

Isaiah 28:13-14, Jeremiah 9:23-24

1 Corinthians 1:18 - 2:5

March 1, 2015, Second Sunday in Lent

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

The Crosses of Lent **The Folly of What We Preach**

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.

Wednesday morning I walked into Cheryl's office and saw Nancy standing at the bottom of the staircase. She had something of a stricken look on her face. When I asked her what was wrong, she said, "I can't find my cross." She pointed to a broken golden chain lying on the step and said, "I went back outside to try to brush some of the ice off of the steps and when I came back in, my cross was missing. My mama gave me that cross."

Together and separately Nancy and I looked for that cross. We retraced her steps from the parking lot into the Church Office Building. We sifted through the ice that she had swept off the steps. She went back home and looked everywhere. While she was gone I walked all around the parking lot and looked for that cross. Neither one of us found the cross.

On our way to lunch, Nancy said, "If I don't find that cross, I'm going to be so upset. Mama gave that cross to me." After lunch, we went by the house to walk the dogs. I went in the house, put the leashes on Heidi and Holden, and went to the back door. Nancy was standing there with a big grin on her face. She was holding the little gold cross. She had found it lying on the snow and ice at the edge of the brick patio. That night she said, "I'm so glad I found that cross!"

"For I decided to know nothing among you," wrote the apostle Paul to the Christians at Corinth, "except Jesus Christ, and him crucified." (1 Cor. 2:2)

For many years we have decorated a cross with flowers on Easter Sunday morning. The cross is very simply made — two pieces of wood covered with chicken wire. Almost every year, during Holy Week, someone will ask, "Where is the cross?" I used to be able to say, "It's back there behind the storage shed at the edge of the parking lot, leaning against the wall." Now that the storage shed is gone, I have to say that I'm not really sure where the cross is. I would have to go looking for it.

"For I decided to know nothing among you," wrote the apostle Paul to the Christians at Corinth, "except Jesus Christ, and him crucified." (1 Cor. 2:2)

In the midst of all of the stories about the winter storms that hit the Southern states this week, there was a strange story about the state of Georgia delaying the execution of a female death row inmate. She was scheduled for execution at 7:00 p.m. on Wednesday. However, because of the forecast for ice and snow and scheduling issues, her execution has been rescheduled for tomorrow.

“But we proclaim Christ crucified,” wrote the apostle Paul to the Christians at Rome, “a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.” (1 Cor. 1:23-24)

What do looking for a lost gold cross or a chicken wire covered wooden cross and a delayed execution have in common? Last Sunday, I talked about how our Confirmation group looked for all of the crosses in the sanctuary. This week, N.H. Carter stopped by and said, “Come with me, I want to show you something.” We walked down the hall to the Margaret Glasgow Sunday School Classroom. N.H. showed me a wooden cross on the front of the lectern that Jim Sills uses when he teaches the class. “I found that cross at an auction and Pat McGowen figured out a way to put it on that lectern,” N.H. said.

The cross is prominently displayed in our sanctuary. We wear crosses around our necks. We carry little crosses in our pockets. We cover crosses with beautiful flowers on Easter Sunday. All of that is fine and good, but it’s also true that the cross has lost its shock value and foolishness for many of us who are so comfortable seeing a cross in church, wearing a cross around our necks, or putting a cross bumper sticker on our car.

What if you walked into this sanctuary next Sunday and, instead of seeing the beautiful gold cross hanging on the wall in the chancel area, you saw a gallows with a noose swinging from the crossbar? A guillotine? An old electric chair with the leather straps and metal helmet? A hospital gurney and an IV stand?

For people in first century A.D. Palestine and Asia Minor, the cross was not a beloved sign of hope and redemption. The cross was, very simply, a horrendous reminder of what happened to people Rome wanted to get rid of. The Romans didn’t invent crucifixion, but they perfected the punishment, and used it to intimidate and terrorize any would-be opponents of Rome. And yet we come to worship and sing, “When I survey the wondrous cross on which the Prince of glory died, my richest gain I count but loss, and pour contempt on all my pride.” We belt out, “O Lord, once lifted on the glorious tree, your death has brought us life eternally. Lift high the cross, the love of Christ proclaim till all the world adore his sacred name.” Then there is the old favorite, “On a hill far away stood an old rugged cross, The emblem of suffering and shame; And I love that old cross where the Dearest and Best for a world of lost sinners was slain. So I’ll cherish the old rugged cross, Till my trophies at last I lay down; I will cling to the old rugged cross, And exchange it someday for a crown.”

That’s not how first century Palestinian Jews would have thought about the cross. The apostle Paul describes the cross as “a stumbling block to Jews.” They would have looked at the Roman crosses and remembered these words from the Law: “When someone is convicted of a crime punishable by death and is executed, and you hang him on a tree, his corpse must not remain all night upon the tree; you shall bury him that same day, for anyone hung on a tree is under God’s curse. You must not defile the land that the Lord your God is giving you for possession.” (Deut. 21:22-23)

Paul calls the cross “foolishness to Gentiles.” Even some of the Romans, apparently, found the cross to be troublesome and disgusting. The great Roman orator, Cicero, called crucifixion “a most cruel and disgusting punishment.” He said, “The very mention of the cross should be far removed not only from a Roman citizen’s body, but from his mind, his eyes, his ears.”

It would have been foolish enough if Paul had gone out preaching to the Jews and the Gentiles and said, “but we proclaim Jesus crucified . . . For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus, and him crucified.” Both Jews and Gentiles might have had some sympathy for the untimely death of a good teacher and a good man. Instead, Paul said, “God decided, through the foolishness of our preaching, to save those who believe . . . we proclaim *Christ* crucified . . . For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus *Christ*, and him crucified.” Christ — Messiah — the one God sent to save us from our sins — the one God sent to redeem the whole world — the one God sent to make things right again between God and his people. No wonder Paul wrote, “For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.” (1 Cor. 1:18)

Martin Luther said, “A theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theologian of the cross calls the thing what it actually is.”¹ Paul is a “theologian of the cross,” and he calls the thing what it actually is —

foolishness. At least, in the world’s eyes, the cross is foolishness. “Look, there is your Savior, your Messiah, nailed to a cross, bloodied, whipped, thirsty, deserted, dying.”

The Southern writer, Flannery O’Connor, wrote, “You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you odd.”² Isn’t that a great commentary on what Paul says about the cross of Jesus Christ? “God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God.” (1 Cor. 1:27-29)

A woman once said to me, “The crucifixion probably wasn’t as bad for Jesus as it was for other people. After all, he knew he was going to be raised from the dead.” Her comment probably says more about her own discomfort and horror at the cross than about Jesus’ comfort on the cross. “In the cross of Christ I glory”? Maybe, but that’s not really the way the world works. A man hanging on a cross, pierced and bleeding and dying, is hardly the picture of strength and “wisdom and righteousness and sanctification and redemption.” As Jesus hung on the cross, some of the religious leaders mocked him and said, “He saved others; he cannot save himself. Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down from the cross now, so that we may see and believe.”

The folly of what we preach — Jesus Christ, and him crucified — might lead us to echo those religious leaders: “Jesus, come down from the cross now, so that we may see and believe.” And that would have more to do with our own discomfort with what the cross of Jesus Christ demands of us and what the cross of Jesus Christ exposes in our lives. In his book, *Markings*, Dag Hammarskjöld, the second General Secretary of the United Nations who tragically died in a plane crash in Zambia when he was 56,

wrote that “Jesus had assented to a possibility in his being, of which he had had his first inkling when he returned from the desert. If God required anything of him, he would not fail. Only recently, he thought, had he begun to see more clearly, and to realize that the road of possibility might lead to the Cross. He knew, though, that he had to follow it, still uncertain as to whether he was indeed ‘the one who shall bring it to pass,’ but certain that the answer could only be learned by following the road to the end. The end *might* be a death without significance — as well as being the end of the road of possibility. . . . Would the Crucifixion have had any sublimity or meaning if Jesus had seen himself crowned with the halo of martyrdom? What we have later added was not there for him. And we must forget all about it if we are to hear his commands.”³

Obviously the apostle Paul preached about more than just the cross. He preached about the resurrection, the gifts of the Spirit, the meaning of baptism, and many other theological and spiritual topics. But, the heart of Paul’s preaching is Jesus Christ, and him crucified. That was a scandal, a stumbling block, foolishness in Paul’s day. I suppose it is no less so today. Our world values strength and reason and logic and obvious displays of power and might. We proclaim Christ crucified. But do we live Christ crucified?

Johann Heinrich Arnold was a German pastor and spiritual guide in the 20th century. In a devotion called “The Center,” Arnold wrote, “Every believer knows that Christ went the way of the cross for our sakes. But it is not enough just to *know* this. Each of us must find the cross.”⁴

When we find the cross, as foolish as it may sound in this world we live in, let us say, “I’m so glad I found that cross!”

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, who is coming in glory. Amen.

NOTES

¹Carl R. Trueman, “Luther’s Theology of the Cross,” at www.opc.org/new_horizons/NH05/10b.html.

²Flannery O’Connor, *Collected Works: Wise Blood/A Good Man is Hard to Find/The Violent Bear It Away/Everything that Rises Must Converge/Essays and Letters*, at www.goodreads.com/quotes/48482-you-shall-know-the-truth-and-the-truth-shall-make.

³Dag Hammarskjöld, “For the Sacrificed,” *Markings* (Random House: 1964).

⁴J. Heinrich Arnold, “The Center,” in *Bread and Wine: Readings for Lent and Easter* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2010), p. 61.