

January 26, 2020

I Corinthians 1:17-18; Matthew 4:17, 23-25

## “The Power of God”

Pilgrim Lutheran Church  
2155 N. Oakland Avenue  
Decatur Illinois 62526

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

You may or may not have known it, but when we were celebrating Easter last year, in China the government was busy tearing down crosses from unregistered Protestant and Catholic churches, as the members begged them not to do it. Even legal churches were not safe. Members of East Street watched helplessly as officials destroyed their church on Good Friday, ripping up floors and removing valuables. One Christian was quoted as saying, "These officials are just like bandits. They confiscated and burned everything." A year before that, also in China, crosses were being removed in well over a hundred churches while Christians were encouraged to replace those crosses with the flag and image of the Chinese President.

It's quite the irony that in America, not that long ago, many churches were gladly removing crosses from church buildings and sanctuaries because they might offend visitors and hinder growth. This was at a time when many people were wearing crosses as a standard form of costume jewelry and a routine piece to wear if you happened to like punk rock. Today, there is a host of anti-Christian groups working overtime to remove crosses and Bibles from every school, state institution, and any place that is considered to be public property. At one point in the United Kingdom (2012), the government was opposed to allowing Christians to wear crosses at work. Of course, during the same time in the United Kingdom, other religions had been granted special status for garments or symbols such as the Sikh turban and Kara bracelet, or the Muslim Hijab.

So what did the people in the time of Christ most likely think about if they would have happened to see an actual crucifixion? One author writes: "Curiosity seekers saw nothing unique at Calvary. For them the cross of Jesus was nothing new. They had seen it all before. There was a sordid routine to every execution under Roman rule: first the stripping, then the flogging, finally the nailing. In the end, every crucifixion looked much the same. Jagged, bleeding flesh was nailed up to die a horrible death." Kind of strange in our day and culture to think of crucifixion as an everyday scene to discourage people from breaking the laws.

One of the earliest surviving depictions of the crucifixion of Christ is a piece of Roman graffiti scratched in plaster on the wall of a room near the Palatine Hill in Rome (the piece is now in a museum). The image depicts a human-like figure affixed to a cross and possessing the head of a donkey. To the left of the image is a young man – apparently intended to represent a Christian. Beneath the cross is a caption written in crude Greek: "Alexamenos worshiping [his] God."

Amazing isn't it? A simple cross can stir up violence, indifference, identity in a fad, deep devotion, mockery, and even fear of breaking laws. Much of it depends upon when and where you live and what you know and don't know. For the Christian, a cross on a church building or in a sanctuary is neither commanded nor forbidden in the Bible, a matter of Christian freedom. Yet, when people demand that it must be removed, it can become a matter of one's confession of faith. And still, when others demand that it is a sin not to have one, strange as it may sound, it might be appropriate to remove the cross. Like all matters of Christian freedom, it can become a matter of Christian conscience in unique ways.

In our epistle lesson for this morning, the apostle Paul writes (1 Cor. 1:18): “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.” As you can see, at it’s core, it really isn’t about a crucifix proper, but about an underlying message that is offensive to those who do not believe, and the power of God to those who do. Either way, when the word of the cross is preached, a real meeting with God takes place that will remove the ability of the person to be indifferent. Harold L. Senkbeil in his book *Dying to Live* puts it in this way:

This is the true offense of the cross - that God died for the sins of the world ... Human wisdom will always consider this message foolishness and weakness. *But the foolishness of God is wiser than man’s wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man’s strength* (1 Cor. 1:25). And so this foolish, weak cross of Jesus is the heart and center of the Christian faith. All other reality flows from it. In this dying world we have no other hope beside the cross of Christ and its message - the death of God for the life of the world.

The word of the cross is not a matter of Christian freedom. It is the truth that can never be absent from any church that would dare call itself a church. It is a message that is first an aggressive attack on all humanity, for it accuses everyone of self-love and rebellion against God who is the true lover from which real love flows. The word of the cross cries out to those who are living it up to realize that all are living it up in a dying world that is on the brink of going away, and that death itself is merely a physical picture of a greater, forever death that is to come. It is a word that assaults the pride of humanity by saying, “you do not have the power to do anything to stop the inevitable. You are so helpless that only God’s one and only Son can help you. All your attempts to change the inevitable will end up futile.” It is a word that ruins the ongoing party of the down here, for it demands an end to the selfish desires of the heart.

In our Gospel lesson for this morning, the entire cross message of Jesus is summarized in those words that so many love to mock: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” And for those who by the grace of God are filled with sorrow over their sin and looking to the life, sufferings, and death of the Word made flesh - Jesus of Nazareth - the lesson talks about what repentance receives. It is recorded:

And he went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people. So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought him all the sick, those afflicted with various diseases and pains, those oppressed by demons, those having seizures, and paralytics, and he healed them. And great crowds followed him from Galilee and the Decapolis, and from Jerusalem and Judea, and from beyond the Jordan.

We are also those who follow Jesus. And they knew and believed, so we also know and believe that there is everlasting healing of all things in the forgiveness of sins. In the rule of the King of kings there is grace, and consequently, a kingdom of everlasting life and everything that is good. There is salvation. To all who believe this, it is understood as the power of God. The word of the cross, where the King of kings rules in love and forgiveness, establishes a kingdom that is not of this world and forever. To those who reject the truth, he establishes a kingdom that is counted as foolishness. So, the cross is reviled.

Real cross life for the Christian isn't wearing a cross and chain, nor is it gazing at a cross on the altar of a church. If one would experience the power of God in the word of the cross, it will require the emptying - the death - the denial of oneself - our own crucifixion with Jesus. The real cross is to endure the attack of God when he exposes our sin, our self-love, pride, and arrogance; then to grieve over one's attempt to injure and overthrow the true God who loves us and gives us all things. The real cross is to find ourselves so repulsive that we turn away from who we have become, and turn toward his grace and mercy which was poured out in what the Son of God became for us. It is in his grace and mercy at the cross, which appears to be nothing but weakness to the unbeliever, that we find astonishing power. It is there in the life that Jesus lived for us, in the sufferings that he suffered for us, in the death he died for us - it is there, that we find the death of sin and the rising of a new us in the forgiveness of sins and life to be lived in true love forever.

There is no road to life in this world apart from Jesus. He is the way and the truth. On the cross, he who is life brought life. In his death is the death of sin and death. Isaiah predicted it centuries before it happened (25:6-8). He wrote:

On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined. And he will swallow up on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken.

This is the word of the cross. It is the power of God. Without this message, you can make the cross into just about whatever you want it to be. But, if you understand the underlying word behind the symbol, it is either foolishness to those who are perishing or salvation and the power of God. The whole world can remove every cross on every church building and in every sanctuary as well as the ones on chains around the neck, but it cannot ever remove the cross in us. How silly and foolish they are to think they can remove the word of the cross, which is eternal. And do not forget that last promise in Isaiah. "The reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken."

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott