

The Message of the Cross

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Roger Scott Powers
at St. Andrew Presbyterian Church in Albuquerque,
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I Corinthians 1:18-25

The cross stands as the central symbol of the Christian faith. For centuries it has been a universal symbol for Christianity and for the Church, recognized all around the world. When you see a cross on a building or on a map, you automatically think to yourself, "Oh, that must be a church!" When you see a cross on the cover of a book, you conclude that it must be a copy of the Bible or a Christian prayer book of some kind. When you see someone wearing a cross around his or her neck, you presume that he or she is a Christian.

Probably the two most common crosses are the Latin cross, like the one on the wall behind me, and the crucifix, which includes a representation of Jesus' body hanging on the cross. The crucifix is especially important in the Roman Catholic Church, but it is also used in Orthodox, Anglican, and Lutheran Churches. The crucifix puts emphasis on Jesus' crucifixion, on his sacrifice, while the Latin cross puts emphasis on Jesus' resurrection, on his victory over death.

Of course, there are many different styles of crosses. In addition to the Latin cross and the crucifix, you'll see Celtic crosses, Coptic crosses, Eastern crosses, Greek crosses, Jerusalem crosses, and many other types. Crosses come in a great variety of shapes and sizes.

Crosses are so commonplace that we don't usually give them a second thought. But this morning I want us to step back a moment and think about the message of this common symbol of our faith.

In Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth, he says that 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." Paul proclaims "Christ crucified," which for him is shorthand for Christ's death and resurrection. "We proclaim Christ crucified," he writes, "a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles (meaning everyone else), but to those who are called (Christian believers), both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God."

We may not think of the cross as foolishness or as a stumbling block today, but in the first century, that's exactly what it was. The cross was the ultimate symbol of shame, humiliation, and rejection. It was a means of capital punishment, an instrument of torture and execution, equivalent to the electric chair or gas chamber today. To get a sense of the offensive, scandalous nature of the cross, imagine what would happen if we were to remove the cross from the front of our church building and replace it with an electric chair or a hangman's noose! Imagine the uproar that would follow! Imagine the controversy! Imagine the scandal it would cause!

So, when the early Christians began hailing Jesus as the Messiah and worshiping him as Lord, the conventional wisdom of the day dismissed such claims as utter folly. How could anyone give that much status to someone who had died the most shameful of deaths? Who in their right mind would follow a man who had been condemned as a criminal according to Roman law and cursed by God according to Jewish law? It was a foolish and scandalous idea to both Jews and Gentiles. It was completely absurd!

But God's wisdom is unconventional wisdom, which makes foolish the wisdom of the world. Paul almost mocks the wise ones of his day: "Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? . . . The world did not know God through wisdom." Paul was saying that you can't reason your way to God. Christianity isn't a matter of thinking the right way,

or holding the right ideas, or affirming a certain set of propositions. No, Christianity is about being in right relationship with God, a relationship initiated by God through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

“God decided,” Paul tells us, “through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe.” “God decided.” Salvation is God’s decision, not ours. Salvation comes at God’s initiative, not ours. Salvation is God’s gracious gift to us.

It is a paradox that God’s saving power would be exhibited through an act of seeming powerlessness, that God’s true nature would be revealed in the weakness and vulnerability of Jesus’ dying on a cross.

Jesus didn’t resort to violence to protect his life or legacy. No, Jesus rejected violence. Instead of taking up the sword, he chose to endure the suffering of the cross with words of forgiveness on his lips: “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.” (Luke 23:34)

Of Jesus’ death on the cross, Martin Luther King, Jr., said this: “Jesus eloquently affirmed from the cross a higher law. He knew that the old eye-for-an-eye philosophy would leave everyone blind. He did not seek to overcome evil with evil. He overcame evil with good.”

First-century Christians saw Christ’s death on the cross as the final and ultimate sacrifice for the sins of the world. The cross became transformed from a means of execution into the ultimate symbol of God’s love and the ultimate symbol of Christ’s obedience.

But God did not stop there. No, God would not let crucifixion be the end. God would not let death have the last word. God raised Christ to new life in the resurrection. And what scoffers initially dismissed as folly has since become the foundation of a faith

tradition that has transformed lives from generation to generation for almost 2,000 years.

It is often pointed out that the cross has two dimensions -- a vertical dimension and a horizontal dimension. The vertical dimension has been interpreted as representing the relationship human beings have with God. The horizontal dimension has been interpreted as representing the relationship human beings have with one another and with the rest of Creation. Many Christians are tempted to focus on one dimension or the other. Either we focus on the vertical dimension -- on our relationship with God -- through worship, prayer, and study, or we focus on the horizontal dimension -- on our relationship with our neighbors -- through hospitality, fellowship, charity, and advocating for peace, justice, and the integrity of creation. In walking the Christian path, we are meant to hold these two dimensions together, to live at their intersection -- to love God and to love neighbor. It is a matter of both/and rather than either/or.

So, as Christians, when we leave this sanctuary, we need to bring both dimensions of the cross with us, out into the world. We need to deepen our relationship with God at the same time that we engage with the world around us.

George Macleod, the Church of Scotland minister who founded the Iona Community, put it this way:

“I simply argue that the cross be raised again at the center of the market place as well as on the steeple of a church. Jesus was not crucified in a cathedral between two candles, but on a cross between two thieves; on the town garbage-heap; at a crossroads so cosmopolitan that they had to write his title in Hebrew, Latin, and Greek, at a place where cynics talk smut, and thieves curse, and soldiers gamble. That is where He died. And that is what He died about. And that is where church men and women should be and what churchmanship is all about.”

May it be so. Amen.