

1 Corinthians 1:18-24

Third Sunday in Lent (Series B)

Lessons for the Day: Exodus 20:1-17; 1 Corinthians 1:18-31; John 2:13-25**Cross-Purposes**

March 4, 2018

For the word of the cross is folly 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, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart." Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

The picture in front of you this morning is from Faith Lutheran Church in London, Ontario. What is the first thing you notice in the picture? (The Cross). When I first walked into the church, the cross definitely caught my attention. It is about 30 feet tall, and very imposing. It is made out of a rough-hewn barn beam, so it even looks the way we often think the cross would have looked, especially as you get closer to it. Most people entering the sanctuary are drawn to the cross, and struck by its appearance. It is, in a positive sense, a source of pride for the members of the church. They are glad that the first thing that people noticed about their church is the cross.

But it wasn't always that way. When the church was being built, there was quite a controversy about the type of cross to put at the front of the church. Some wanted a simple metal cross, or at least something less imposing. Some wanted a stained-glass cross. A few wanted a crucifix—the cross with the body of Christ on it. But money was extremely tight. They couldn't agree on what to have, or how to install it. Well, one of the members was tearing down a barn. He had the beams, which today would be very expensive, and he and a few members decided to get together, fashion the cross; cut out the back, so that lighting could go behind it, and erected it before worship one week.

That Sunday, as the people came into the church, there was the cross: that huge, rough, overwhelming cross. But as they entered the church that day, the controversy over the cross ended. It ended, not because what's done is done and there was no other choice, but because seeing this cross, the members of the church couldn't imagine anything else. If you were to ask those who built that church what they appreciated most in the building, they would tell you it was the cross. It became a source of comfort, of joy and of pride for the members of the church.

We are surrounded by the cross. We have the cross at the front of the church. The symbol of the cross is on our hymnals; it is formed in the brackets of the altar and the altar rail. It hangs on a chain around my neck. You also may be wearing a cross today. When we come together, we make the sign of the cross and remember our Baptism. In this church it is almost impossible to escape the image of the cross which is displayed again and again and again.

To those outside the church, this often seems strange. After all, what is the cross? The cross is a gruesome instrument of torture and punishment. The cross was reserved for the worst criminals, who were hung on the cross so that others would learn a powerful lesson from a public execution. When people saw the movie, *"The Passion of the Christ"*, the scenes of Christ being flogged and then nailed to the cross were overwhelming for many people.

The cross is unpleasant. Many people are uncomfortable with it. Others are offended by it. Maybe that is why so many churches today have removed the cross and other Christian symbols from their worship areas. Some years ago, the priest at a North Carolina Catholic church placed his usual array of Lenten crosses, draped all in black for Good Friday, out in front of his little church. Soon after he received a call from the North Myrtle Beach Chamber of Commerce: "Look preacher, we've been getting complaints about those crosses out in your churchyard. Now inside the church, who cares? But out front, where everybody can see them, they are offensive. The retired people here don't like them—they find them depressing. The tourists will not like them either. It will be bad for business. People come down here to get happy, not depressed."

Even those who call themselves Christians take offense at the cross today. I have been invited to hear several Christian speakers, whose message was advertised as a denial of what we call the vicarious atonement—the message of the crucified Christ. I can show you articles from supposed Christian magazines which say that the message of the cross is foolishness, and that the idea

that God saved the world through the violence of the cross is just wrong.

Yes, the world sees the cross as foolish, but Paul calls it *the power of God*. That is why, with Paul, we are at cross-purposes with the world as we boldly confess: ***but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.***

When St. Paul wrote to the Corinthian church, he was writing to a church surrounded, as we are today, by some very worldly attitudes. Corinth was not far from Athens, the centre of philosophy in that day. Corinth was a regional centre for various sporting events, and its citizens were not unlike many sports-minded Canadians, who don't mind missing church, but won't miss their favourite sporting event. These people were busy in a world preoccupied with making a living; they were concerned about knowing the latest political information; they wanted to keep up on the stock market. They saw themselves as progressive, embracing new ideas and attitudes that revealed the permissiveness of their age.

It is in the midst of this worldliness that Paul preaches of Jesus Christ crucified and risen again. Paul recognized that preaching this message was regarded as "foolish"—the Greek word for this is found in the English word, 'moron'. To the modern world steeped in spiritual blindness, just as it was to many of the people in Corinth, the message of the cross and the crucified Christ is moronic. Focussing on the cross is just plain foolish. Christians are regarded as foolish, uninformed creatures—mental midgets—because we believe the Scriptures and what happened on the cross of Calvary.

But we aren't so foolish, and the people who think themselves wise in this world aren't as smart as they imagine. People may say that the notion of a crucified Saviour offends them because it is barbaric and unrealistic, but there is something that lies far deeper than that. The real reason that people are offended by the cross is that they don't like the truth that flows from the confession of the crucified Christ. Like it or not, the cross teaches us the true nature of sin and its consequences. I am always mindful of those words from the Lenten hymn, *Stricken, Smitten and Afflicted*, where we are told: *Ye who think of sin but lightly, nor suppose the evil great; here may view its nature rightly, here its guilt may estimate.* (LSB 451, st. 3) Sin is not just a little boo-boo that can be ignored. It is a horrible, terrible thing, deserving of punishment, including the punishment of death and hell. And you and I and all people on the face of the earth are sinners; sinners who deserve the full wrath and anger of God; sinners who are totally unable to set things right with God. The problem is that if Jesus must be crucified for us on the cross, then sin must be real. If sin is real, then the punishment that we deserve must be real. In a world where people want to deny sin, and where we want to believe that everybody is going to get to heaven somehow, the cross has to be foolishness to the world, or else it is a threat to the self-righteous of this world. It has to be foolishness, or else it contradicts the ease, the comfort and the wisdom of those who think more of themselves than they should.

There is another reason why people don't like the message of the crucified Christ. The cross declares that there is a definite right and wrong. Again, people think that all things are relative. I was so disappointed to read that a recent survey found that 46% of LCMS members believe that abortion should be legal in all or most circumstances. I imagine that the same is true for our Lutheran Church–Canada. Pick any area of morality, and we see that the standards of right and wrong are always in flux. We think they are just matters of our own opinion. But right and wrong aren't matters of opinion. In our Old Testament lesson today, we heard God's standard of right and wrong. God has given us His commandments—and we broke them. That brings forth the consequence that comes with sinfulness. Paul said it so well: ***For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*** (Romans 6:23 - ESV)

Thankfully we, who have been at cross-purposes with God, now find His purpose in the cross. With Paul, ***we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.*** There is great joy and peace for us in that confession! The cross teaches us the consequence of sin, but it also reveals the great love that God has for sinners like you and me. Jesus Christ, the true Lord of all, suffered and died on that cross in our place, that we might be forgiven and set free from sin's terrible consequences. This was God's plan, no matter how strange that may seem to us. How blessed we are in that forgiveness! The crucified Lord came to undo all that sin has done to ruin our lives. He is with us to help us in the struggles at work or school; He helps us through the struggles of our relationships; He is with us in our economic woes. We have that confidence, for the crucified, dying Lord rose again from the dead to lead us through the struggles of this world to the joy of eternal life in His heavenly kingdom.

In the late 1800s, Charles Berry, an English preacher, was the pastor of the Plymouth Church in Brooklyn. There had been a time in Berry's early ministry when he preached a very thin gospel—really no gospel at all. As did the Corinthians, he saw Jesus as merely a noble teacher, but not the Divine Redeemer. Late one night as he sat in his study, there came a knock. He opened the door and found a typical, poor Lancashire girl. "Are you a minister?" she asked. Getting an affirmative answer, she went

on breathlessly. "You must come with me quickly. I want you to get my mother in."

Thinking it was a case of some drunken mother out in the streets, Berry said, "You must go and get a policeman." "No," said the girl, "My mother is dying, and you must come and get her into heaven." Berry got dressed and followed her for a mile and a half through lonely streets in the night. He knelt at the woman's side, and he began telling her how good and kind Jesus was and how he'd come to show us how to live. Then the desperate woman cut him off. "Mister," she cried, "that's no use for the likes of me. I'm a sinner. I've lived my life. Can't you tell me of someone who can have mercy upon me and save my poor soul?"

"I stood there in the presence of a dying woman," said Berry, "and I realized I had nothing to tell her. In the midst of sin and death, I had no message. In order to bring something to that dying woman, I leaped back to my mother's knee, to my cradle faith, and I told her the story of the Cross and of a Christ who is able to save to the uttermost." The tears began to run down the woman's cheeks. "Now you're getting it," she said. "Now you're helping me." Berry concluded the story by saying, "I got her in, and blessed be God, I got in myself."

We preach Christ crucified, for in the message of the cross we find what that poor woman found: the hope, the peace, the forgiveness and the life that Christ alone can give. Thanks be to God that the crucified Christ paid for our sins. And thanks be to Him who rose to give us life with Him forever. Amen.