

“CHRIST CRUCIFIED”

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany (Series A)

January 29, 2017

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The epistle lesson for this Fourth Sunday after Epiphany picks up right where last week’s left off. Last week we dealt with the issue of doctrinal agreement and congregational unity. If you missed it, you can go online to our website or iTunes and get caught up.

This week Paul moves us into a discussion on what lies at the center of our doctrine and life together.

So the epistle lesson comes from *Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians*, chapter 1, verses 18 through 31. It is on page 807 of the pew Bible. In this scripture, Paul takes something very weak and foolish; he shoves it in our faces; and he calls it powerful and wise. Please stand as you are able for the epistle lesson. From 1 Corinthians 1, we begin reading at verse 18.

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. ¹⁹ For it is written,

“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,
and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.”

²⁰ Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ²¹ For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. ²² For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, ²³ but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, ²⁴ but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵ For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

²⁶ For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. ²⁷ But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; ²⁸ God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, ²⁹ so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. ³⁰ And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, ³¹ so that, as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.”

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Let’s do a little word association. When I say the word *victory*, what do you think of?

Maybe you think of tanks, rolling through the French countryside. You know, with American soldiers waving American flags, signaling that the Nazi regime had fallen. Maybe you picture a basketball player on a step-ladder, cutting down a net. Maybe it’s a big house surrounded by a

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perfectly manicured lawn, so that everyone can see, you won the game of life. Maybe for you it's the fastest car, the biggest boat, your perfectly behaved children, or any other kind of trophy.

These are pictures of victory—pictures of power and wisdom. And all these things are good. There's nothing wrong with them. These are human images of victory.

But what is God's picture of victory? What do his wisdom and power look like? What is the Christian image of victory?

You know what it is?

It's a dead guy, hanging beaten, bloodied, naked, and humiliated on a Roman cross. That is what wisdom and power look like. That is our image of victory. Weird, right?

And let me ask you another question. What is at the center of our faith?

Suppose someone who doesn't know anything about Christianity were to ask you, “What is Christianity all about?” what would you say?

We should all be longing for someone to ask us such a question. And the answer for us should be quick and effortless. We shouldn't even have to think about it. It should just roll off our tongues as if it had been sitting there waiting for the right moment to be released. And for each of us, if our answers to that question are not word-for-word identical, they should at least be very close.

Now, if you're struggling to come up with what you would say, or if your answer ends up being different from what Paul teaches in this passage, don't beat yourself up. It can be very common for Christians to stumble over this question. We shouldn't; but we do. As you observe various understandings of Christianity, you will hear many people—even clergy—stumble over this question or give absolutely wrong answers.

But we should all be ready to say something like this: *Christianity is about Jesus Christ, crucified and risen for the forgiveness of sins.* That is what Christianity is all about. And if someone asks you what the Bible is about, same answer: *Jesus Christ, crucified and risen for the forgiveness of sins.* If someone asks you what Lutheran doctrine is about, or what our congregation is about, same answer: *Jesus Christ, crucified and risen for the forgiveness of sins.*

So if you need an answer for when someone asks you about your faith, or for whenever you have an opportunity to let these words roll off your tongue, memorize these ten words. Write them down. Don't forget them. *Jesus Christ, crucified and risen for the forgiveness of sins.* And then be ready to explain what that means.

And if ten words is too much for you to memorize and remember, start with two. Because in two words, Paul condenses his message down to this: *Christ crucified.* He says, “Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, *but we preach Christ crucified*” (1:22-23). This is the heart and soul of our faith. This is everything to us.

If a pastor, or a Christian leader, or even an angel from heaven (Gal. 1:8) should teach you otherwise, leave that person and their teaching alone. Shut off the radio. Put down the book. Walk out of the service. If anyone ever presents Christianity to you as something other than what Jesus Christ did for you in his death and resurrection, that teaching is not Christian.

It is tempting to gloss over the offense of the cross. It is tempting to put forward something that seems more powerful or wise, because the cross looks weak and foolish. Surely we can do

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better than the cross. We must be able to come up with something more appealing to people, right? But this horrific event that looks so pathetic is the power of God. *Christ crucified*.

This is the heart and soul of our faith. The cross is the center of our theology. It's the event that gives meaning to everything else. If the event of the cross is not the center of our doctrine and life together, everything falls apart, and Christianity becomes worthless.

Now, when we say the cross is the main thing, we do not mean it is the only thing. There are other articles of doctrine, and there are moral absolutes we uphold. So the cross is not the only thing you hear from a Christian pulpit. But you should never hear anything without also hearing what the cross has to say about it. If a particular teaching is divorced from the cross of Christ, it cannot rightly be called “Christian.”

We can think of Christian doctrine and life using the imagery of a wagon wheel. The center of the wheel is the event of the cross. And we should also include the events surrounding the cross. We're talking about the beatings Jesus endured, the crucifixion itself, Jesus' death, his burial, and—of course—his resurrection from the dead. These events of his passion are the center—or the hub—of the wheel. And everything else in Christian doctrine and life is a spoke connected to the hub.

If any spoke of a wheel is not connected to the hub, it is worthless. And all of Christian doctrine and life is the same way. If we talk about Baptism, the Lord's Supper, prayer, the Holy Spirit, eternal life, or any other article of faith, without showing how it is a gift to us through Jesus' death and resurrection, then it cannot rightly be called “Christian.” And if we talk about good works without connecting our behavior to our identity as baptized and forgiven children of God, then the teaching cannot rightly be called “Christian.” The cross is the center of our doctrine and life together.

This is why, as Paul begins to settle the divisions in the congregation at Corinth, he begins with the foundation of the cross. The cross means everything to us. Christ crucified is the wisdom and power of God (1:24).

So we should think about this phrase, “Christ crucified.” What is so foolish and weak about it? Why is it “a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles” (1:23)?

Consider the term *Christ*. It's a Greek word that means “Anointed One.” It's the same as the Hebrew word *Messiah*. The Jews were waiting for God's Anointed One to come.

Now, in the Old Testament, who were the anointed ones? If you know some Old Testament history, who can you think of who was anointed? Primarily, it was the kings, right? First, Saul was anointed by the prophet Samuel to be king over Israel (1 Sam. 10). And when God rejected Saul, David was anointed to be the new king (1 Sam. 16). And after David, his son Solomon was anointed (1 Kings 1:39).

The kings were the anointed ones. And the Jews expected the Christ—the final and ultimate Anointed One—to be a king. And they were right. Jesus Christ *is* a king. But he wasn't exactly the kind of king they expected. Remember where we finally see Jesus publicly identified as “The King of the Jews.” It's at his crucifixion, when Pilate orders for a sign to be placed above Jesus' head that reads, “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews” (John 19:19).

If you're wondering what the King of the Jews looks like, consider what was hanging beneath that sign.

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So imagine you are a Jew in ancient Israel. And you’re waiting for the Messiah to come. You are waiting for the promised king to come. Most of the Jews expected the Messiah to overthrow the oppressive Roman occupation of the Promised Land. This, they thought, was their big problem. Then Jesus comes along and proclaims himself to be the Messiah. And he does some pretty spectacular miracles to prove it. So far, so good. Some of the people are getting excited.

But then the cross happens. He gets arrested, beaten, and humiliated by the Roman government, and then they kill him. Instead of overthrowing the Roman occupation of Israel, Rome executes this so-called king.

So you see how the cross would be a stumbling block to Jews. Suppose you were one of them, and you were on the fence about whether or not Jesus was really the Messiah. When he gets strung up and killed by the government you thought he was supposed to overthrow, you would conclude that, apparently, he wasn’t the Messiah. Or if you were a believer, your hopes would be dashed to pieces. The cross is a stumbling block to Jews, and we can understand why.

And then to the rest of the world, it just seems foolish. The cross is the ultimate picture of shame, weakness, and defeat. To find our victory in this seems utterly foolish. Why would we place our hopes in a guy who either can’t or won’t save himself? What makes us think he can or will save us?

Picture a man wearing nothing but a crown of thorns pressed onto his head, with nails in his outstretched hands and in his feet to hold him to this rough wooden cross, with lacerations in his back so deep you can see his ribs, with blood flowing from these various wounds and covering his dying flesh, and crying out in agony—even complaining to God, **“Why have you forsaken me?”** (Matt. 27:46) Picture that.

This is the Christian picture of salvation. This is what we call deliverance. Now tell me that doesn’t sound foolish. We sound like fools when we sing “In the Cross of Christ I Glory.” That’s shorthand for saying, “I glory in a dead Jew hanging naked, beaten, bloodied, and humiliated on a Roman instrument of execution.” That’s ridiculous! There is nothing wise or powerful about that picture.

If you want something the rest of the world will think is wise and powerful—if you want something your friends and neighbors will respect you for—you’re going to have to find something other than the cross. But if you want forgiveness for your sins—if you want a salvation that will carry you through death and into life—you will find it nowhere else.

If our greatest problem is that we don’t have enough power—if our problem is that we don’t have enough friends, or our houses aren’t big enough, or we don’t know how to be rich and successful—if those are our problems, then the cross is foolishness. It doesn’t do anything for us.

But if our problem is “that we are by nature sinful and unclean, and that we have sinned against [God] in thought, word, and deed,” then the cross is the wisdom and power of God.

So let’s look beyond the momentary problems of this life and consider our eternal salvation. How will we stand before God on the judgment day? When every thought, word, and deed is revealed before the Almighty, what will become of us?

If our problem is our own sinful rebellion, then we are wise to place our hopes in a dying Messiah who refuses to save himself. The cross is the wisdom and power of God, because this is

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where the Son of God, our Savior, took the sin of the world upon himself, suffered the wrath of God, and died. This is how he defeated sin, death, and the devil for all time.

This is why we call “Christ crucified” the wisdom and power of God. This is why the cross is the center of our faith.

So when we talk about *Jesus Christ, crucified and risen for the forgiveness of sins*, we’re not just talking about some random person’s sins. We’re not talking about sin in the abstract. We’re talking about your sins—your real ones—the ones that plague you on a daily basis—the ones that haunt your conscience. *Jesus Christ, crucified and risen for the forgiveness of your sins*.

This is what makes that horrifying image of a dead guy on a cross so beautiful.

And when we sing, “There Is a Fountain Filled with Blood,” picture that image too. Unlike the historic imagery of the cross, this one is merely artistic. But imagine such a fountain, because it does teach the spiritual reality of what Jesus’ blood does for us. It’s a really gross picture, right? It’s a beautiful hymn centered around a really gross image—a fountain filled with blood. It sounds like a crime scene. And then sinners are plunged beneath it. But they don’t get dirty. They don’t get stained. Instead, they “lose all their guilty stains.”

Christ crucified—the wisdom and power of God. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.