

THE PRIMACY OF THE CROSS

I Corinthians 1:18-25

A sermon by Larry R. Hayward on the Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 26, 2021, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia. This is part of an ongoing sermon series “The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ.”¹

18 For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ¹⁹For it is written,

*‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,
and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.’*

²⁰Where 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? ²¹For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. ²²For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, ²³but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, ²⁴but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.

As many of you know, today I am beginning an “intermittent series” on the Crucifixion of Christ. My hope is that through the spiritual discipline of focusing on this sometimes avoided, sometimes misunderstood, yet *central* aspect of our faith, we will come away from the series with a deeper understanding of the *death* of Christ, not just his death as a *human being*, perhaps separate from the *all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-loving God* we affirm through our creeds, but his death as part of the Trinity of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

I.

There have been millions of people throughout history who have been put to death for their faith, not all of them, of course, Christian. But even in the Bible, Jesus is *not unique* for having died because of what he believed.

- Early in his ministry, he learned that the person who had baptized him just a few months earlier, *John the Baptist*, had been beheaded.²
- Soon after Christ’s Ascension, a young man named *Stephen* – whom Luke describes as having “the face of an angel”³ – was stoned to his death and became the first Christian martyr.⁴

While being put to death for one’s faith is horrible and often gruesome, it is *not* that alone which makes *Christ* unique and *Christianity* different from other faiths or social movements.

¹ This sermon series is inspired and draws largely from the book by Fleming Rutledge, *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ*, published in 2015 by William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

² Matthew 14:1-12.

³ Acts 6:15.

⁴ Acts 8:54-60.

What is *unique* about the death of Christ – and what makes the Crucifixion so *definitional* to our faith – is *not* that another heroic martyr has died. Rather, what makes the Crucifixion of Christ unique is the *claim* (which I affirm) that on the Cross it is the *fullness of God* who dies – not just God’s spokesperson or representative or proxy or Spirit or shadow or even simple human Son; rather, it is *God’s own self* who is put to death by a combination of civil and religious authorities in a way that is brutal, shameful, public, and painful. I am told that there is no other major religion in the world in which *the most powerful divinity* suffers and dies such an ignominious death.⁵ Fleming Rutledge, whose book has inspired and is guiding this series, speaks of: “the absurdly irreligious claim that a *degrading, state-sponsored execution* had secured the *salvation* of the *entire cosmos*.”⁶

Furthermore, Jesus Christ – as God – does *not* die as an *unwitting* victim. He is willing. His entire life and ministry are headed to this end.⁷ As John Donne wrote: “All his life was a continual passion.”⁸

It is this willingness of Christ as God, of God in Christ, to be *crucified* that *contradicts everything* we as humans *conceive* to be appropriate when we say the word “*God*.” Because we think of God as *all-powerful*, *all-knowing*, and *all-good*, to think of God as suffering, or even more as dying a shameful, public death on the cross is *counter* to everything we mean when we say “*God*.” Yet this very counter-reality leads the Apostle Paul to write: “...the message about the cross is *foolishness* to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the *power* of God.”⁹

II.

The uniqueness of the Crucifixion of Christ intensifies for us when we consider its *gruesomeness*.

Two weeks ago when I announced this series, a parent reminded me that when her children were young, they had once asked me: “Why did Jesus have to be *nailed* to the cross? Couldn’t he have just been *taped*?” I don’t remember how I responded, but I know that many of not most of us as adults identify with their wonderment.

While we as humans sometimes possess an unhealthy attraction to gruesome crimes and deaths, at our best we recoil at the mistreatment of other human beings: POWs, detainees, people incarcerated, people under arrest, people at our borders. When our children are sick or our elderly parents are taking their last breath, our instinct – often in desperation – is to comfort them, because they are so vulnerable. Thus, we can *barely conceive* of suffering when it comes to the treatment of Christ on the cross, especially Christ as God, because as God Christ is supposed to be a paragon of power. “Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!” rails the thief crucified with him.¹⁰

So we ask: *How* can a religion worship a God who would allow himself or herself or itself *as God* – to die such a *shameful* death? How can we put our *ultimate trust* and *fate* in such a God? How can we *turn* to such a God for *strength* and *succor*? Can a crucified God really be the *all-powerful*, *all-knowing*, *all-loving* God in whom “we live and move and have our being,”¹¹ the God for whom we have left our nets to follow?¹²

III.

⁵ Rutledge, 10-13, 18-19; see also Tom Holland, *Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World* (New York: Basic Books: 2019).

⁶ Rutledge 69.

⁷ Rutledge, 43-45, 56-61.

⁸ “Death’s Duel,” February 25, 1631, quoted in Rutledge, 31.

⁹ Rutledge speaks on page 69 of “the absurdly irreligious claim that a degrading, state-sponsored execution had secured the salvation of the entire cosmos.”

¹⁰ Luke 23:39.

¹¹ Acts 17:28.

¹² Mark 1:16-20.

As many of you know, a few decades after Christ's humiliating death as God, the risen Christ appeared to and commissioned his first major messenger to spread the news of his death and Resurrection beyond Judea in which it occurred into the larger Greco-Roman world. The one called and commissioned – on the Road to Damascus¹³ – was the previously mentioned Paul. Most books in the second part of the New Testament consist of letters that Paul wrote to churches he had *founded, remained with for a while*, and then *departed* to establish a church in the next town.

One such church Paul had established was in the city of Corinth. At the time Paul founded a church there, Corinth had been rebuilt from ruins by Julius Caesar and had grown into a prosperous, multi-cultural city that had many religious groups and the various gods they worshipped. In addition, as a port town, Corinth had a strong element of hedonism and permissiveness.¹⁴

After about eighteen months,¹⁵ Paul had left Corinth for Ephesus, and a group of new leaders had surfaced and convinced many in the church that that Paul had it all wrong.

- These new leaders taught that as Christians they (the Corinthians) had received “special spiritual knowledge.”
- This knowledge had *elevated* them out of the mundane, material, bodily aspects of life and more or less transferred them into “*already-risen*,” *highly-spiritualized state*.
- It appears that some even taught that since they were already living the “resurrection life,” they didn’t need to be concerned with earthly matters, earthly responsibilities, earthly rules and regulations, including sexual mores.
- These new leaders also appeared to teach that any *suffering* or *sacrifices* the Corinthian Christians made were *misguided* and *unnecessary*, and because they were *above* and *beyond* matters material, they certainly didn’t need to be concerned about something so *unseemly* as the death of Christ.¹⁶

Out of deep *affection* Paul had for the Corinthians, and out of *intense disagreement* with these new teachers, Paul sought to *salvage* the faith he had instilled within this beloved congregation. He wrote them, saying:

...the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God...For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

To the Corinthians the death of Christ seemed to reveal a weakness about God. Yet Paul counters by telling them head-on that it is *precisely* the *strength* of God – made known in *weakness* – that *transcends* their own human understanding of *strength*. As he would write them on a later occasion: “*My power is made perfect in weakness.*”¹⁷

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¹³ Acts 9:1-19.

¹⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ancient_Corinth#Modern_Corinth.

¹⁵ Acts 18:11.

¹⁶ Rutledge 43-45.

¹⁷ II Corinthians 12:9.

Later in the letter, Paul goes on to write that not only is the Crucifixion the place where God's *strength* is *revealed* in weakness, but the *Resurrection* which follows *does not undo* the *shame* and *suffering* of Jesus' death.¹⁸

- The Resurrection doesn't *cancel* the Crucifixion.
- It doesn't *replace* it.
- It doesn't *take away* its pain or shame.

The Crucifixion is not, as the late Robert Schuller once said, "A *mild set-back* Jesus faced that he then he *put behind him* on Easter morn."¹⁹ No.

- The Resurrection *vindicates* the cross.
- It *vindicates* the pain and suffering.
- It *vindicates* what Jesus as God undergoes on it.

Theologian Douglas John Hall says that in his Crucifixion, God has *set aside* God's own "*immunity from suffering*."²⁰ God is saying: "This is Who I Am – the One on the Cross – and this is how I rule."

IV.

So what on earth does this mean for us? What does this mean for us while we are *literally* still on earth?

(a)

One thing it means comes from a very short verse from Paul's later letter to the church at Rome.

In Romans 6:4, Paul writes:

...we have been buried with [Christ] by [our] baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.

Simple but *revolutionary*:

Christ *died* and is *raised* into glory
We *die* with Christ in baptism,
But not yet raised into glory,
We *put our feet* on a new path of life.

We change. We stop walking down *this* path. We start walking down *this* path.²¹

We are often – not always, but often – are clear about the path we need to *stop* walking down, and the path we need to *start* walking down. While it differs for everyone, and while changing directions and making U-turns

¹⁸ Likewise, in Biblical narrative, Jesus was not the only person *raised from the dead*: In the Old Testament Elijah the prophet raised from the dead the son of *the widow of Zarephath* (1 Kings 17:17-24); and in the New Testament, Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead (John 11:1-44), Peter raised *Tabitha* (Acts 9:36-42), and Paul raised the young man named *Eutychus*, who had fallen out of a window after nodding off during one of Paul's lengthier sermons (Acts 20:7-12).

¹⁹ This story was told by Dr. Thomas G. Long to the Moveable Feast Preaching Seminary over twenty years ago.

²⁰ Douglas John Hall, *The Cross of Christ* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1986, 335-336), quoted in Rutledge 57-58n40.

²¹ I am indebted to Hans Frei's closing sermon in *The Identity of Jesus Christ* for this exegesis of Romans 6:4. (Augsburg Fortress, 1975).

can be difficult and hurt those around us, a change of paths is ordinary how we respond to the death and Resurrection of Christ. We put our feet on a new path of life.

(b)

Second, again from Paul: this new path involves *love*. But let's be clear:

- It's not simply the romantic love of *eros* Paul talks about.
- It's not simply the brotherly or sisterly love of *philos* he enjoins.
- Rather it is the *agape* love God lives out on the cross that Paul enjoins for us.

Near the end of his long letter, Paul challenges the Corinthians to go deeper into living out the love of God (*agape*) shown on the cross. Using words of a hymn we have come nearly always to associate with marriage, Paul applies these words to the Corinthians in their life together as a community of faith:

*If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels,
But do not have agape,
I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.
And if I have prophetic powers,
and understand all mysteries and all knowledge,
and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains,
but do not have agape,
I am nothing.
If I give away all my possessions,
and if I hand over my body to be burned,
but do not have agape,
I gain nothing.
Agape is patient;
Agape is kind;
Agape is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude.
It does not insist on its own way;
it is not irritable or resentful;
it does not rejoice in wrongdoing,
but rejoices in the truth.
Agape bears all things,
believes all things,
hopes all things,
endures all things.
Agape never ends.²²*

My friends, the way we respond to the primacy of the cross is putting our feet on a new path. Whether that path be a dirt road into an Appalachian holler, or promenade paved into a palace of power, or a new relationship with someone with whom we are close, the name of that path shall be *Agape*, the ultimate self-giving love of Christ, most visible to us in his Crucifixion on the cross.

Amen.

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²² I Corinthians 13:1-8.