



1 Corinthians 1:18-25
 The Church Is...
 "...Sent With the Cross"

Rev. Brian North
 June 4th, 2023

Today we continue a series of messages that we began last week on the nature of the Church. Last Sunday we looked at the last few verses of the Gospel According to Matthew, and focused on was the fact that Jesus sends the church out; he sends the church with a mission, and a mission field, and with the resources for the mission. But the main point of focus was that we Christians are a sent people. Jesus sends his church.

And the rest of the messages in this series will actually reflect the "sent" nature of the church. Today, for example, we finish this phrase, "The Church is..." with this statement: "...Sent With the Cross." For those of us who follow Jesus, this is good news. The cross is the centerpiece of the Christian faith, eclipsed only by the empty tomb. If an empty tomb could be easily hung up on a wall in a church or turned into a pendant on necklace, I imagine we'd see more empty tombs than we do crosses. But, the cross is also at the center of Christian theology because of what Jesus' death on the cross means. The two go together, and are the center of the good news of Jesus.

But it occurred to me this week, in thinking about today's passage, that when it comes to sharing our faith with others, the cross is not all good news to the world. From a non-Christian view, the message of the cross is bad news and questionable news rolled up together. Let's dive into today's passage to see what I mean. We are in 1 Corinthians 1:18-25 this morning. This is Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth, a church that – quite frankly – was a mess, based on the two letters we have to them. And so almost the first thing he does in this letter to try and get some unity in the church, is to point them to the cross of Christ. So, **this is God's word** to you and me today.

Let's start with what we believe and embrace as Christians about the cross. **It starts with bad news: that we are sinners, and that our sin separates us from the God of the universe who gives us life.** From the sin of Adam and Eve in the garden to the sin that you committed yesterday or maybe even this morning on the way to church...our sin separates us from God. The way to rectify this that God gave to the Jews in the Old Testament, was for a

sacrifice to be made. Specifically, for an animal – usually a lamb – without blemish to be sacrificed, as payment for sin. But the reprieve it brought was temporary, so the animal sacrifice happened every year.

Then comes the good news of the cross: Jesus comes to us in that Jewish religious system and fulfills the sacrifice himself, through his death on the cross. So, the bad news of our sin leads to God ultimately taking the initiative to rectify the broken relationship between us and him, which is good news. Some of you may be aware that Tim Keller recently passed away. He was the founding pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan, and was arguably the most influential pastor of the last 30 years or so. And I think one thing he said about the cross really sums up this idea that God has taken the initiative to rectify the bad news of our sin. Keller said, **“The central basis of Christian assurance is not how much our hearts are set on God, but how unshakably his heart is set on us” (Tim Keller).**¹ God’s heart is set so unshakably on us that he came to us in human form to be the once for all, unblemished sacrifice, and that took place on the cross. Jesus’ death fulfills the Old Testament requirement of a price to be paid for our sin, and demonstrates how unshakably his heart is set on us.

So, for those who have come to put our faith in Jesus and trust that his death on the cross leads to mending our relationship with our Creator God, this is good news. It’s great news, because the cross mends our relationship with God.

The problem with the message of the cross for the non-believer, however, is that acknowledging we have sin in our lives is hard to do, and believing that Jesus’ death on the cross rectifies the problem our sin creates and brings us back in relationship with God sounds foolish. That’s the world we live in. For better or for worse, it’s not any different than the world of the first century church, particularly in Greek culture to whom Paul writes.

In this passage, Paul is addressing two different worldviews that both have problems with the message of the cross. **The Jewish worldview has a problem with the cross because they first can’t believe that God would become a human, and they also can’t believe that God would die on a**

cross. To their way of thinking, that's showing a weak God, and God is not weak. To them, God is powerful, almighty, holy, set apart – to the point that they wouldn't even pronounce the name of God that was most revered: Yahweh. How could he possibly become a human, therefore? And even if he did: how could he possibly end up crucified like a common criminal? Their understanding of God was a deliverer, a victor, one who couldn't be stopped – like parting of seas, and walls tumbling down. And the cross, to them, seems to convey anything but that. This is why they wanted “signs” as Paul speaks of here. The signs they want are signs of power and might and victory.

To the Greek way of thinking, the cross was just foolishness. This is what Paul mostly addresses. Their culture valued human wisdom, human accomplishment, human kingdoms – and the Roman Empire was an incredible human kingdom at the time, so you can understand why they'd value that – this was the kind of thing they were after. Build great buildings, have a great empire, educate-educate-educate, debate ideas, let iron sharpen iron in the halls of philosophy. This was what they valued. So, for them, the cross just seemed foolish to them. They would say: “What's the point? Look how great we are! There's no such thing as sin...no God of the universe to be in relationship with...no broken relationship. Where's the accomplishment and achievement in death on a cross? It's all just foolishness.” That was their thinking.

The Greek approach is very similar to today: the cross of Christ is foolish. Even as we read the passage, perhaps what Paul writes about wisdom and foolishness sounds like something quite current. We live in a time and place that sees the Christian faith as “foolish.” You know: “God? Whatever – we know everything now and don't need God; Sin? What's that? Anything goes, and I'll boast about it to all to the world; The cross? Clearly not needed; Jesus? Maybe he lived, maybe he didn't...seems like a good guy...but came from eternity and returned after his death? Foolishness!” That's the thinking of today's world.

Some even question if Jesus actually died on the cross...some would say he just “swooned”. That's the word that's usually used to describe this alternate

theory of what happened to him. Greg Laurie recounts how someone once wrote into a newspaper with this question: “Our preacher on Easter said that Jesus just swooned on the cross and that His disciples nursed Him back to health. What do you think? Sincerely signed, Bewildered.” So, somebody at the newspaper wrote back, “Dear Bewildered, beat your preacher with a cat o’ nine tails with 39 heavy strokes. Nail him to a cross, hang him out in the sun for six hours, run a spear through his heart, and embalm him, and put him in an airless tomb for 36 hours and see what happens.”²

But here’s the thing: **At some point, most people will have a doubt about their godless world view, or a realization that they really aren’t “all that and a bag of chips.”** Job loss, a moral failure, death of a loved one, an addiction they’re coming to grips with...there are events in life that people experience, that are a chink the armor of pride and self-righteousness that opens them up to the possibility that maybe, just maybe, there’s something more to life...even beyond this life...and they can’t get there on their own.

And you see, when a person gets there, the message of the cross suddenly doesn’t seem quite so foolish or like such a stumbling block. So, the church is sent with the cross and the message of the cross...but it’s a message to share when the time is right. And you’ll know it’s right once you’ve done some listening to the people in your life. Sharing the good news of the cross doesn’t begin with us speaking – it will only be received as foolishness. It starts with listening, and particularly listening for the points of pain and disappointment. The abortion a person had years ago that still haunts them; their role in a divorce that pains them to this day; the physical or sexual abuse they suffered as a teenager that still haunts them; the car accident that took the life of a loved one; the cancer diagnosis they got from the doctor a couple weeks ago. These things crack the armor of pride and selfishness of all but the most hardened humans. And those are the places where the message of the cross can work their way in.

So, what is that message of the cross? What is it that we communicate to someone in those places? Once we’ve listened and had empathized with them, it’s simply letting them know how God has gotten you through those same kinds of seasons of life. And at the center of whatever it is that God has

done to get you through that, I guarantee you that you will find the cross, and Jesus' love for you and me and those God has put in our life. It is Jesus' steadfast love that took him to the cross, after all. I'll turn to Tim Keller once more. He puts it like this: **"If the suffering Jesus endured did not make him give up on us, nothing will"** (Pastor Tim Keller).³ That's how much Jesus loves, and nothing will stop him from loving us and being with us in the midst of whatever it is we're going through. That's the message of the cross we share with those who are broken and hurting – that Jesus is with us, never forsakes us, doesn't give up on us because he loves us. What seemed foolish can suddenly seem possible, real, filled with wisdom, comfort, and grace.

And maybe this morning you're here, or watching online, and you're actually in this place of brokenness. Maybe the hard exterior, the social media posts that show you perfectly happy in wonderful places...maybe the belief that you're a good person without any sin that's hurt others and separated you from your Creator...maybe you're at a place where all of that is coming crashing down this week...or maybe it did some time ago and you've just kind of swept the difficulties under the rug, trying to ignore sin and its effects, and the pain of life.

If that's you, I simply say to you: **The answer to the pain and heartache you feel is found in the cross of Jesus Christ.** Maybe that sounds cliché, but the thing is, is that it's true. It's like in *Top Gun - Maverick*, two times someone says to Tom Cruise's character: "I don't like the look on your face" and both times, he replies "It's the only one I've got." It's the same with the message of the cross: it's the only one we've got. The cross is at the core of the Gospel. And so, maybe it's clear that sin has impacted you. Your own sin or someone else's or a combination of both, in all likelihood. I'm telling you, that the cross of Christ is the only place you'll truly find an answer for that. Jesus suffered for you to the point of death, and nothing you do, nothing you say, nothing that happens to you, will change that.

I'm not going to go into great detail here this morning: but I've experienced my share of ups and downs in life. Compared to a lot of people on the face of this earth, I realize my pain is less than a lot, the sin that's led to that pain

might be viewed as “smaller” than the sins others have committed. But all sin separates us from God. And as pastor, I’ve walked through enough painful experiences with others, to realize that without the cross where God’s love pierces into my life and the lives of countless others... **Without that message of the cross in my life, I’d be a different person: no hope, limited ability to forgive, lacking humility to ask for forgiveness, no sense of purpose or meaning in life.**

These things – hope, forgiveness, humility, purpose, meaning – they all come to us through the cross of Christ when we confess our need for Jesus in our lives. Maybe that has sounded foolish to you before. Maybe the cross has been a stumbling block for you. But there is power and wisdom in the cross of Christ; It’s wisdom and power that doesn’t come from us. It comes from the God of the universe who loves each of us deeply. That’s the message of the cross, and it’s the message that we who follow Jesus take into the world as we are sent out on mission for him. Let’s pray...Amen.

¹ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/50-quotes-tim-keller/>

² <https://thepastorsworkshop.com/sermon-illustrations-on-the-cross/>

³ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/50-quotes-tim-keller/>