

Colossians 1:15-20; Hebrews 12:1-2; Luke 9:18-27

February 22, 2015

First Sunday of Lent

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

The Crosses of Lent
A CRUCIFORM 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.

How many crosses are there in the sanctuary?

That's what I asked the confirmation group Sunday afternoon as we spent most of our time in here talking about how and why we worship God. The young people walked around and found the Bible on the lectern, the pulpit, the communion table, the baptismal font, and the organ and piano. We talked about **why** those things are **where** they are in the sanctuary. Then I asked them, "How many crosses are there in the sanctuary?" Before they got up and started looking, though, I told them, "By the way, I don't know the answer to my question! See how many you can find."

Right away some of them pointed to the big cross that hangs above the choir (which was donated in 1967 in memory of Dr. John D. Robinson). They found crosses on the cloths or paraments that hang on the pulpit and lectern. Last Sunday afternoon, the cloths were white for Transfiguration Sunday; today they are purple for the season of Lent. Cameron said, "There's a cross on the Christian flag and there's a cross on another flag in the vestibule." Colby pointed out the Presbyterian Church (USA) symbol on his confirmation notebook he had brought into the sanctuary. That symbol is printed in the upper left hand corner on the front page of today's bulletin. Notice how our church symbol is made up of many different symbols, all of which combine to form a central cross. Colby then held up a hymnbook and said, "There's a cross on each of the hymnbooks in here." (That's one reason I didn't know the answer to the question I asked them!)

Then Anna Grace said, "The church is shaped like a cross." While some of the others were asking "What do you mean?" I said, "I was hoping nobody would see that so I could tell y'all about it. Anna Grace, how did you know that?" She said, "You talked about it once in LOGOS." Anna Grace is right — this sanctuary is shaped something like a cross, with the long aisle leading up to the cross bar before the front pews and the chancel area as the top of the cross. If you could float above the pews, you'd have an easier time seeing the cross-shaped pattern.

The "cruciform" or "cross-shaped" architecture of churches dates back many centuries. The symbols in and the architecture of this church remind us of the central place of the cross of Jesus Christ in our faith, in our Christian lives, and in the mission of this congregation. But, to be truly a cruciform church, we must pay attention to

more than just pulpit cloths, hymnbooks, Christian flags, and beautiful crosses we hang on the wall.

What does it mean to be a cruciform church? Frederick Dale Bruner writes, “‘Point to Christ!’ — that is the rock of the church. ‘Follow Christ!’ — that is the cement of the church, the substance that takes the rock and joins it to Christ the cornerstone to form the building of God. Rocks without cement are rock piles; cement without rocks is formless. Jesus Christ and the cross of Jesus Christ are the twin building blocks of the church. . . How does a church become a church? Jesus will build his church wherever his disciples faithfully speak of him as the divine and crucified Christ and wherever they faithfully follow him in self-denying obedience. . . The consequences will surely be that the church will redouble her devotion, first of all, to sacred doctrine, whose chief concern is the right witness to Jesus Christ in the church, and then also, as zealously and as soberly, she will devote herself to the ethical obedience of Jesus in the world.”¹

Jesus said to his disciples, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.”

“A cross to bear . . .” Bum knees? A difficult boss? An estranged relationship? A boring job? Poor health? Persistent financial troubles? These may all be hard things to bear in life, but they’re not what Jesus is talking about when he says, “Let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.” Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was no stranger to suffering for Christ and was hanged by the Nazis just days before the Allies liberated the prison camp where he was held, wrote in his book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, that “the cross is not adversity, nor the harshness of fate, but suffering coming solely from our commitment to Jesus Christ.” He also wrote, “When a disciple picks up his or her own cross, it is actually Christ himself who is thereby found.”

During this Lenten season, the sermons will be about “The Crosses of Lent.” You will find the sermon texts for the next six Sundays printed in today’s bulletin and in the February and March newsletters. The sermons will not be about the many different designs of the cross (although that is an interesting topic, in and of itself). Rather, the sermons will be based on Gospel lessons and the writings of the apostle Paul, who told the Christians at Corinth, “For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified.” (1 Corinthians 2:2)

Thursday afternoon I took a PostIt note in to Cheryl with a note about the Food Pantry. When I walked in her office, she looked at the PostIt note in my hand and said, “Oh no, not another sermon title!” I understood why she said that — I had already given her three different titles for today’s sermon. Here are the eight possibilities I worked with: Take Up Your Cross Daily; Christ on the Cross; The Crucified Lord; The Church Beneath the Cross; Discipleship and the Cross; The “Must” of Suffering; The Way of the Cross; and, finally, A Cruciform Church. One of these other titles may yet show up in the next six weeks.

For the most part, we Presbyterians don’t have a long history of Ash Wednesday observances and practices. On Wednesday of this week, instead of going somewhere

and having ashes wiped on my head in the form of a cross, I pulled a book off of the shelf and began to read Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Meditations on the Cross*. You may remember that Bonhoeffer was a German pastor who resisted the claims of Adolph Hitler in the 1930's. Pastor Bonhoeffer turned down an offer of safety in England or the United States and chose to remain with his people in the German Confessing Church. He was martyred at the age of 39 at the hands of the Nazis.

The blurb on the back of the book says, "The cross and resurrection, suffering, and overcoming death were central themes in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's theological work. Throughout his life, he focused on these themes, trying to disclose their relevance for human life and actions and to answer the question 'What does it mean to be a Christian?'"

Let me share a few of Bonhoeffer's thoughts on the cross of Jesus Christ and what it means for us as Christians and our church:

* "We want Jesus as the visibly resurrected one, as the splendid, transfigured Jesus. We want his visible power and glory, and we no longer want to return to the cross, to believing against all appearances, to suffering in faith." (p. 4)

* "The call to discipleship occurs here in connection with Jesus' announcement of suffering." (p. 11)

* "... from its very inception the church itself has taken offense at the suffering Christ. It neither wants such a Lord nor does it, as the Church of Christ, want its Lord to force upon it the law of suffering." (p. 12)

* "Discipleship as commitment to the person of Jesus Christ places the disciple under the law of Christ, that is, under the cross." (p. 12)

* "Self-denial means knowing only Christ, and no longer oneself. It means seeing only Christ, who goes ahead of us, and no longer the path that is too difficult for us. Again, self-denial is saying only: He goes ahead of us; hold fast to him." (p. 13)

* "... those who lose their life in discipleship, in bearing the cross, will find it again in discipleship itself, in the community of the cross with Christ. The opposite of discipleship is to be ashamed of Christ, of the cross, and to take offense at the cross." (p. 16)

* "By following under the cross the congregation of Jesus Christ represents the world before God." (p. 17)²

Many of those thoughts are taken from Bonhoeffer's book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, in which you will find one of his most famous quotations: "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die."

At lunch on Thursday, Nancy asked me, "What did you do this morning?" I answered, "I worked on my sermon, more or less." Then I paused and said, "Well, actually I spent a lot of time trying to get up the nerve to write my sermon." In light of what Jesus told his disciples about what it means and what is required to follow him, in light of what Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote about the cross of Jesus Christ and how he lived and died beneath the cross of Jesus, I was actually nervous about writing this sermon. Do I

take up my cross daily and follow Jesus? Am I willing to lose my life for Jesus' sake? Am I ashamed of Jesus and his words when push comes to shove?

And what about our church? Do we spend too much of our time trying to “save our life” rather than losing our life as a community for Jesus' sake? How do we take up our cross daily as a church — actively serving Jesus Christ in Wallace and beyond, even if it means suffering and shame? Reformed and Presbyterian Christians have historically referred to the preaching of God's Word and the right administration of the sacraments as marks of the true church. The great reformer, Martin Luther, who surely would have agreed with those two marks, also counted suffering among the signs of the real church.

Lent is traditionally a season of spiritual introspection and taking stock of your relationship with God through Jesus Christ. If we're honest in our Lenten reflections, we have to admit that we usually want to save our lives rather than lose them, even for Jesus' sake. If we're honest, we have to admit we'd rather not and, many times, we don't take up our crosses daily and follow Jesus. If we're honest, we have to confess that the idea of serving a crucified Lord sometimes is either scary or ludicrous.

And yet . . . and yet, Jesus calls us and says, “Take up your cross and follow me.” It is precisely **because** Jesus went to his own cross for us that we can even, for a minute, think about taking up our own cross and following him. Have you ever considered the irony, that one of the cruelest forms of death has become the greatest symbol of faith? Frederick Buechner writes, “A six-pointed star, a crescent moon, a lotus — the symbols of other religions suggest beauty and light. The symbol of Christianity is an instrument of death. It suggests, at the very least, hope.”³

In some Christian traditions and churches, a crucifer walks ahead of the minister or priest and other worship leaders as they process into the sanctuary for worship. The crucifer holds the cross of Christ high in the air.

We don't have a crucifer in the Wallace Presbyterian Church. In a sense, however, we are **all** crucifers. As we will sing in our closing hymn, “All newborn servants of the Crucified bear on their brow the seal of Christ who died. Lift high the cross, the love of Christ proclaim till all the world adore his sacred name.”

Our crucified and risen Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is calling us to be a cruciform church, not just in our church architecture and the symbols in our sanctuary, but especially in the lives we live, by the witness we bear, and in the mission we take to our community and the world.

Let us pray: (from St. Benedict)

Almighty God, give us wisdom to perceive you, intellect to understand you, diligence to seek you, patience to wait for you, eyes to behold you, a heart to meditate upon you, and life to proclaim you, through the power of the Spirit of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

NOTES

¹Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew, Volume 2: The Churchbook, Matthew 13-28* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1990), pp. 587, 599.

²All quotations are taken from *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Meditations on the Cross*, Manfred Weber, ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press 1998).

³Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC* (HarperOne: 1993).