

What to Do About the Cross?  
*1 Corinthians 1:18-30*

Maxie Dunnam, our Irresistible Invitation author tells the story of First UMC in Dallas, Texas. For Lent one year they put a big, rough, wooden cross on the lawn. It was a jarring counterpoint to the beautiful neatly manicured yard and the strikingly beautiful buildings. One woman, considering the cross to be an eyesore called the church and asked, “Can’t you do something with that dreadful cross?”

What a compelling question, even if she did not mean it as such. What indeed are we to do about the cross. To that woman in Dallas it was a jarring symbol; and in fact it has been a jarring, disruptive, compelling, confusing, comforting, challenging, shocking, part of the Christian journey from the very beginning.

My least favorite hymn begins as one of my most favorite: *Alas and did my savior bleed and did my Sovereign die. Would he devote that sacred head for sinners such as I?* That part is a great hymn, by Isaac Watts of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. It calls us to contemplate again the wonder and the love of Jesus’ sacrifice for us. But then in 1885 a guy by the name of Ralph Hudson came and ruined it by adding this refrain, *At the cross, at the cross, where I first saw the light and the burden of my heart rolled away. It was there by faith I received my sight and now I am happy all the day.*

Is that all the cross means? That thinking about Jesus’ sacrifice makes us.... happy? All the day? Every day? As if the cross is some sort of spiritual equivalent to a new puppy dog or something.

Many modern church growth experts counsel against preaching about the cross. It’s a downer. It’s not fun. It’s

not joyous. It's dark. It's serious. And who wants that when they come to church? By the way, such experts also counsel against hymns in a minor key... too depressing, and also against having the Lord's Supper. . . not energetic enough. . . but I digress.

The early church struggled to understand the cross. What to do about it. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, especially, the cross comes as a staggering body blow to the band of disciples. It leads them to give up in abject discouragement. As the disciples first looked at the cross on Friday, they saw no redemption, no hope, no gift, just a sad failure.

It is only when Resurrection comes that faith returns. Resurrection undoes the horror of the cross. Resurrection gives the disciples back their faith, their courage, their hope.

But St. Paul, as he writes to the Church in Corinth, a fractious and fractured church by the way, with many competing interests, while acknowledging there is no inherent beauty in the cross or splendor in such a death, points to something more, to a deeper and gracious meaning.

Now, that church in Corinth was divided in the following of certain leaders. Some trusted Paul's leadership, others Apollos', others Peter's. In the same way, churches today can become divided into groups. Young. Old. Natives. From Off. Conservative. Liberal. Methodist. Lutheran. Catholic. Baptist. Tar Heel. Wolfpack.

Paul brings them up short. Whatever your differences, you have this in common: Jesus Christ died on the cross. It's the center of our faith.

And a strange center it is! Paul admits it doesn't make logical sense. To Jewish people, it was a scandal: how can one claim to be God's son and then die such an ignominious death? To the Gentiles, it was, well, simple foolishness: imagine dying for something so trivial as a religious idea or conviction.

To the world, the cross is the reason not to believe. But to those being saved, Paul writes, it's the reason to believe. It's a call to trust God's wisdom, even when it seems foolish. But then, what is this wisdom, this foolishness?

Let's look at some ways in which the cross has been understood.

Some see the cross as fulfilling a vengeful God's thirst for blood. That an angry God, like Shakespeare's Shylock in *the Merchant of Venice*, demands his pound of flesh. As if Jesus, because his blood is shed, forces an angry God, almost against God's will, to accept us as his children.

I think this is an unfortunate misunderstanding of God's nature and God's relationship to us. Now the cross was something bad. A scandal and a folly indeed. And had God chosen, God could have chosen to make the cross the symbol of humanity's ultimate sin: destroying humanity for having killed God's obedient Son.

But instead God, in God's grace, chose not to focus on the disobedience of humanity in crucifying Jesus, but instead on Jesus' obedience in standing firm for God even when that meant death.

Using the concept of Jewish sacrificial law, Bible writers were able to explain that Jesus' death had become in fact a last, complete, final sacrifice. God did not have to accept Jesus' death as an atoning sacrifice, but He

chose to.

Let us not lose track of two important verses that describe God's nature and his relationship to us through Jesus Christ: *For God so loved the world that he sent his only son Jesus Christ, so that whosoever believes in him would not perish, but have eternal life.*

And, 2 Corinthians 5:19. . . *God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself.*

There are many theories about how the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross brings about salvation. But today, I want to focus just one possible meaning of the cross, not as something God demanded, but as something Jesus chose in order to be obedient to his calling.

In the hymn, *How Great Thou Art*, there is a line that says, "And when I think that God his son not sparing, sent him to die, I scarce can take it in." Now the first part I like: God did not spare his son. But I don't think that Jesus was sent in order to die a cruel death.

Again, what would that say about God? Would you want to serve a God who would willingly plan to do something like that to his beloved son?

Rather, I think Jesus was sent to live. To live as God's presence in the world. To be what God would be if God were human. To be sure, there were many things Jesus could not experience. He did not experience what it was like to be a mother. What it was like to be a slave or an emperor. But he did experience what it was like to live and what it was like to face death.

And Jesus did experience what it was like to be a human being to live in relationship to God. And what we do imperfectly, Jesus did perfectly. Given the choice between saving his own life and denying the truth about God and affirming God's kingdom even when it meant arrest and execution, Jesus chose to be obedient. He chose to lose something, life, so that we could gain something, life. As Paul writes elsewhere, as by one man, Adam, came death, so by one man, Jesus has come life.

We do not have to insist that God sent Jesus to die. But we can affirm that when it was a choice between saving his own life and being obedient to God, to God's purposes, to God's principles, Jesus chose obedience, even at the cost of that dreadful cross.

The cross is foolish to those who regard self interest as the highest good. The cross is scandal to those who insist that God will always reward the righteous with health and wealth and power and prestige.

But the cross is the power of God to those being saved, Paul writes. Now, being saved is not just a state of being, it's an ongoing relationship with God. And more than that, to be saved, in Greek, also means to be healed.

To know the power of the cross means that when we go through times the world would regard as unfortunate or even horrific, we believe that God's grace and God's power is still there. It's the power God gave my mother in law, after her stroke, unable to speak, still to be able to smile, still to be able know blessing, still to find blessedness in life.

To accept the truth of the cross, is to accept joyfully the fact that in Jesus' obedient sacrifice God regards us

as righteous and opens to us the gates of heaven. But it also means something else: it means that we are receiving spiritual healing for this life.

It means that in the truth of the cross, which is the most powerful symbol of Jesus' love for us, we begin to learn what it means to live a healthy life. A life centered on not just ourselves, but the least and the lost. A life that cares about what Jesus cared about. Hungry people and spiritually starved people. Being merciful and forgiving. Being engaged in the problems of others.

Paul experienced this for himself. When he was at his most sinful, when he was on the road to go to Damascus to destroy God's people, it was then the risen Jesus appeared to him to offer him love and a new road to travel. And in that truth, Paul realized that Jesus had died for him, even for him. As an act of incomprehensible love.

And he has died for you, even for you.

Well, one more place to travel. Jesus called upon his followers to pick up their cross. Daily. Now, what did he mean by this? Truly we cannot die on a cross day after day. He must have meant something else. And he did.

In this context, the cross is the symbol of something that means sacrifice for us and blessing for someone else. In Jesus' case, it meant death for him and eternal life for us.

But in this context, the cross does not mean the suffering we go through. If you have an impossible mother-in-law, she's a pain, but that's not a cross you have to bear. Or if you have a physical challenge, that's difficult, but that's not a cross you have to bear.

A cross you bear is what you choose to do to be blessing to someone else. To teach Sunday School is a cross. Even if you get something out of it, and I hope you do, it's sacrifice. . . and it brings blessing. Same thing with working with LOGOS or our UMYF packing food boxes or singing in the choir or serving on a committee. . . the list is endless. Those are crosses. Sacrifices you choose to bless someone else.

In fact to live such a life is to respond most fully to Jesus' call of discipleship. It's the kind of life that brings true blessing. True to others such a life of responding, of giving, might seem foolish, but God's wisdom confounds the world time after time.

Well, I've gone on long enough. So let me close. That woman called and asked, "Can't you do something with that dreadful cross?" And the answer is yes. Let's each of us pick one up. Every day. Amen.