

Reformation Sunday
“Luther and the Cross”
1 Corinthians 1:18-31
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Occasionally when I’m watching television, I’ll stop and check out the “competition.” By that I mean periodically I will switch the channel to a couple of religious programming stations to see what they’re saying these days. I must be a masochist, however, as I can only abide watching such shows for about two to three minutes before I begin to feel really sick in the pit of my stomach. You see, the message is uniformly predictable, that God is one great big sugar daddy, a divine ATM who wants to enrich us beyond our wildest dreams. You can turn on any one of these stations and hear the preacher describe how if those currently watching the program were only to follow his recipe for success (which involved a healthy contribution to his ministry), God would unleash their faith and steer unbelievable blessings their way. God would deliver them from all their debts by providing them with a better job, a new car, a larger home with a two-car garage to accommodate that new vehicle, and all the luxuries they’ve been craving for their lives. In the same way that HE--the preacher--had been blessed by God with jet planes and fancy cars and a million-dollar home because of HIS faith, God could do the very same thing for THEM.

One prominent televangelist—Jesse Duplantis—received a lot of notoriety recently when he made a passionate appeal to his television audience to help fund his fourth private jet because, as he explained, “Jesus “wouldn’t be riding a donkey.” He said that God had told him to buy a Falcon 7X for 54 million dollars, adding that he was somewhat hesitant about it at first, but then God reassured him, “I didn’t ask you to PAY for it. I asked you to BELIEVE for it.” I can’t imagine a more perfect god for this materialistic society of ours than this.

You would think that people could see through all this flim-flam but his adoring audience came through and he did get his new jet. The reality is that people just can’t get enough of it. More and more persons, ESPECIALLY when they’re enduring tough economic times, seem to flock to this kind of message, even as their desperation grows. Hence, God is reduced to a kind of personal genie who can be instantly summoned to do our bidding and solve all life’s problems- if only we have enough faith. If you need money, just ask God for it; if you have physical problems and need healing, God is only a call away; having relationship troubles? then God will put on his counselor’s hat and fix it for you. All your needs and problems will magically disappear if only you believe! If God DOESN’T, then you have no one to blame but YOURSELF because your faith was not strong enough or you haven’t asked in the right manner.

Where thirty-five, forty years ago, you might have heard one or two preachers make such brazen promises, it has now become standard fare in many of our most popular churches: God exists to serve US- to magically meet all OUR wants and needs and NOT the OTHER way around. Well the PROBLEM with this kind of theology is that it’s all about US, all about what God can do for US with little or no talk about sin or redemption or discipleship or service to

others, ESPECIALLY on behalf of those most vulnerable in our society. Prosperity preaching has become all the rage these days and I suspect the reason is BECAUSE there is no cross in it. It promises the blessings of Easter without first having to go through Good Friday; it says that one may experience resurrection life and all its benefits without first having to endure crucifixion and the death to oneself that it requires. I found this kind of theology best described in the title of a recent lecture I saw being advertised for the Pittsburgh Humanities Festival. The speaker's talk was entitled, "Everybody Wants to Go to Heaven but Nobody Wants to Die." Pure and simple, much of today's preaching, which can be found in a number of our nation's largest churches, are offering salvation on the cheap- a religion without sacrifice, a faith that incurs no cost to the believer. We've come a long way in our understanding of God from when the martyred German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who lost his life in a Nazi prison camp, wrote, "When God calls someone, he bids him come and die!"

Someone who recognized the insidiousness of this kind of theology and offered a scriptural corrective to it was Martin Luther. This morning is "Reformation Sunday," the anniversary of one of the most famous events in world history. It was on October 31 in the year 1517—503 years ago this week--that Luther nailed his *95 Theses* upon the door of the castle church in Wittenberg, Germany. With this single revolutionary act, he shook the theological foundations of the Roman Catholic Church--of which he himself was a monk--to its knees. Among his contributions, he translated the Bible into the German tongue so persons could finally read it for themselves. He denied the authority of the Pope insisting that God ALONE was lord of the church and he argued for the priesthood of ALL believers, that we didn't need priests to serve as mediators between ourselves and God. Most importantly, Luther returned to the message of Augustine and St. Paul by insisting that our salvation was by grace through faith ALONE and NOT good works or the sale of papal indulgences. Our salvation, our acceptance before God, was solely the result of God's good favor towards us which we received only by faith in his gift to us- Jesus Christ. He insisted that CHRIST ALONE and NOT the church had the power to save.

Inspired by this morning's New Testament text, Luther was able to arrive at one of the great theological breakthroughs in the history of the church. We are plainly told in 1st Corinthians that God has destroyed the wisdom of this world by the foolishness of the Christian message. In order to shame the WISE, God has chosen what the world counts as foolishness to inaugurate his kingdom. To shame what is STRONG, God has chosen what the world counts as low and weak and contemptible. And to shame what is WISE IN OUR EYES, God has now revealed himself, not through "the best and the brightest," but through weak and foolish things--through God's "opposite." We see God's glory precisely where to all human appearances there appears no glory- in a man dying on a cross, in poverty and suffering and weakness and shame, in humility and trouble and anguish, in darkness and foolishness. Paul is saying that if you would at all find God, then THERE is where you must go to find him- and there you WILL!

These verses helped to convince Luther that the heart of God is ultimately revealed, not in the majesty of the heavens or in the beauty of our earth, but in the cross and crucifixion of his Son and nowhere else. For anyone who has ever witnessed the power of Niagara Falls or stood on the edge of the Grand Canyon or hiked through Yosemite National Park, you can't help but

come away overwhelmed by all the wonder and beauty displayed in creation. If ANYTHING, it reveals God to be an intelligent and powerful creator. But there is also much death and destruction in nature. In his *The Origin of Species*, the naturalist Charles Darwin described nature as “red in tooth and claw” and governed by “the survival of the fittest.” All you have to do is think back to the tidal wave that struck Japan and washed the city of Fukushima off the map or the earthquake that struck Haiti in 2010 which claimed a hundred and sixty thousand lives in a matter of seconds and displaced a million and a half more. Yes, nature can be beautiful and serene, but it can be violent and terrifyingly destructive at the same time! We cannot learn that God is love by merely looking THERE!

But if we don't find God in nature, neither do we discover God is love by investigating the human heart. The human breast can INDEED engender great acts of compassion and sacrifice at times, but that same heart is ALSO responsible for two World Wars, the atom bomb, and Nazi gas chambers in the past century alone. One may be inspired to tremendous acts of generosity and bravery but then, as the psalmist knew all-too well, the heart could be “desperately wicked,” so MUCH so that he asked, “who can ever know it?”; it seems the human propensity for evil can be BOUNDLESS. Who can explain why a wealthy 64-year old calmly took up a rifle and began firing indiscriminately into a group of concert-goers in Las Vegas three years ago this month killing 58, or why a young man who was given everything he ever wanted fatally shot his mother, 20 children, and six adult staff members in a Connecticut schoolhouse before taking his OWN life. No, the fullest and clearest expression of God's love lies not in an analysis of nature, not in any examination of the human soul, nor in any amount of reasoning or philosophical speculation by the world's greatest thinkers but in the DEATH OF JESUS CHRIST UPON THAT CROSS and NOWHERE ELSE. This is why the Bible instructs us, "By this we know love, that Christ laid down his life for us." and again, "God commended his love towards us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."

St. Paul reminded the church in Philippi that though Christ was in the form of God, he STRIPPED himself of every divine privilege in order to take on the form of a “slave” and be born in the likeness of you and me. And after stooping so low as to become man, the Creator becoming one with the “creature,” he humbled himself FURTHER by living among us, shouldering our problems, healing our afflictions, making the lonely and unloved persons in this world feel accepted, and ultimately dying the death of a common criminal with our trespasses and sins nailed into his body-all because he LOVED us.

For two thousand years, it is the CROSS that has stood at the very center of our faith- no other symbol in all of history can compare in importance to it. It is the dominating motif in so much of our art and architecture, the ultimate criterion in our faith and conduct, the center of our devotion and service. And yet the great irony is, as that wonderful old hymn “The Old Rugged Cross” reminds us, the cross is an emblem of “suffering and shame.” Rather than conveying the fair and the beautiful, it suggests just the OPPOSITE- it is meant to remind us of all that is crude and ugly. That cross was a horrible instrument of torture and death; it testified to the perverseness of God's creation, that we could arrest, torture, and execute the same Son of God who had been sent to redeem and save us in the first place.

But WHY? Why is it that we identify the CROSS as the point at which God addresses and reveals himself and not the Empty Tomb? Why not single out the RESURRECTION as disclosing the nature and purposes of God- certainly the empty tomb is a lot more upbeat and celebratory than a man dying on a cross? The answer is that the cross is the mirror that illuminates our OWN condition. It is the symbol of our present situation NOW with all its tragedies and sickness and death, all its fears and anguish and perplexities. As the cross signifies THE PHYSICAL PAIN CHRIST SUFFERED, so does it remind US of all the pain OUR bodies are wracked with- from the cradle to the grave. As the cross signifies THE LONELINESS AND ABANDONMENT CHRIST EXPERIENCED, so does it stand for all the deep feelings of loneliness and rejection WE must put up with. As the cross signifies THE TRIALS AND TEMPTATIONS THAT JESUS ENDURED, so does it point to the trials and temptations in our OWN lives. As the cross signifies THE SILENCE AND ABSENCE OF GOD, so does it remind US of those moments WE have felt abandoned by God. And as the cross signifies CHRIST'S DEATH, so too does it remind US that WE must one day pass from this life. Hence, the cross is a powerful symbol of the trials and terrors of the human predicament that WE must face EVERY DAY.

Therefore, no one can ever say that God doesn't understand the plight of his children in all their frailty and brokenness. Through Christ and his cross, God understands rejection. God understands loneliness. God understands sorrow. God understands abandonment. God understands poverty. God understands persecution. God understands pain. God understands hunger and thirst. And God even understands DEATH- ESPECIALLY the deaths of so many victims the world over which this pandemic has claimed! God UNDERSTANDS it all because Jesus, his son, EXPERIENCED it all. Hence, one can never say, "Nobody understands what I'm going through, not even GOD" because the testimony is clear- God DOES understand and our Lord's cross becomes the very PROOF of it. Had there been no cross, none of us would ever have had any assurance that God understands our problems, our needs, or even our state of mind when we are forced to confront our OWN death.

But if we live each day in the shadow of the cross, as Christians, we also live by the knowledge of his RESURRECTION from death. Life under the cross does not mean giving in to hopelessness and despair, but it DOES mean living Good Friday in the light of Easter. The Empty Tomb assures us that in the midst of our OWN trials and confusions and doubts, God is present to us TODAY even as he was to Christ on Calvary two thousand years ago. The Empty Tomb is proof to us that as the Father had never abandoned the Son--even in the hours of his suffering and death--he will never abandon US in the midst of our OWN struggles.

Thus the cross speaks to us of a God who reveals himself in suffering and weakness, not strength and glory- a "God who is hidden in suffering" to use Luther's expression. The God who is all-powerful hides himself in weakness; the God who is all-wise hides himself in foolishness; and the God who is living, hides himself in death. Extreme trials do not suggest the absence of God but rather the HIDDENNESS of God, and yet a God who is PRESENT ALL THE SAME as Jesus' eventual resurrection revealed. And the implications of this for us is great for it means that if we ourselves would at all find God, THERE is where we must ALSO go to find him. In order to find Christ, we must visit those same difficult and disturbing places he himself

frequently went. Hence, HE CALLS US TO COMFORT THE LOST AND LONELY even as he dried the tears of a forlorn widow in a forgotten outpost called Nain. HE CALLS US TO LIFT UP THE WEAK AND THE POWERLESS even as he conferred dignity on a sinful Samaritan woman. HE CALLS US TO TEND TO THE SICK AND SUFFERING even as he healed the affliction of a hopeless leper, the greatest outcast in the ancient world. HE CALLS US TO EMBRACE MISFITS AND UNDERDOGS just as he welcomed prostitutes and tax collectors, demoniacs and even the “heathen” gentiles. He bids us to follow him into those places that are NOT so pleasant and NOT so desirable- like hospitals and drug rehabs, nursing homes and community jails; into places NOT so safe and clean as many of the homes and tenements, streets and back alleys of our inner cities, and he says that if you’re looking for God, THERE and THERE ALONE you will find him. I can assure you that you’ll never hear such a message from any of those popular television preachers!

Friends, our theology, our very LIVES MUST be grounded in that cross. Only the CROSS reveals to us a God who acts, who loves, who gives, and who suffers. In that cross ALONE do we find forgiveness of sins; ONLY IN THE CROSS do we see God humiliating himself out of love for us; ONLY IN THAT CROSS do we see a God who experiences and understands trials and temptation, suffering and even death; NOWHERE BUT IN CHRIST’S CROSS are we assured that when WE experience SIMILAR trials, God is present to US in all his love and glory. Yes, the cross is a great contradiction. Where the world sees rejection and death, WE see forgiveness and love and life; where the world sees the night of Good Friday, WE see the light of Easter morn. The notion that one can find victory in the death of God is INDEED foolishness, and yet as Paul understood so well and Luther was later to REDISCOVER, such foolishness is the power of God and the wisdom of God for our salvation. Let us pray...

Gracious God of the Cross, forgive us for wanting to recreate you in OUR image instead of the other way around, for turning you into something you’re not- a slave to our worst desires and basest impulses. Instead, help us to stay fixated on your cross and the call to sacrifice and servanthood that it demands. Help us to take great comfort in the fact that you DO understand us and our situation, and that you’re ever present to us even when life gets rough and we can’t see or hear you. In Christ’s name we pray. Amen.