

“Boasting in the Cross”

It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God— that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. Therefore, as it is written: “Let him who boasts boast in the Lord” (I Corinthians 1:30-31).

The cross of Jesus Christ is utterly foolish to the world. For just one moment, I want you to clear your mind of everything you know and understand about the cross. Take away the hymns, the prayers and the verses of Scripture upon which our faith is founded. Remove from your mind the Sunday school art work and the Good Friday imagery and, for one brief, if not hopeless moment, I want you to look at the cross on its own merits. What do you see? If you’re honest, what you find in the crucifixion cross is nothing but a terribly cruel, barbaric and repulsive tool of torture and capital punishment. Viewed objectively, the Roman cross should evoke images of a hangman’s noose, or the French guillotine or stretching rack of the Inquisition.

The cross is an ancient symbol of punishment and justice, and yet this instrument of shame and suffering stands at the center of our faith and, in fact, it is the very thing to which our faith clings. The Bible teaches and we believe, that the cross is the way God chose to deliver us from sin and death and condemnation and yet, if we’re honest, we have to admit that the cross of Jesus Christ completely contradicts rational thought. In fact, any reasonable outside observer considering the cross would have a difficult time seeing anything redeeming about it. And a candid assessment of the cross is where today’s text begins.

Paul writes, “¹⁸For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. . . . For since in the wisdom of God, the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. ²²Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, ²³but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, ²⁴but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God” (I Corinthians 1:18-24).

Paul wrote these words to the Christian congregation he had founded in Corinth and it was a diverse group of people to whom he wrote. The Corinthian church consisted of a collection of Greeks and Jews, rich and poor, slave and free, and those of both noble and humble lineage. Corinth was also a cosmopolitan, religious and highly intellectual city in which the Greek philosopher Aristides once wrote that on every street you could meet a so-called wise man. So, as he began his letter to the believers in Corinth, Paul addressed what must have been the most controversial aspect of this new religion and he identifies a criticism that the Corinthians must have constantly battled: “How could the One you claim as the Messiah and the Son of God and *the Savior of the world* possibly be connected to a cross?”

The Greeks in Corinth would’ve found it utterly ridiculous and completely untenable to have an innocent or reputable person crucified, let alone a “god.” And the thought of Christ’s blood being shed to forgive their sins was repulsive and against all earthly wisdom. The Jews in Corinth would have been equally disgusted by the thought of a Messiah who submitted himself to a Roman execution and, as we saw in today’s Gospel reading, they expected a Messiah who came with powerful and miraculous signs (Concordia Pulpit Resources, Volume 7, Part 4).

The bottom line with both the Jews and the Greeks, and with any other human belief system for that matter, is that they wanted a religion that made sense. They wanted a belief system that gave them some control; that put themselves in the savior’s seat and aligned them with a god who expressed himself in power. They wanted a theology that glorified their accomplishments and pointed to what *they* could do. And that was a religion they couldn’t find in the cross. In fact, a theology based on the cross actually proclaims there is *nothing* we can do.

And this brings us to heart of Paul’s message, because *we still fight this same battle!* My friends, the cross of Jesus Christ is not only unreasonable, it is offensive to the world! And, if we’re honest, it’s also offensive to us! You see, the cross of Christ is God’s attack on sin. So often we view the crucifixion as a way in which Jesus joined us in our struggle against sin and identified with our suffering, but when we think of the cross in this way, we see Jesus as a fellow victim rather than our substitute and we miss the radical nature of Christ’s death for us. The cross of Jesus Christ attacks our sin in a way that makes us uncomfortable and we must see that, in the cross of Christ, our Old Adam is not merely renovated or reformed, *it is utterly destroyed!* This means that the cross of Christ not only deals with our obvious sins, it also attacks

what we consider *the best* we have to offer. In Isaiah 64:6 we are told that, “all our righteous acts are like filthy rags” and it is these righteous acts, these things of which we are so proud, these things our sinful nature would like us to hold up before God as credits on our account, that the cross smashes to pieces—and we don’t like it one bit!

You see, in Galatians Paul tells us that not only was Christ crucified *for us* but we were also “crucified with Him” (Galatians 2:20). And this changes everything! You see, a proper understanding of the cross moves us from observers to participants. The cross makes us a part of its story. In fact, the cross *becomes* our story. Martin Luther commented on this in a piece called, “A Meditation on Christ’s Passion” when he wrote, “the real and true work of Christ’s Passion is to conform man to Christ, so that our conscience is tormented by our sins just as Christ was tormented in body and soul by our sins... and then the whole world closes in on us...” and conscience can no longer defend us. Luther continues, “You must get this through your head and not doubt that you are the one who is torturing Christ, for your sins have surely caused this... Therefore, when you see the nails piercing Christ’s hands, you can be certain that it is your work.” Here, the cross of Jesus cuts through our good intentions and false humility. Here, the cross of Jesus demolishes the good works that we hope will please God. And here, the cross of Christ becomes our story!

The Jews in today’s Gospel reading were clinging to their own story. When they asked Jesus to give them a sign of His authority they were justifying their sin and clinging to their own righteousness...and we do too. As we reflect on the Ten Commandments in today’s Old Testament lesson, they should not only hold up God’s perfect standard, but they also should strip away any illusion that we are keeping the law of God at an “acceptable” level. As we are told in James 2:10, “If we keep the whole law and yet stumble at just one point we are guilty of breaking all of it.”

You see, the sin that holds Christ to the cross is *our sin* and we don’t want to admit this. In fact, our sinful nature fights this truth with every ounce of its strength. Instead of dying to sin, our old Adam promotes the idea that all we really need is a little optimism; a little encouragement; a little flattery; a little positive thinking; a measure of support to build our self-esteem; that if we just work a little harder and commit ourselves to improvement, then we can come out victorious. But that is not the way of the cross.

The cross offends our old Adam. The cross attacks our good intentions and strips away our pretense of good works or a good heart and it destroys the shred of independence to which we desperately cling. Like an addict who must admit his problem before recovery can begin, the cross will allow nothing from us other than the naked confession that, “I am a sinner” and the cross of Jesus Christ demands that we never stop saying these words of repentance, “until Christ’s return makes it no longer true” (Forde, 17). The cross is the end of our sin. The cross is the end of us. And it is the beginning of a faith that saves.

We are all theologians, a truth which simply means that we all think about God. My friends, there are only two theological paths. One leads to God, one does not. One proclaims Christ alone, one does not. One grasps the promises of God in Christ as the only possibility for salvation, one does not. Jesus said, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the father except through me” (John 14:6). Jesus is the way and this path begins at the cross. Here, at the cross, the sinful nature is destroyed and “all loopholes are closed so that, in the end, we will simply be cast on the creative love of God” (Forde, 12). And we will be saved!

Dying to our sinful nature means that the only story we have is the story of the cross and it is through the lens of this story that we see everything! Since the cross alone is our story, we look at all things through the cross. This means that we are led by the cross to see everything – even the trials and the suffering and the anxieties of life; even the struggles and troubles and yes, even the joys of this life – as God’s doing. And when we put all of these things at the foot of the cross, we receive the promise of God, “that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴ We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. ⁵ If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection” (Romans 6:3-5).

The cross of Jesus Christ is the life of the world. It is here that we die with Christ. It is here we have forgiveness. And it is here that we can say with the apostle Paul that Christ has “become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption.” And as it is written, it is here that “we can boast in the Lord.” Go in the righteousness and peace that is yours in the cross of Christ. Amen.

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