
Crossfoolery

1 Corinthians 1:18-24

This morning, I'm going to preach a scandalous sermon. So, I want you to prepare yourselves. I will be preaching Christ crucified. Now, before you dismiss me right away, here me out: As absurd as this is to hear, *this* is actually the wise and powerful way of God. I know, I know! Utterly scandalous!

Now, I know you probably don't think about the cross in this way. After all, crosses are everywhere: used as chic home décor, bedazzling our wardrobe, anything from cross t-shirts that say "Jesus is my homeboy" to the \$39,000 cross clip made by Tiffany & Co. The cross is anything but scandalous in our day.

The Apostle Paul was determined on keeping the cross weird and awkward. Preaching that nonsensical message was #1 on his agenda in writing to the church in Corinth:

"It seems the Jews are always asking for signs and the Greeks are always on the prowl for wisdom. But we tell a different story. We proclaim a crucified Jesus, God's Anointed. For Jews this is scandalous, for outsiders this is moronic, but for those of us living out God's call—regardless of our Jewish or Greek heritage—we know the Anointed embodies God's dynamic power and God's deep wisdom." (1 Cor. 1:22-24)

A crucified Savior? Do you hear the absolute foolishness in this?

Paul needed to address this because early followers of the Way couldn't *merely* keep in lock-step with society in preach the persuasive good news of the Gospel. The message of the cross wasn't just the latest trend, the newest clever gadgetry, the most-convincing philosophical argument, or the latest human advancement.

In a word, Paul was ensuring that for the early believers the cross didn't come to making too much "sense" in the world.

It reminds me of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, writing to his good friend Eberhard Bethge in 1944. Bonhoeffer, the young German theologian, had observed all of the latest human advancements of the early Twentieth Century, and it was impressive. Writing to Bethge, Bonhoeffer recognized that modern people were becoming increasingly capable of understanding and addressing the challenges of life without appealing to God as an explanation. As fields such as science, medicine, psychology, economics, and politics were increasingly developing at an exponential rate, these had now assumed responsibility for questions that Christianity had once addressed primarily through faith.

Bonhoeffer understood this shift as humanity reaching a kind of maturity—he called it "a world come of age"—and he believed the church needed to reckon honestly with what this new situation meant for the place of faith in life and society. To be clear, he wasn't against all of these advancements. Bonhoeffer's call to the Christian church was to ensure that the message of the cross wouldn't become just a more clever, convincing, or louder message, but a return to its simplicity, to its quiet absurdity, to the scandalous.

"For 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." Foolishness is its power. What is the message of the cross, for us, today?

As Christians, we lift high the cross. There's even a glorious, soaring hymn about it—one of my favorites: "Lift high the cross, the love of Christ proclaim, till all the world adore his sacred name." We raise the cross high. In fact, we have done this quite literally across the globe.

I was curious, so I looked it up. Did you know that the tallest free-standing cross is just outside of Madrid, Spain? A towering 500-foot stone cross that stretches over a large basilica there, which is also a memorial complex to those who died in the Spanish Civil War. I'm not sure how expensive that cross is, but the whole complex itself cost billions to construct, a sight that can be seen from many miles away.

The Branson Cross in Missouri is less than half that height but weighs about 450,000 pounds and took over \$3 million dollars to build. That's quite an

expensive roadside religious architectural towering over a major highway. Growing up in the southern United States, I've seen plenty of these gigantic crosses. You don't have to drive far to see them, from far off in the distance, on the side of highways, even glowing white at night. We know how to lift high the cross.

This year's Lenten season, this past April, culminated with a Good Friday Walk. Area churches in Leonia, across multiple denominations, met to make their way from church to church through town, holding services at each location along the route. And a large wooden cross was carried as we walked in procession—which has been a tradition of the Good Friday Walk. But if I can be honest, that day I was tending to a tension I felt within myself being in that cross procession.

Maybe it was the knowledge of how the cross has more-recently held a prominent place in gatherings of red-hat protestors in order to bolster a sense of power and authority in an act of political might. Maybe it was feelings tied to my own conservative evangelical past, when I was a young Christian using the cross on street corners to try and convert people who were just trying to enjoy their Saturday morning walk, or keep an appointment at a planned parenthood clinic. Maybe it's a deep-seeded knowledge of the cross-wielding crusades or the way crosses were brought into black-populated southern American neighborhoods, and set on fire to burn fear in the hearts of those with darker skin color.

When the cross has been lifted high, historically it has often times not been in the character of the crucified one. Mahatma Gandhi famously said: "I like your Christ. I do not like your Christians. They are so unlike your Christ." The message of the cross has historically not aligned with the message of Jesus—standing at times in the name of power, oppression, fear, and domination.

And as we walked and wheeled that giant cross along Leonia's sidewalks, I wrestled with that tension. Maybe the cross is safer in sanctuaries or fixed upon church steeples. But that day it was taken down, and in a solemn walk on Good Friday, it was brought low to where the people were—passing by many of Leonia's residents, by coffee shops, and banks, and grocery stores.

And here's the thought that came to mind: When we lift high the cross, that's not for the world. The cross means nothing to the world—not anything positive at least. That's for Christian's to be reminded of the Way of Jesus amidst all the

noise. So we raise the cross high to call us back to Christlikeness. Yet, the world needs not a cross lifted high but one brought low. When Jesus asked us to take up our crosses and “carry them daily”, he was calling us to a life of absurd solidarity, to do as he did: to stand with the excluded, the outsider, the forgotten, with those discarded by society.

When we show up in spaces that have little to do with us, or live in a way that cost us something on behalf of someone else. When we take unnecessary risks in the name of compassion and justice, that’s when the cross becomes foolish again. Father Richard Rohr challenges the way we think about it, he said: “[Jesus calls] us all to lives of communion with the world’s suffering. This is so much harder than merely trying to fix it, understand it, control it, or even localize it. Only love can do this, and really only God’s love.” Beloveds, solidarity is God’s chosen Way. And solidarity for its own sake.

This week we will observe the International Day of Peace around the world. For us locally, we’ll do that this Saturday on the lawn of the United Methodist Church. Please come out and join us. In the Mennonite and Anabaptist traditions, this year’s Peace theme is *Solidarity: From Power Over to Power With*. When we practice cross-like solidarity, we consciously move from a position of power over (or under) others to power *with* others. Jesus took on the cross as a way of being in solidarity with the problem. And when we identify with a cruciform life, we too have living communion with human suffering. We learn what it is to stand *with* others in their need and hurt.

I want to highlight another expression of the cross’ foolishness in this passage: And that is that God chose you and me to accomplish the work of the kingdom.

In a few verses directly following this morning’s Epistle reading, Paul writes: “Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong” (1 Cor. 1:26-27)

If that sounds like a back-handed compliment, I think it is. He is saying, “Look at yourselves: you’re not the brightest bunch. But God chooses you anyways. In fact, you are the very ones through which the kingdom will be accomplished

on earth.” Now, that’s not accurate of you. You ARE the brightest and best AND you are chosen.

My friends, are we keeping the cross weird these days? Or has it been serving us as just another form of power and sensible argumentation? When we think of Jesus’ call to “take up our cross and follow him”, hear in that a call to take *down* the cross and carry it low. It will lead into pathways of glorious and senseless solidarity. It will scandalize the wisdom of the world. May it be so. Amen.