

## **THE FOOLISHNESS OF THE CROSS**

***a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, Feb. 5, 2017  
Based on I Corinthians 1:18–25; Philippians 2:6–8***

The sermon this morning is the beginning of a seven-part sermon series entitled, “The Points of the Cross—how the cross of Christ can save you.” The series will conclude on Palm Sunday. Let us begin with a moment of prayer . . .

You see it everywhere—the cross. It’s on the top of churches, it’s on every altar or above it, it adorns the walls of religious hospitals and schools, and it is worn on chains and jewelry. We see it as the symbol of Christian faith and don’t think much more about it. We are so accustomed to the cross that it does not occur to us how strange a symbol this is.

For first century people in the Roman Empire, the cross was an imperial instrument of execution. So when Christians began to make it into a sign of salvation, this was most perplexing. To put this into a modern context, you would have to think of a modern instrument of execution—think of an electric chair, or a gurney with injection needles, or a gallows—and imagine that this was turned into the prime symbol of our faith. Imagine if on the top of our church building we had a gallows with a noose. How many people would come in to find what we are about?

Thus you can understand what Paul was saying when he wrote, “We preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.” (I Cor. 1:23) The Christian proclamation that a man’s crucifixion on a cross was a salvation event for humanity struck first century people of all stripes as baffling and bizarre.

This is one reason you can be sure that the gospel was not a human invention. If someone wanted to dream up a religion, they would never come up with the message of the cross. It is completely counterintuitive and would seem destined to gain scarcely a hearing. And yet, as Paul went on to say, “The foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.” (I Cor. 1:25) The message of the cross is, in fact, profound, and the power of the cross can transform human life.

But 21<sup>st</sup> century people may have a problem analogous to that of first century people, in that the cross for many people appears mystifying or meaningless. This sermon series is designed to help us answer that modern-day perplexity concerning the cross. We will see how the cross addresses our whole human problem at every level, and how the cross can be for us, as Paul said, “the power of God.”

The place to begin is with our typical human expectation as to how God ought to work. In the ancient Greek theatre, there was a device that historians of the theatre later described with the Latin term, “*deus ex machina*”—god out of a machine. The scenario was basically this: as the play unfolds, the characters on stage get into a real mess, as human beings often do in life. Then, just at the point when there appears to be no solution, God swoops in. On stage, this was accomplished by means of a contraption in which an actor, playing the part of a god, could literally fly over the stage. So the god flies in from above, and resolves the problem down below.

This is how human beings have typically wanted to envision the working of God in response to human troubles. We look for divine power to swoop in from on high to resolve the issue. The ancients were right in recognizing that we need the saving power of God. But they were simplistic in their concept of how God should work, because if the answer to our trouble is for God to fly in from on high and resolve the issue at hand, the problem will be that more troubles just keep arising. Thus more plays were written with ever more difficulties, and the gods kept having to sweep in at the end of each play. In this scenario, the basic human problem is never resolved.

In the first century, when Jews were looking for a Messiah, they were essentially looking for God to work in a *deus ex machina* fashion. They wanted the Messiah to sweep down from on high and eliminate their troubles. But God had a radically different and far bigger plan in store.

Rather than dropping down as an answer machine from beyond us, Christ would become one with us. Christ would identify completely with us—taking our human frailty and weakness upon himself. And on the cross, he would make the identification complete, as he took our human pain and brokenness and sin upon himself, until he finally took upon himself death.

The critic might say, “Well, how does that help?!” But you can’t rescue a person who is stuck in a pit unless you get down into the pit with them; and you can’t save a drowning person who has sunk under the waves unless you dive into the deep after them. Christ had to join with us in our fallen condition in order to lift us out.

Moreover, the sort of rescue that Christ brings is not simply a matter of yanking us out of trouble. Christ came to transform us, to change our connection with God, to make us into a new people, so that we are no longer sinking in sin and despair and death; but that sort of change requires that Christ become fully one with us, in order that he might finally transform our human condition. So, as Paul would say in Philippians, “Christ emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in human likeness.” (Phil. 2:7)

It is precisely this sort of approach that appears to the world as foolishness. If someone is on the verge of drowning out in high waves, the prudent thing to do is to toss them a line; that is what you’re taught to do in lifesaving. If all else fails you could dive in to save them, but that would be quite risky. You would put yourself in danger, and the whole thing would be very uncomfortable.

When it comes to helping other people, we humans generally prefer the “toss them a line” approach. We may extend some help, but we prefer to keep our distance. But Jesus dives into our human condition, putting himself in considerable peril.

Then Jesus goes even further. In a lifesaving operation, if you dive in to help someone, the objective is to get yourself and the victim out of the water as quickly as possible. But Jesus’ objective is not to get us out of the world; it is to enable us to live as new people in the world. So imagine that the rescuer, after grasping the struggling person in the water, does not make beeline for safety, but decides instead to teach the person to swim. And imagine further if, in enabling that person to stay above water, the rescuer sacrifices his own life. That would be pure foolishness. But this is essentially what Christ

does. Christ enters into the rough waters of our human condition not to whisk us out of this world but to give his life for us so that we might live anew.

We generally have a preference for grand and simple rescues. If someone is in danger of drowning, we want to see the helicopter swooping in to pull them out. Jesus Christ works in a more subtle, more hidden, and yet more powerful fashion. He joins with us. He unites himself with us. He transforms us.

When Jesus went to the cross, his skeptical observers were looking for the grand rescue from on high. "Let God rescue him now if God desires him," they said. (Matthew 27:43) They were looking for that rescue line to drop down from heaven, and the absence of anything meant to them that God was absent. But in fact God was working in far more profound fashion. On the cross, Christ had entered into the deep with us. No matter what you are going through, no matter what trouble or pain you are experiencing, even if you are facing death, when you look at the cross, you see that you are not alone. Christ has joined with you. Christ has immersed himself in our human condition, in order that he might change our human condition, and so open up for us an entirely new future.

Here then is the first great message or point of the cross, and it is revolutionary. For millennia, human beings have looked to the heavens for assistance, and have hoped for some bit of blessing to be dropped on them from on high. But the cross declares that our Savior has not just tossed down some help from above; rather He has come to us, and He has united himself completely with us. Christ has taken our whole human trouble upon himself, so that he might bring us through trouble into the real and eternal blessing of God.

In future weeks, we will be looking further at how Christ acts through the cross to address our human problem at every level. As we do so, we will see how the cross itself can function as a visual image of different aspects of Christ's saving work—each arm of the cross can serve as a symbol of a particular way that Christ works through the cross to save us. In this respect, the downward beam of the cross reminds us of what we have been considering this morning—that on the cross Christ comes down to us and fully connects with our earthly condition. On the cross Jesus becomes united with us, in order that we might finally become united with God.

We especially celebrate this aspect of the cross whenever we have Communion. As we receive the bread and the cup, we receive Christ who is with us, and we experience anew a union with Christ. In Communion we are reminded of that key truth expressed in the cross—that Christ does not just hover above us, like that crazy machine in ancient Greek plays, tossing down solutions from on high—but rather Christ joins with us. And if Christ is with us, then we need not fear; but we can trust in Christ to be at work in us with saving power.