

## **The Way of the Cross**

I Corinthians 1: 18-25

“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

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It is good to be back at Morningside after a time away preaching and teaching in Toronto. I bring you greetings and good wishes from the Presbyterian Church in Canada, which has strong historic ties with the Church of Scotland and a deep commitment to serving the city creatively in a time of rapid change. Like American society, Canadian society is becoming increasingly secular, and individualized religion is outpacing institutional churches. The church in which I preached last Sunday is an exception to the rule. The congregation is vital and active. Their outreach ministries touch the lives of hundreds of people each week with the compassion of Christ.

The worship service was wonderful, though formal. You might even say “high church”. We knelt to pray, for example, a knee-cracking custom that brought to mind the fact that only in recent centuries have people sat in chairs or pews when they prayed. For 1,000’s of years, prayer supplicants

had three choices: to stand, to kneel, or to lie prostrate with their noses on the floor. I was glad for the kneeling benches at St. Andrews.

As I always am when I visit churches in new places, I was struck by differences in custom, but I was also struck by the fact that whether I am in a downtown church in the sophisticated city of Toronto, preaching in a concrete block church in Estile, Nicaragua, a thatched roof church in a remote Romanian village, or worshipping here with you, the story around which the people of God gather is the same.

Charles Cousar writes in *A Theology of the Cross*: “The crucifixion shapes the identity of the people of God and functions as the basis of their communal and individual self-understanding. In the story of Jesus’ death preached in our worship and celebrated at the Lord’s Supper, we announce who we are and discover how we are to live.”

All around the world, faith communities are making their way through the forty days of Lent and on to the events of Passion Week and Good Friday. As much as we might wish that the road to empty tomb would make a detour around Golgotha, there is no way to get to new life in God without the events of Passion Week and Good Friday. The church at its best speaks of God’s self-giving love for the world, represented by the cross. At its worst, the church substitutes a kind of triumphalist, everyone- can- be- - winner,

it's- all- about- you- theology which unfortunately plays very well in modern America. (1)

I recently saw a *New Yorker* cartoon that sums up current worldly wisdom very well. Two attractive people are sitting at a table in a coffee shop. The man is saying to the woman, "I've tried a lot of strategies, and I've discovered that being completely self-serving is the strategy that works best for me."

Last summer, Bill McKibben wrote an article in Harper's Magazine entitled "The Christian Paradox: How a Faithful Nation Gets Jesus Wrong." "This new [American ] religion features sprawling new churches designed like shopping malls, catering to every individual need, with drive through latte stands, Krispy Kreme doughnut service and lots of how to sermons: How to get ahead how to reduce your debt, how to raise your children. (2)

I believe that all of us can use all the help we can get. Melinda Sandkam and I are working on a teaching series for the summer at Morningside on marriage enrichment and raising your children, for example, but the church can never forget that the story of the cross is the story that most profoundly shapes who we are and how we shall live. Cleaned-up Christianity, Krispy Kreme Christianity, that is, Christianity without the cross, has nothing redemptive to offer.

I think one of the reasons Raymond Brown's *The DA Vinci Code* has been on the best seller list for so long is that it offers the idea that Jesus had a secret, happier life than the life described in the gospels. The idea has been around a while. In Nikos Kazantzakis' book, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, "Jesus is wrestling with he ought to do, now that it is obvious that he will be arrested and tried. "He asks himself, "Why don't I just go back to Nazareth, get married, have a family, take up carpentry again, and get away from all of this that is before me?" If he had done that, he would have missed his whole reason for being, which was to show us the depth of God's commitment to participate in the life of the world, with all its cruelty and injustice, its suffering and pain. (3) If he had gone back to Nazareth, he would not have shown us how to live and how to die and how to be free from the excessive self-absorption that robs human life of meaning. If he had gone back to Nazareth, how would we have known that God is with us, voluntarily and completely, all the way?

In every age, the church is to proclaim Christ crucified, and in every age, that proclamation drives some people crazy and sounds like foolishness to others, but "to those who are called, God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength."

This sounds crazy, but the strength of God's self-giving love is the strongest force on earth.

In the Greek Orthodox Church, when a child is baptized, the priest takes the large cross he wears around his neck and strikes the child on its chest, so hard that it leaves a mark and, of course the child screams. Peter Gomes interprets the ritual as a sign that anyone who has been baptized into Christ must bear the cross, and that the cross is not a sign of ease or comfort or victory but of the reality of the life of Christ and the life of the believer.

Where did we get the idea that if we were nice to God, Gomes asks, that life would be nice to us? (4) "Faith is forged on the anvil of adversity," or as poet Mary Oliver puts it, "No gets out of it, nobody, having to swim through he fires to live in this world.

The meanings of the cross, the symbol of the crucified savior, are endless, complex, and often in conflict with each other, but I want to think with you today about three of the more obvious ways the cross shapes our understanding of who we are and how we are to live.

The first I have just alluded to, and that is that suffering is a fact of life.

Sooner or later, it comes. Sometimes it is self induced, as the result of bad decisions, bad lifestyle choices, failure of nerve to step off the wrong path and get on the right one.

Sometimes, suffering is the consequence of the apathy and indifference of other people or of people in power. I continue to be haunted by the thought of the mostly elderly people who drowned in their attics in New Orleans, waiting to be rescued. I am haunted by the fact that after automobile accidents, domestic violence is the leading cause of injury to women in Georgia. I think of the 20,000 children in foster care in our state and the 2,000 homeless women and children who walk the streets of this great international city every night looking for a place to stay, because they are homeless.

As we come to the third anniversary of the war in Iraq, it is imperative that people who follow the way of the cross pay attention to the suffering and the death that war has caused to both Iraqis and Americans, the chaos and mayhem that show no sign of dissipating. We cannot close our eyes and pretend that none of it has anything to do with us. We must do what we can in solidarity with those who suffer.

Some suffering just doesn't have to be, but other suffering is utterly unavoidable. It comes in the form of a stealth attack we could not have expected or prepared for. We are the people of the cross, not because we are fixated on the negative, but because as Canadian theologian Douglas John Hall puts it, "the world is full of pain and God loves the world."

Here is the heart of it. God helps, not by standing outside of this unpredictable and often daunting thing called human existence but by getting into it, and because of God's willingness to get into it, we encounter God where God is most needed. The Psalmist had it right: "God is our refuge and strength, an ever present help in time of trouble. Therefore, we will not fear, though the earth should change; though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea, The Lord of hosts is with us."

To be sure, The Lord is with us in high moments of joy and delight, in times of hope and success, but the Lord is also acquainted with our sorrows and defeats. As he bid farewell to his disciples on the night we was betrayed and handed over, Jesus two of the most important things he ever said, "In the world we shall have tribulation, but be of good courage, for I have overcome the world." (John 16:33)

In Toronto, I spent a lot of time with one of my host pastors, George Vais, and his wife Faith. Dr. Vais was Moderator of the Presbyterian Church in Canada and is a great man, proud of his two sons, both of whom went into the ministry but only one of whom is living. Chris, the younger son, died at the age of forty from of ALS. In the journal he began to keep after his diagnosis, Chris writes of going on a prayer retreat while he could still walk. It was a silent retreat, and he is very funny describing how in order to get

someone to pass the pepper, you had to point and grunt. He goes to describe how in the woods, he came upon a life-size sculpture of Jesus and how he sat for a couple of hours before it, reflecting on the crucifixion of Jesus and his own illness. He recalled how Jesus had said from the cross “I thirst” and of how he, Chris, when he wanted something to drink, was unable to lift a cup to his own lips and had to ask for help. This was the prayer he composed in his mind that afternoon: “Lord God, you know. No matter what I go through, you know. You know my pain, not from afar, but in the suffering of Jesus. You are familiar with my sorrows, Take my tears and frustrations, and Take my anger and my fears. Then save me and make me whole as you have promised, through Jesus Christ.” (5)

What is the promise of the cross is that beyond the worst life can do is the best God can do and indeed is already doing in and through and in spite of the worst.

The second way the cross shapes our understanding of who we are and how we are to live is that Christ’s courage can become our own. Let this cup pass,” he prayed, but then he said, “Not my will but thing be done.” When he dies, he says, “It is finished,” not as a sigh of resignation but as a vote of confidence that the meaning and purpose of his existence was now complete.

What is the way of the cross? It is meeting with courage whatever life offers up, trusting beneath you always are God's everlasting arms.

In his journal, Chris Vais tells the story of a Scottish colonel who, during the First World War, was preparing his troops for battle when he received word that his own son had been killed on the front line that morning. The colonel stayed in his tent for a while and then led his own troops through an intense day of danger. Later he was asked what had gone through his minds during those moments in the tent. He answered, "I had three choices. I could turn to strong drink and drown my sorrow. I could turn to despair and give up, or I could turn to God and continue, which is what I did."

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 to go on.

The third obvious message of the cross is that the people of the cross are to stand with those who suffer, to do all we can to alleviate pain and offer hope and comfort, to work for social change, to address the needs of those who are forgotten and left out, who do not have adequate access to health care, who live in harms' way because of war or other manifestations of what Robert Burns called "Man's inhumanity to man." I rejoice that the women of Morningside, in addition to Bible study and luncheon fellowship, are now gathering once a month to put together supply kits for a Presbyterian

hospital in Malawi. No, it's not going to change the world, but it is a genuinely blessed thing to stand with those who suffer.

How would you define success in your life? In terms of avoiding disaster? Or influencing others, or making money or getting to where you want to be in your career? Or do you not sense that the real thing has less to do with what you get than with what you give. So much that happens to us we have no control over, but whether we live in a shell of self-absorption or whether we move live in such a way that we both give and receive from others, that is the choice that makes all the difference.

I think of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's memorable book *The Cost of Discipleship* and its indictment of cheap grace, Christianity without the cross.

Bonhoeffer was a German pastor who was executed in April of 1945 for participating in a plot to assassinate Adolph Hitler, having chosen to return to Germany from the United States where he was teaching rather than remain out of harms' way and uninvolved with the indescribable suffering and death caused by the Nazi regime. He was arrested and imprisoned.

One of his fellow prisoners, an English officer, later wrote: *Bonhoeffer was all humility and sweetness, he always diffused an atmosphere of happiness and joy in every small event in life. Even in prison, he was grateful for the fact that he was alive . . . He was one of the few men I ever met to whom God*

*seemed real and close. On Sunday, the 8<sup>th</sup> of April, 1945, pastor Bonhoeffer led us in a worship service. He spoke to us in a manner that reached the hearts of all, finding just the right words to express our fears and his thoughts and hopes. . . He had barely finished his last prayer when the door opened and two evil looking men in civilian clothes came in and said, Prisoner Bonhoeffer, get ready to come with us” Those words, “Come with us” for all the prisoners had come to mean only one thing—the scaffold. We bade him goodbye. As he passed me, he drew me aside. “This is the end,” he said, “but for me, it is the beginning of life.” (6)*

Call it foolishness if you like, but for 2000 years, the way of the cross has been the path into the very heart of God. There is no reason in the world why it cannot be your path too.

**Notes:**

(1) John M. Buchanan “The Most Important Words Ever Spoken,” Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, IL, 3/12/06.

(2) As quoted by Buchanan.

(3) Douglas John Hall, *The Cross*, Augsburg Press, 2003.

(4) Peter J. Gomes, “The Storm Center,” *Christian Century*, 5/31/03.

(5) Chris Vias, *For Words*, published by Susan McLeod.

(6) As quoted by Buchanan.