

Mark 8:27 - 9:1 1 Corinthians 1:18 - 2:5 February 16, 2020
Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

A CROSS-SHAPED CHURCH

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

See if you can identify these companies without even seeing their logos. They are such well known companies and logos, even a verbal description is probably enough information.

- Golden Arches (McDonald's)



- An alligator on a polo shirt (Lacoste)



- Five interlocking rings: blue, yellow, black, green, and red (Olympics)



- the swoosh (Nike)



- The silhouette of an apple with a bite taken out (Apple)



- Four small squares (blue, red, green, yellow) making one large square (Microsoft)



According to an article about “30 of the Most Recognizable Brand Logos of All Time,” “your logo is the symbol attached to your brand that’s meant to help identify it. Usually composed of images and text, it’s unique to your company. And even though it’s a visual representation of your company, it’s meant for a lot more than to just be pretty. A logo communicates to the world what it is you offer, what your values are, and what sets you apart from other businesses in your industry.”¹

Throughout the centuries, there have been many symbols or, if you will, logos used to describe the church and/or the Christian faith: a boat; an ark; the fish; a dove; and an anchor. But the most famous, most enduring, and perhaps most meaningful logo of the Christian faith is the cross.

To use the words of the article about the purpose of company/business logos, the cross “communicates to the world what it is we offer, what our values are, and what sets us apart from other groups.”

We wear crosses around our necks, put bumper stickers on our cars, carry crosses in our pockets, cross-stitch pretty pictures of crosses, adorn crosses with beautiful spring flowers, gild crosses with gold and put them in our sanctuaries. In many ways, we have tamed and domesticated the cross so much we miss the power and shock of the apostle Paul’s words to the Christians at Corinth: “but we proclaim Christ crucified . . . For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified.” (1 Corinthians 1:23; 2:2)

And, if we tame and domesticate the cross of Jesus Christ, we dilute the power of God and the meaning of Jesus’ call to discipleship when he says, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” (Matthew 16:24) Josephus, the 1st century A.D. Jewish historian, called crucifixion “that most wretched of deaths.” (*Jewish War*: 7.203) While the Persians supposedly invented crucifixion, the Romans perfected it to send a publicly painful, degrading, and humiliating message: don’t mess with the power of Rome! In his book, *Jewish War*, Josephus described the common practice of this most cruel punishment, “So the soldiers, out of the wrath and hatred they bore the Jews, nailed those they caught, one after one way, and another after another, to the crosses, by way of jest, when their multitude was so great, that room was wanting for the crosses, and crosses wanting for the bodies.” (*Jewish War*, 5:446-451)

And the cross is our logo. It communicates to the world what it is we offer, what our values are, and what sets us apart from other groups. At least, it should . . .

There is a story about a little boy who wasn’t any good at math. He was a smart boy and did well in all of his other subjects. However, no matter how hard he worked, he couldn’t succeed at math. His parents hired tutors, to no avail. They transferred him to a special STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) school, but his grades were still poor. Finally, out of desperation, they enrolled him in a private Catholic school, figuring the discipline and focus might help their son. They didn’t know what else to do.

The first afternoon, the boy slammed the front door, grabbed some cookies off the kitchen counter, ran upstairs, and stayed in his room until supertime. He wolfed down his food and ran back up to his room, where

his door stayed closed until bedtime. He repeated this every day without fail, until report cards came out. When he showed his mom and dad his report card, they were delighted and amazed to see he had an A+ in math. They asked him, “Is that what you’ve been doing every day? Studying math up in your room? What in the world made the difference?” The little boy answered, “Well, on my first day, when I walked into the classroom, I saw something hanging on the wall at the front of the room. When I looked closer, I realized it was a man nailed to a plus sign, and I thought, ‘Boy, they sure take math seriously around here!’”

Inevitably the question gets asked: Why do Catholic churches have crucifixes (crosses with Jesus hanging on them) and Protestant churches have empty crosses? The usual answer is that the Catholic crucifix represents the focal point of their faith and theology – Jesus suffered and died on the cross to save us from our sins – while the Protestant empty cross represents the fact that Jesus has been raised from the dead. There’s much truth in that typical explanation, but we need to be careful – otherwise we’ll end up thinking that, somehow, Catholic Christians don’t think the resurrection is important and that Protestant Christians don’t think the crucifixion is important. Well, neither of those characterizations is accurate. Of course, Catholic Christians think the resurrection is important and, of course, Protestant Christians think the crucifixion is important.

Why do you suppose, then, that the apostle Paul wrote to the believers at Corinth, “For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified” rather than “For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him raised from the dead”? Especially since, as Paul so plainly puts it, “The message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing . . . a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles.” (1 Corinthians 1:18, 23)

The answer to that question has everything to do with why Paul was writing to the Corinthians in the first place. He had heard about the divisions in his beloved church which he had founded. Members of the church were setting themselves over against one another – “I belong to Paul, I belong to Apollos, I belong to Cephas.” Furthermore, they apparently were following the accepted social codes of their day and making distinctions among themselves based on power and position and wealth and connections and claimed wisdom. They may as well have used the Roman symbol of the eagle as their logo, for the eagle represented strength, courage, power, and domination, which is how the Roman Empire ruled.

But, in so many words, Paul says, “Our logo is not the eagle, but the cross.” In the world’s eyes, then and now, that logo/symbol sends the wrong message. A man nailed to a cross symbolizes weakness and defeat and ridicule. The world’s values in the 1st century A.D. weren’t any different from today’s: might makes right and the Golden Rule turned upside down – “The ones who have the gold, make the rules.”

Paul, though, tells the Corinthians that the cross, foolish in the world’s eyes, is actually the power of God for salvation. God chose what is foolish – a man hanging on a cross – to shame the wisdom and values of the world. So, Paul says, “when I came to you, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified.” (1 Corinthians 2:1-2)

Remember how the risen Lord Jesus appeared to his disciples and “showed them his hands and his side”? Why do you suppose he did that? The assumption is, the risen Lord was showing his crucifixion wounds to his followers. The cross might have been empty after Easter, but its effects and its power for salvation continue to this day.

Another symbol of the Christian faith that is not as easy to see or notice as a cross on a chain or a bumper sticker on a car is what is called the “cruciform church.” “Cruciform” means “cross-shaped.” The earliest churches were in people’s homes. As believers began to erect church buildings, they used the Roman basilica as their model. A basilica was a long and large rectangular structure where public and legal matters were conducted. At one end of the hall was a large space (called the “apse”) where the judge or emperor would sit. Christians adapted the basilica model, using the apse for the altar and the mass. Then Christians added two perpendicular wings just below the apse to provide more space. Can you picture it in your mind? If you could float above one of those early churches, you could look down and see the shape of the cross. In fact, if you climbed up into the attic of our sanctuary, you would see our “cross-shaped church.”

When we hear Paul’s words, “We preach Christ crucified,” we can think of our “cross-shaped church” in more than architectural terms. If the cross is our logo, what message will we communicate to the world? How does our church demonstrate the values of the one who suffered and died on the cross? How is our “cross-shaped church” different from other groups in the world? And, will we be embarrassed by the apparent foolishness of being a “cross-shaped church” or will we trust in the message about

the cross, that it is the power of God for salvation, and then live and act as if we really believe that?

Let me share these words that I came across as I was reading for this sermon. They are good food for thought for us in the Wallace Presbyterian Church as we consider how we will follow the One who says, “Take up your cross and follow me.”

“Here in the 21st century we need more cruciform churches. Not lavish cathedrals but living communities of disciples being shaped by the cross into the shape of the cross for the glory of God and the good of our neighbors, the nations, and the next generation. Our best hope is to cooperate with The Architect, who promised he would build his church (Matthew 16:18) as we join him to form our families, small groups, and churches into ‘cruciform communities.’ Such communities visibly show and verbally share the message of the cross because they are made up of people who have been vibrantly shaped by that message.”

Thursday morning I came into this sanctuary to spend some quiet time in devotional reading and prayer. Instead of talking *to* God with some kind of laundry list of requests, I tried to listen *to* God and hear what God had to say about the cross of Jesus and our being a cross-shaped church.

I brought with me a devotional book called *Meditations on the Cross*, a collection of writings from Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ were central to Bonhoeffer’s theological work. In the book’s foreword, the editor of this collection of writings comments that Bonhoeffer tried “to answer the question regarding just what Christian life really is.” The writings included in the devotional book, he says, “strengthen (*sic*) our assurance and hope that, through the cross and resurrection, Christ addresses us at the very center of our lives and in fact does not abandon us in our discipleship.”

I read the first selection, “Encountering the Extraordinary,” and found this powerful sentence. It sums up what we are called to be and to do as the Wallace Presbyterian Church if we truly want to be a “cross-shaped church”: “The worshipping community of Jesus’ followers, the congregation of a better righteousness, is the visible congregation that has stepped out of the order of this world and has abandoned everything for the sake of gaining the cross of Christ.”³

Let us pray: Eternal God, holy and faithful, what can we give in return for our life? Teach us to take up the cross of Christ with grateful hearts and humble spirits, offering all for the sake of

the gospel, so that we may receive life in fullness; through Christ, our Lord and Savior, who calls us, “Follow me.” Amen.

NOTES

¹Micah Lally, “30 of the Most Recognizable Brand Logos of All Time,” September 26, 2019 at www.bluleadz.com/blog/30-of-the-most-recognizable-brand-logos-of-all-time.

²Jimmy Davis, “Cruciform: Living the Cross-Shaped Life,” March 15, 2012 at www.voice.dts.edu/article/cruciform-living-the-cross-shaped-life-jimmy-davis/

³Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Meditations on the Cross*, Manfred Weber, ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), vii, 1.