

“The Cross”
Sermon Series – The Cross #1
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First Presbyterian Church, Winston-Salem, NC
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(1 Cor. 1:18-25)

Introduction.

In his book *The Radical Cross*, A.W. Tozer writes that we often hear the phrase “the crux of the matter” or “the crux of a situation.” The word *crux* come from Latin, and it simply means ‘cross.’ Now why has the word *crux* come to be associated with a critical juncture or a point in time? Tozer says it’s because the cross of Jesus Christ is truly the crux of history. Without the cross, history itself cannot be defined or corrected.

There is another word we often hear when we’re in the throes of indescribable pain. It is the word *excruciating*. That also come from Latin, and it means “out of the cross.” Through the centuries and in human experience the cross has been the historical event that intersects time and space, and it speaks to the deepest hurts of the human heart.¹

There is an old hymn that goes like this:

*On the mount of crucifixion,
Fountains opened deep and wide;
Through the floodgates of God’s mercy
Flowed a vast and gracious tide.
Grace and love, like mighty rivers,
Poured incessant from above,
And heaven’s peace and perfect justice
Kissed a guilty world in love.²*

This is the paradox of the cross – perfect love and perfect justice were united in one death on a Friday afternoon 2,000 years ago.

Through the season of Lent, we’re going to focus on the cross, the crux of history. As we make our journey to Holy Week and our celebration of Easter, we’re going to slow down and take a look at various aspects of the suffering of Jesus on our behalf. Today we’re going to study a passage of Scripture which talks about how from the world’s point of view the cross looked foolish and weak, but nothing could be further from the truth. It was, in fact, the wisdom and power of God.

I. The Foolishness of the Cross.

Has there ever been a time in your life when you felt foolish? I don’t mean a time when you were embarrassed about a decision you made or because you got lost and wouldn’t ask anyone for directions. I’m talking about a time when you felt foolish for being a Christian, a time when you could tell that the person you were talking to thought you were an idiot, or at least naïve,

for having faith in God and believing in Jesus? They may have even asked, “Do you really believe all that stuff in the Bible – that Moses parted the Red Sea, that Jesus did turned water into wine, and that He actually rose from the dead? You’ve got to be kidding me!” they said.

Many people think they’re too sophisticated and intelligent to believe in the God of the Bible, and they like to make fun of people of faith. I remember a time when I was a sophomore in college, and I was taking a course in English literature. The professor was a brilliant scholar and teacher, but he was also very antagonistic to the Christian Faith.

On the first day of the semester he asked, “Do I have any Christians in my class? Let me see a show of hands.” Four of us sheepishly raised our hands. Then he said, “I just like to know where my Christians are.” Over the course of the rest of the semester the professor occasionally asked, “Now where are my Christians?” And then he would proceed to ask us the most difficult questions about some obscure passage in Scripture that is hard to understand, or about some doctrine of the Christian faith which is difficult to explain. His intent was to make us look foolish and stupid, and oftentimes we did to the other students in the class.

For many people today the Christian faith is foolishness. To them it’s ridiculous that someone would believe in God, especially a God who would suffer. They think, “If God is all powerful and He is all wise, then why in the world did He allow Jesus to go through all the suffering to which He was subjected, and why did He allow Him to be put to death on a cross? Good people shouldn’t suffer. Injustice shouldn’t prevail.” We want a powerful God, a God who overcomes, a God who wins all the time. But Jesus, the Son of God, died on a cross. “How weak, how foolish, and how ridiculous is that?!” they say.

Through the centuries the cross has been a stumbling block for people. It was at the time of Jesus, and the apostle Paul, just as it is today. However, the Bible says we are mistaken if we think the cross is foolish and weak. It was actually the wisdom and the power of God at work in the world. People just didn’t realize it. Paul writes, *“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. For it is written, ‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate’”* (1 Cor. 1:18,19).

The people to whom Paul was writing lived in a part of the world which had a long history of very smart philosophers who added to the wisdom of the world. Ancient Greece was the home of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, and the Greeks prided themselves on their wisdom. They always thought they were the smartest kids in the class. So, it was natural for unbelievers in the city of Corinth to think they were too cool for school and look down on the Christian faith as foolishness.

The word used here in this passage which is translated “foolish” is the Greek word *moria*. It comes from the same root from which we get our English word “moron.” In blunt terms, Paul is saying that to people who don’t know Jesus, those of us who believe in the gospel, look like morons. They think we’re stupid. The reason for this is because in Paul’s day, the cross remained in widespread use by the Romans as a means of public humiliation and execution. It was a symbol of punishment for shameful crimes, and it signified the powerlessness of lawbreakers before the mighty Roman empire.

The cross wasn’t foolish to the Greeks and Romans because they didn’t believe in God. Quite the contrary, they actually believed in all kinds of gods, and they sorted them out by the power and control they wielded over nature and humanity. No, the reason the cross was

foolish to their way of thinking was because Jesus was rejected by His own people, and He was crucified like a common criminal by the military machine of Rome. And from a Greek and Roman perspective, that was no kind of god to worship.

However, as Paul explains, what was foolishness to some is actually the wisdom of God. It was, in fact, God's most glorious and beautiful act in human history. Jesus didn't lose a fight with the Jewish leaders or the Roman government. He wasn't overpowered or outmatched. As Christ said in John 10:17, He laid down His life willingly, and He sacrificed Himself for the sins of the world. In spite of the fact that Jesus had limitless power and divine authority, He gave up His life willingly to pay for the sins of lost humanity. And those of us who trust in Christ understand that without that sacrificial act, we would be lost and without hope. This is the wisdom of the cross.

II. The Weakness of the Cross.

The cross is arguably the most recognizable symbol of the Christian faith and perhaps even the most recognizable symbol in the world. That means we can become inoculated against its brutality as well as its beauty. It is interesting to note that for the first 300 years of the Christian church, the cross was *not* a symbol of our faith. Rather, it was a symbol of imperial cruelty, a technology of dehumanization, and a degrading public spectacle intended to humiliate its victims. No wonder the cross didn't become a symbol of Christianity until everyone who had actually witnessed a crucifixion had already died.

The earliest depiction of Jesus on the cross is found in a piece of graffiti art, where Jesus is given the head of a donkey. It is the work of one slave mocking another for worshipping such a weak and silly god. Fleming Rutledge reminds us that "until the gospel of Jesus Christ burst upon the Mediterranean world, no one in the history of human imagination had ever conceived of such a thing as worship of a crucified man."³

The crucifixion of Jesus and the weakness of the cross is just too much for some people to embrace. For example, Philip Yancey points out that when the Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci went to China in the 16th century, he brought with him samples of religious art to illustrate the story of Jesus for people who had never heard it before. The Chinese readily adopted portraits of the Virgin Mary holding her infant child, but when he showed them paintings of the crucifixion and tried to explain that the God-child came to the earth and had grown up only to be executed, the audience reacted with revulsion and horror. They much preferred the Virgin and insisted on worshipping her rather than the crucified Christ.⁴

One of the saddest features of Islam is that it rejects the cross and says that it's inappropriate that a major prophet of God should come to such an ignominious end. The Koran sees no need for the sin-bearing death of a Savior, and at least five times it categorically declares that "no soul shall bear another's burden [or sin]." Why is this? It's because they believe "each man shall reap the fruits of his own deeds."⁵

The Koran goes on to say that the Jews "uttered a monstrous falsehood when they declared we have put to death the Messiah Jesus the son of Mary, the apostle of Allah, for they did not kill him, nor did they crucify him, but only thought they did." Although Muslim theologians interpret this statement in a variety of ways, the commonly held belief is that God cast a spell over the enemies of Jesus in order to rescue Him, and that either Judas Iscariot or Simon of Cyrene was substituted for Christ at the last minute.

The world isn't drawn to weakness. We admire the strong and congratulate the powerful. We give trophies to the victors. We give medals to the ones who are the fastest, the strongest, and the best. Who likes to cheer for a loser?

Perhaps the most scornful rejection of the cross has come from the pen of the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. In his book *The Anti-Christ*, he defined the good as "the will to power," and the bad as "all that proceeds from weakness." And he said that happiness is the feeling one has as power increases. So, he reasoned that nothing is more harmful than active sympathy for the weak and pitiful of this world – namely, the faith and practice of Christianity.

Nietzsche admired the work of Charles Darwin and his emphasis on the survival of the fittest, and he despised all forms of weakness. To him depravity meant decadence, and nothing was more decadent than Christianity which had taken the side of everything that weak and base. But the famous philosopher reserved his bitterest criticism for the Christian concept of God which he describes as "God of the sick, God as spider, God as spirit," and for Jesus His Messiah whom he dismissed with contempt as "God on the cross."⁶

However, Nietzsche was mistaken. What looked like weakness to the world was actually the power of God at work. In a judo-like move, God took the weakness of the humiliation and the death of Jesus and turned it into the most powerful act of redemption in human history which resulted in the salvation of the world. It's like the deeper magic in C.S. Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* where the self-sacrificial death of Aslan the Lion led to the undoing of the curse, and death itself started working backwards.

In a video devotional I saw this week, a friend of mine talked about ***the wisdom of weakness*** in the Christian faith. He said that contrary to popular opinion today, it is only through utter defeat that we take the first steps toward true liberation and strength. It turns out that the admission of personal powerlessness is the only firm bedrock for a happy and purposeful life. That's because this is the only way we can be rid of the illusion of our own self-sufficiency and begin to truly tap into the power of God. As long as we think we can do it ourselves and solve our problems on our own, we will never come to God and draw upon His limitless power which has the ability to make dead things come alive again. If we think we can do it ourselves, we will remain defeated and live in spiritual darkness.

Where do you feel weak and powerless today? Where is it that do you feel out of control or impotent to change your circumstances this morning? The blessing of the message of the cross is that when we are the weakest, that's when we can experience the power of God the most. Just as the weakness of the cross was the means by which the power of God was secretly at work in the world, so your weakness can be the hidden opportunity God's wants to use to give you His strength in a brand-new way and bring you into a deeper relationship with Him.

Conclusion.

Earlier I mentioned my English Lit professor in college who tried to pick on us Christians in his class and make us look foolish. One of the other students in the class was my roommate Del Lewis. Del was a brilliant student, and I don't think ever made a B in his life. He went on to get a PhD in philosophy, and now he teaches at a university. Del is also a committed follower of Jesus.

After we took the first big test of the semester (which was worth one-third of our grade), the professor was passing out the exams to everyone. As he did, when he came to Del he said,

“Mr. Lewis has done so well on this exam that if he does as well on the second test in this course as he did on the first, he may very well be teaching the latter third of this class.” Those of us who were Christians smiled and felt a little vindication. God was using Del to help dismiss the misconception of foolishness in the Christian faith, and that included the cross of Jesus.

In his book *Who Is this Man?* John Ortberg writes, “The cross has become the most widely recognized symbol in the world. It marks more graves, graces more jewelry, and sits atop more churches than any other design. The making of the sign of the cross is known from basilicas to baseball diamonds. Finding a logo has become big business, but no corporation, country, or cause has produced such an enduring and widespread image.

“The cross was changed from the symbol of a human empire’s power into a symbol of the suffering love of God. It was changed from an expression of ultimate threat into an expression of ultimate hope. And it came, in a sense, to express the exact opposite of its original purpose – that the power of embraced sacrifice is greater than the power of coercion.”⁷

How did this happen? Jesus chose it. He chose to die on a cross for you and for me. And after that Friday, neither the cross nor the world would ever be the same again. May God give us deeper insight into and greater appreciation for the wisdom and the power of the cross of Jesus Christ. Amen.

¹ A.W. Tozer, *The Radical Cross* (Chicago: Moody Press, 2009) 7.

² “Here Is Love,” Lyrics: vs. 1 & 2 by William Rees (1802-1883), vv. 3, 5 by Matt Giles, vs. 4 by Vell Rives; Music: Robert Lowry (1826-1899)

³ Fleming Rutledge, *The Crucifixion* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015) 1.

⁴ From Jonathan D. Spence, *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci*. 245.

⁵ Quotations are from the *Koran*.

⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ* (published by Alfred A. Knof, 1895) 128, 168.

⁷ John Ortberg, *Who Is this Man?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012) 173-174.