

The Confounding Claims of the Cross

John 2: 13-22 & 1 Corinthians 1: 18-25

Third Sunday in Lent/ 19th March 2006

It's 1943. Antwerp, Belgium. Two young Jewish girls, raised among Catholics and Protestant children who called them "dirty Jewess[es]," were summoned to Nazi Germany "to go to work" for the Germans. Suspicious, their mother was able at least to delay the departure of the younger girl. When the family discovered the elder sister had been shipped directly to Auschwitz and gassed, the family split up and fled. Taken in as a "Protestant orphan" by kind Sisters at a convent and boarding school, the young girl climbed into bed her first night in hiding and noticed a crucifix on the wall. Angrily, she yelled at the crucified Jesus, "It's all your fault that I'm in this trouble!" She pulled the crucifix off the wall and hid it under her bed.¹

There are a lot of people who still want to remove the cross and hide it, put it away altogether. Dr. Michael Gorman, dean of the Ecumenical Institute at St. Mary's (who has spoken here on several occasions), recounts this story of the young girl, who survived the German crucifixion of Europe, in his book *Cruciformity*. She told him the story first-hand; she's a friend. The story is a reminder that we need to be conscious of how just the sight of the cross – whether Protestant or Catholic renderings – remains an offense to many Jews, to many non-Jews – and indeed to some Christians.

"A school in England this year declared that hot cross buns can be offensive to religious minorities and told its supplier to make buns without the cross. The practice of making hot cross buns goes back to 1361, when a monk supposedly made small spiced cakes with a cross on top, to serve to poor people visiting St. Albans monastery on Good Friday."²

In the view of some, the cross is an embarrassment, a gross testimony to senseless violence, a primitive hold-over from earlier religious rites where blood was required in order to appease the gods. Some theological conservatives see the cross as sanctifying violence or lifting up the actual act of shedding blood – of sacrifice – as the only way to redemption. Some theological liberals prefer to turn away from the direction of the cross altogether, by focusing upon Jesus' teachings, trying to live up to

¹ Cited almost verbatim in Michael Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul's Narrative Spirituality of the Cross* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 374.

² A United Press International release, quoted in *The Christian Century*, March 7, 2006.

his high moral standards, talking more about the love of God and steering away from any talk of sacrifice. There's good justification for this given the horrific abuses this symbol has suffered across the ages, when you consider all the suffering this symbol has caused, when you think of the destruction inflicted upon the world, upon people wielding the image of the cross. It's no wonder people find the cross offensive and want to dismiss it or rethink Christianity without it. It's oppressive. It's too depressing. In an age like ours that worships the gods of comfort and security, authentic Christianity will never be popular. The cross is the antithesis of comfort and security. There is no Christianity without a cross. We have to be honest; this is not a message that's going to attract crowds of people. "Come, join our church and *die!*" is not how many prefer to grow a church. Although Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) once said, "When Christ calls a man, he bids him to come and die."³

What, then, is this *message* of the cross? Paul's never ambiguous about it. For him, the cross is a kind of sermon; it's proclaiming a message, a *word* about the nature and purposes of God. The cross is communicating to us something about who God is and how God chooses to act in the world. "The cross," as Mike Gorman writes, "is the interpretive ... lens through which God is seen; it is the means of grace by which God is known."⁴ The cross brings previously blurry images of God into clear focus – allowing us to see what humankind could never have seen on its own. There's a cross in the heart of God and there always has been one.⁵

The God Paul discovered in Jesus on the cross is the same God Israel discovered long ago, but now focused and intensified, concentrated in the cross of the Christ. To his utter surprise and amazement, Paul discovers God is a God who cares little for social norms and convention, cares little for socially sanctioned moralities and values. God cannot be limited by "signs" or proofs, of what is rational or reasonable. God will not be determined by human assumptions, philosophies, or the prevailing wisdom of any age. Indeed, from Genesis through Revelation – if you stay very close to the text – we will see that the Bible is the story of the God of Abraham and Sarah, the God of Isaac, and Jacob, the God of the prophets, the God of Paul, the God who has come in the flesh in Jesus Christ, whose very means of entering the world, indeed his entire life, is a testimony that God is free to do whatever God wills, indeed "God violates the world's

³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Collier Books, 1963[1937]), 99.

⁴ Gorman, .

⁵ "...there is a cross in God before the wood is seen upon Calvary...a cross unseen, standing on its own undiscovered hill, far back in the ages, out of which were sounding always, jut the same deep voice of suffering love and patience that was heard by mortal ears from the sacred hill of Calvary." American Congregationalist theologian, Horace Bushnell (1802-1876), *The Vicarious Sacrifice* (1866).

notion of wisdom and strength.”⁶ It all comes to a head with the cross, this stumbling block – ludicrous, barbaric, morally offensive, this instrument of corporal punishment – that God settles upon “as the way to make all things new.”⁷ This is counter-intuitive, seemingly absurd and foolish. It is the foolishness that God chooses which forever remains wiser than human wisdom. It is the way of weakness, not strength, that when embraced we discover is the only way to bring redemption to the world. Redemption does not come through human strength, but through the weakness of God – if that’s not counter-cultural, I don’t know what is. It confounded people of the First Century, just as it continues to confound us in the Twenty-first.

We still haven’t figured out how to hear such a sermon. Now, it’s not that we don’t want to, for in the deepest recesses of the human heart there is that hunger for redemption. Isn’t there? Deep within our hearts we long for redemption. Don’t we? Don’t you? Don’t we wish to be delivered and free from all that binds us, to be made whole? It’s just so difficult getting to such depths and doing what is required to satisfy our hungers. We don’t want to go there. But God will go there, for us, all the way to hell and back. The way of the cross is, excuse the pun, thorny; it’s an assault to all our sensibilities. It turns everything around.

The English preacher and theologian, P. T. Forsyth (1848-1921) once said that we must be clear when we talk about the love of God. While 1 John states that “God is love (1 John 4:8),” the reverse is also true, maybe more true: *Love is God*.⁸ Love is what God does. Love is what God does in Jesus Christ. Love is what God does in Jesus Christ by giving himself and suffering upon a cross. Love inevitably entails sacrifice. When we love with God’s love our lives in Jesus Christ take on the shape and form of the cross. In an age where life is devoted to personal success, pleasure, comfort, freedom, freedom from suffering, or power at the expense of others, to follow Jesus puts us at odds with the values of the world, makes us look odd and foolish.⁹ But when we set our personal agendas aside and take up God’s agenda, when we love, by grace, the way God loves, then our lives become, as Gorman put it, “cruciform.”¹⁰ Self-giving for the sake of the beloved. Suffering for the sake of the other.

⁶ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1982), 204ff.

⁷ Brueggemann, 209.

⁸ This is a theme that runs throughout his writings. See especially P. T. Forsyth, *The Soul of Prayer*, Foreword by Eugene Peter (Vancouver, BC: Regent College Publishing, 2002 [1916]), 84.

⁹ Cf. Luke Timothy Johnson, *Living Jesus: Learning the Heart of the Gospel* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1999), 200.

¹⁰ I am indebted to Gorman’s theological reflection on the cruciform shape of the Christian life and community, pp. 368-401.

We cannot hide from the cross or put it aside. To eliminate the cross from the center of our lives would be a kind of anti-gospel, or anti-Christ, it would be against the very thing that God establishes as the means of hope. The question for us is: How do we retain the cross as a symbol of hope without forgetting that the way to that hope is through the giving of ourselves, through suffering love, through sacrifice – a giving up in order to take up? The cross cannot be ignored because we are post-Easter, with Good Friday behind us. The way of the cross is the way of the Christian. This means “love” or “sacrifice” are false choices. God doesn’t sacrifice the Son as some form of compensation for human sin, as if paying a debt, and then, and only then, are we loved. *Because* God loves God sacrifices and because this love is within us, so do we. Christians love sacrificially. This doesn’t come naturally or through an effort of the will. But by the power of God’s grace within us, we do it.

The way of the cross risks offering a place of safety in a world that doesn’t see Jews as worthy of being saved.

It’s when you sit day after day with the person you’ve been married to for fifty years, but he can’t remember your name.

It means never giving up on anyone, believing no one you meet is beyond redemption.

It’s the way of forgiveness, and the sacrifice that comes with loving one’s enemy and praying for them – because we want the alienation to end, because we want the suffering to end.

When the Christian loves he enters into the suffering of his neighbor; when the Christian loves she shares the pain of her neighbor. We stand in solidarity with all who suffer, because God is to be found in the places where people are writhing in pain. We are not afraid – or maybe less afraid – to stand in or hang out in those places because that’s where God’s takes a stand in the world, hanging out in the places of alienation and suffering, every place in this world where God’s people continue to be crucified. This is the life we promised to live when at some point in our lives we said, “Jesus is Lord.” It’s what comes with being baptized.

When the shape of the church’s life becomes cruciform, then we are truly being the church. We are standing with each other as a baptized-cruciform-community, caring for each other, loving each other, suffering with each other, building each other up. That’s what you’re doing. We had two funerals this week. Over and over again I heard appreciation for the way the families were cared for by members of the congregation, of the love, of the many hours of support, sitting at beside in the hospital. Actually, I’ve heard this a lot the last month. People are overwhelmed by the outpouring of love in this congregation, rejoicing with those who rejoice, suffering with those suffer, granting support in times of need, witnessing so much grace. Finding here, as one person put it, what they didn’t find in any previous church. That’s what the church is supposed to be.

It's all by God's grace. This is what the shape of our lives look when the cross stands at its center.

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