

“Why A Crucified Savior?”
Text: 1 Corinthians 1:18-31
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Often, when I am creeping down Ponce or Peachtree in the middle of Atlanta rush hour traffic, I take the opportunity of slow speed and stoplights to notice church signs. There is no shortage of congregations on the route I travel most often, and many of these churches have new phrases or slogans out each week. Usually, they are announcements of upcoming events “Shrove Tuesday Pancake Supper- 7:00pm,” or well-worn biblical phrases “God is Love.” Recently, I saw one that surprised me. I won’t say which church it was, but the sign read, “Determination is the Key to Success.”

Now, that may be the truth, but at that moment, I thought of Paul, as I almost always do. I thought of his letter to the Christians living in Corinth.

The church was in trouble. Paul had founded it several years earlier, preached for a time, and then moved on to spread the gospel to other towns throughout the Roman Empire. The letter that we have before us this morning came from Paul’s pen when he learned what had happened to the community there after he left. There was division. I think there were probably disagreements over what the church sign should say. Should it say, “Corinth Presbyterian Church, the most intelligent congregation in town.” How about, “Corinth Catholic Church, where the power people pray.” Or perhaps, “Corinth Baptist Church, a who’s who of Corinthian nobility.” Whose name should appear on the sign? Some wanted to put Paul’s name as founder. Others Apollos. Still others Peter.

So in this letter, which is full of suggestions for maintaining unity and focus, Paul wastes no time in getting straight to the point— here’s what the church sign should read, are you ready? “We proclaim Christ crucified.” Only fools need seek membership. In the midst of debates over who was most important, noble, and wise, Paul reminds the Corinthian Christians what is the heart of the matter. We worship a crucified savior. In the eyes of the surrounding world, it is sheer madness. We boast in the presence of God on a cross. We are, as one preacher has said it, fools for Christ. And so we come to the next question in our sermon series for Lent here at Morningside: Why a Crucified Savior? For what could be more foolish than the proclamation that the very Son of God suffered and died on a Roman tool of execution?

Each year, Duke Chapel sponsors a Good Friday Stations of the Cross service. A small group of people gathers on the steps of the chapel at noon and walk

through the fourteen ancient stations remembering fourteen moments in the final hours of Jesus' life. As they travel, led by the cross, they sing ancient hymns and recite litanies from scripture. The stations are laid out all over Duke's West Campus, which is always buzzing with activity on Friday afternoons. Students and professors rushing to class, to lunch, to meetings, to finish a paper due in less than an hour. My sophomore year I was asked to hold one of the crosses, and I hesitantly agreed. I was assigned to hold the cross that marked station nine: Jesus is nailed to the cross. An important station. The drawback was that this station also happened to be located at the West campus bus stop, perhaps the most densely populated place at Duke. So, dressed in white alb with a rope tied round my waist, cross in hand, I stood in that spot for 45 minutes while the pilgrims made their way toward me. As brilliant and beautiful young people hurried by, staring a bit but always avoiding eye contact, I stood there with that ancient symbol of torture and death in my hand. Absolute foolishness, I thought. Surrounding me are people who will cure diseases, invent faster and more complex electronic devices, write Pulitzer Prize winning novels, and chair boards of multi-national corporations. This place screams that, Determination is the key to success. And I am dressed like Saint Francis, holding this ancient symbol of our faith. A crucified savior. Foolishness.

It did not take long after the death and resurrection of Christ for his followers to begin to find ways to smooth over the horrific event of the cross. Some claimed that only the human portion of Jesus died on the cross, while the divine portion suffered no pain. Others, ignoring the Apostle Paul's insistence that they proclaim Christ *crucified*, suggested that the resurrection had negated or reversed the events on Calvary. Embarrassed, the early Christians tried to avoid the cross at all costs.

In our own time many Christian believers and churches have lost this sense of the sheer outlandishness of our worship and our God, either by covering up the centrality of the cross or denying it all together. Recently a friend noted how interesting it is that Christians today tend to minimize Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, but plan big for Easter Sunday. We, like the Corinthians, still find it inordinately difficult to believe that the resurrected Christ is the same suffering servant of whom Isaiah prophesied—he was despised and rejected by others, a man of suffering. He was despised and we held him of no account. We want the lilies and the palms without the ashes and the nails. We want a success story. With our spiritual ancestors, we resist the notion that the cross is the definition of what it means to follow Jesus. It must be something else.

Just this past week I read again about one of the largest and fastest growing mega-churches in the country that has decided to remove the symbol of the cross entirely from its building. The leaders said they chose to do it because they didn't want newcomers confronted with negative images, images of failure, in church. In other words, why preach (or follow) a crucified savior?

We proclaim Christ crucified, Paul wrote, to some stumbling block and foolishness. But to us, the power and wisdom of God. Christ crucified, God's power and wisdom.

Paul knows that only those who follow Jesus *to the cross* will recognize who he is. If we stop before Calvary, we misunderstand Jesus. We will mistake him for just another miracle worker, or another exorcist, or a wise and compelling teacher. If the Corinthians proclaim Jesus the Messiah without the cross, they will proclaim a false messiah, for Jesus' true identity can be known only at the cross. Where God's foolishness prevails over human wisdom. And, in human weakness God's strength is revealed.

It was my first night as the on-call chaplain at Duke Hospital. The pager had been silent and I thought I would make it through the night with no crises. But just as I lay back on the couch in the chaplain's office to take a nap, the high-pitched beeps pierced my ears. I tried to gather myself, and ran down the hall into the emergency room. As I approached the room, there were no fewer than five men and women in white coats surrounding the man, speaking in hushed tones. I turned around to leave, sure that the work that they were doing was far more important than anything I could offer. But before I could, a woman approached. Are you the chaplain? Thank God you are here. My father wants someone to recite the 23rd Psalm with him. I walked in and held the hand of the man. He looked unfazed by the blur of activity all around him. He focused his eyes on mine: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil. Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me." Those ancient words, a balm for his soul.

It is such foolishness, this message we proclaim. Just words and stories and images and experiences. Such foolishness. But, Paul would remind us, it is the power of God.

Why follow a crucified savior? Because only a crucified messiah reveals God as a suffering, vulnerable God. Only those who stand beneath the cross and watch him suffer and die will be convinced that at the heart of reality is One who enters into human suffering. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminds us, "Only the suffering God can help."¹

The Bible bears witness to a God who hears the cries of the poor and defends the orphans, widows, and aliens. The God of the Bible suffers with God's people. God comes among us as a vulnerable baby born among the homeless, lives as an immigrant, associates with the outcasts and compares the kingdom to receiving a little child. Christ is then executed as a criminal and buried in a borrowed tomb.

The message is profound. The Transcendent One has moved into our vulnerability, our guilt, our alienation, our suffering, and our death. God has

claimed our weakness as a resource for divine power. God has claimed our wounds as means of healing.

Why follow a crucified savior? Because in the suffering and death of Jesus Christ we are given a picture of who God is and the paradoxical way that God works. Paul says that God has chosen the path of weakness and foolishness so that no one might boast. That is, the cross stands as a constant reminder that God is God and we are not. We would not have done it this way. Strength in weakness, gaining by losing, the power of the cross – that still seems foolish to those who measure strength by gross national product and megaton bombs, those devoted to finishing first, those who thrive on power as prominence.

I think of the nineteen-member Warrenton Presbyterian Church in northern North Carolina founded in the 18th Century. Each Sunday, Sunday school and worship are held. Sometimes, due to illness and age, fewer than ten people are present for the morning worship service. Still, the people gathered worship God, sing hymns, and read the ancient words of scripture. By the standards of the world, what could be more foolish? The church should close its doors, save the time and energy, do something more productive. And yet in that church I have felt the power of God, made perfect in weakness. I have heard the word of God without pretentiousness. I have seen God at work in the life of this unassuming and cruciform congregation. Lives have been transformed utterly, the community has been brought together, the orphan and the widow have been taken in and given a seat at the table. The crucified savior has been worshipped and served. The story of Warrenton Presbyterian Church is still being written, with no concluding chapter in sight.

Why a crucified Savior? The human mind will never fully understand God's reason for choosing this way of reconciling the world to its divine source. What we can say, with absolute certainty, is that this is how it happened. The messiah, the savior, was crucified. It was the definitive point in the life of God and in the life of humanity. But it was not the end of the relationship.

Recently, I read the story of a young Presbyterian minister who was called to a small congregation in a shrinking town. Almost immediately, the pastor began a program for youth and invited everyone from the community to come and be a part of it. Before long, the weekly events were drawing eighty children, many of whom had never been to church. When Marty, a twelve year old from the town, entered the sanctuary for the first time, he looked at the ornate chairs arrayed at the front and asked, "Which throne does God sit in?"

One of the gifts that the new minister brought with her was a passion for storytelling. Sometimes they would build a pretend campfire and she would dress up like a shepherd and tell Bible stories. One night, Marty was present and the story was the death of Christ. As the shepherd told the old, old story, the youth followed Jesus to Jerusalem. They watched him heal the sick and give sight to

the blind. They listened as the rulers plotted to destroy and heard the jangle of thirty pieces of silver. They sat with Jesus at table in the upper room and followed him to the garden where he was betrayed with a kiss. They witnessed the trial, saw Peter deny Jesus, and heard the lash of the Roman whips. They stood by the foot of the cross and in deepest silence they watched him die. Marty was transfixed. When Jesus, betrayed and abandoned, drew his last shuddering breath, Marty could take it no more. "Oh, nooooo!!" he cried out in sorrow.

A young woman from the church, someone who already knew the story, was sitting next to Marty. She gently placed her arm on Marty's arm and said, "That's all right, Marty. The story isn't over yet."

Sisters and brothers, welcome to Lent, these forty days that lead us to the cross of Jesus Christ.

In the words of Fredrick Buechner, "it can be a pretty depressing business all in all, but if sackcloth and ashes are at the start of it, something like Easter may be at the end."ⁱⁱ

ⁱ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (London: SCM Press, ³1967), pp. 360-1.

ⁱⁱ Frederick Buechner, *Whistling in the Dark - An ABC Theologized* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), pp. 74-75.