for all.

It's the kind of message some would argue Ferguson needs now more than ever.

While some have been critical of the religiosity often found in American football, Williams sees a calling from God he can't ignore.

The 46-year-old pastor began his 14-year NFL career with the Phoenix Cardinals in 1991 and was traded to the Rams in 2001. He retired after the 2004 season and settled in St. Louis. When he was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame last month, Williams spoke publicly about how God tugs at his heart.

"Some people say you got to be a Christian to know God talks to you," Williams told the audience gathered for his induction. "No! God is talking to us all the time. So I'm telling you pay attention to the signs God's giving you."

After announcing that he was thinking about retiring from football, Williams says he was immediately offered a defensive back coaching spot with the Rams but quickly realized the job just wasn't for him.

"Eventually, if you're honest with yourself, you'll gravitate to the things you love," Williams said. "And I've always loved being able to share the Gospel."

The Aug. 9 the fatal shooting of Michael Brown by Ferguson police officer Darren Wilson prompted weeks of protests. Williams said he sees himself as a minister of reconciliation.

"The purpose of the church is to reconcile people to Christ, reconcile people who have different disagreements," Williams said, referring to the recent havoc in Ferguson. "We don't take sides. We come down the middle and bring sides together."

Even before the riots, Williams had big plans for The Spirit Church.

After starting out in Williams' basement seven years ago and moving to a few other sites, the congregation settled into the high school auditorium.

Although most of its 400 members are African-American, church officials say they aspire for a multicultural congregation.

Some of those who worship with Williams say his celebrity may bring folks through the door, but his preaching style is what keeps them coming.

Tiffany Jackson, 27, a grant writer who lives in Florissant, says she appreciates the way Williams is able to transform the Bible into something that is relevant to her life. There's also the fact that everyone she bumps into at the church is friendly.

"I have been in church all my life, and this is the most I've ever been part of a church," Jackson said. "This is a church

family.”

As for Williams’ fame as a football player, Jackson says, “It may help. But it’s not what made us want to stay.”

Williams grew up in New Orleans, the youngest of three boys. Although his parents sent him to church, Williams said Christianity didn’t immediately make sense.

“I really didn’t want to be a Christian,” he said. “I didn’t like the word love.”

Williams spoke about his former indifference to religion at his induction to the Hall of Fame.

“I didn’t understand how God related to everyday life,” Williams said.

“When I was growing up, I thought church was a religious deal. You go sin for six days, then on the seventh day, empty your sin bucket and go do it again.”

Then during his junior year at Southern University and A&M College, a historically black college in Baton Rouge, La., he visited a new church in New Orleans, and Jesus’ message suddenly clicked.

It wasn’t the only aspect of Williams’ life to change that year. Williams had idolized his older brother Achilles, following in his footsteps and majoring in accounting at Southern University. But then one day, Williams dared to walk on the college football field to play.

Around the same time, Williams met his wife, Tracy—a woman who he said won’t stand for foolishness. The two have been married for 21 years and have three daughters, Saenea, Tirzah and Cheyenne, and a son, Lazarus.

Williams says what set him apart from the other players was his refusal to separate his faith from his work.

"My faith was expressed in my work," Williams said. "My faith meant being accountable when no one was watching."

Williams says his commitment to Jesus helped him become a disciplined player and exceed expectations. When he did fail, Williams made a point of admitting he was wrong in front of teammates, asking that they pray for him.

But Williams acknowledges that though his was a relevant faith, it was "not a perfect one, because I still don't have it down yet."

"But it was an honest and transparent one, and I use the same transparency as a pastor today."

It's a formula that seems to work for many.

Richard Dix, who describes himself as not that big of a football fan, has been attending The Spirit Church for three years.

"What impressed me more is his integrity," said Dix, a business analyst in south St. Louis.

Patricia Robinson, 57, an X-ray technician, says she knows The Spirit Church may be in for some tough times.

But she also believes "what's happening here is bigger than us." Robinson hopes the tragedy will help bring the country together.

Williams, for his part, says he's up for the challenge.

"We will continue to play a role in the healing process in the city of Ferguson," Williams said.

As congregants mingled in the school's hallways after worship service, Williams summed up his approach.

"Listen with the ear of understanding and not as one who has the answers."

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