

In his letter to the Corinthians Paul writes, *“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.”*

What is the message about the cross? It’s a good question especially during Lent when we are attempting to reflect on our lives, seeking forgiveness for our sins, and walking with Jesus to his death on that very same cross.

Many of us wear a cross, or own a cross, or even display a cross in our houses. Crosses can be simple and unadorned, or elaborate, studded with precious gems, and turned into jewelry. Whether the former is to be preferred over the latter is an interesting topic ... for another day.

But that image of the cross speaks to us it identifies us as followers of Jesus Christ, this man who was crucified, put to death for disturbing the religious and political powers. This death was disgraceful to pious Jews and pointless to Gentiles. What after all did it accomplish?

None us, I dare to say, want to think of ourselves as foolish or be associated with foolishness – it is beneath our dignity. As adults we strive for respect, and honor, and power, and wealth, and autonomy – all of these in greater or lesser degrees depending on the gifts, opportunities, and luck we have experienced in life. But Jesus went to his death accomplishing what, what did he accomplish that we can grasp can say for ourselves that this is so important to us that we are willing to embrace this symbol of disgrace?

Notice I said the word grasp, and our standard belief in eternal life when we understand it to be ‘life-after-death’ is a little hard to grasp. I am not saying that is not helpful or right to hold onto this but it’s not the most tangible of reasons to embrace the cross. Remember how Karl Marx said that religion was the opiate of the masses? He argued that people were willing to suffer and be passive in this life if they have the promise of a better one in the next and so would be resigned to the harshness of their circumstances and therefore not apt to revolt.

But this is not about passivity. Just look at our reading from the Gospel of John in which Jesus goes berserk in the temple and drives out those who were selling birds and animals for sacrifices, and overturns the tables of the money-changes. Nope, passive is not the right word.

And yet this was the man who would be arrested, tried, tortured, and crucified without fighting back, *“foolishness to those who are perishing, but to those of us who are being saved it is the power of God.”*

Our insight into the power of the cross comes from today’s other readings at the heart of which is obedience. We begin rightly enough with the reading of the commandments from Exodus, the first time that Moses received them on Mt. Sinai. In fact we had a double dose of them this morning because we read them as part of our Lenten liturgy. These commandments are about obedience, obedience to the God who brought the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt and into the Promised Land. These commandments lay out what God expects in order for the people to participate in God’s covenant with them. They don’t receive the covenant as a result of good behavior, they respond with good behavior in gratitude for the covenant. God demands exclusive allegiance together with ways for behaving that will preserve the cohesion of the community. These are a people brought together by God and God has given them ways

to function that will enable them to flourish. Some commands may sound harsh, some may not make all that much sense to us today but these are the basis for living righteously. Even the ancient Israelites had trouble with these commandments; something as simple as “thou shalt not murder” gets complicated when scholars tried to define murder: was it all killing, did it preclude revenge killing or capital punishment? What about accidents? What about self-defense? The Jews developed another 613 laws to flesh them out and countless pages of commentary by the rabbis.

Jesus cut through all the crap. Jesus said, *"The first commandment is this: Hear, O Israel: The Lord your God is the only Lord. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second is this: Love your neighbor as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these."* Mark 12:29-31

The operative word is love, not like because it is still possible to love those whom we do not like. God created the world in love. God gave us his Son in love. Jesus went to the cross for us for love. Love is not easy. Love is akin to obedience; it can be demanding and ask all that we have to give. When we love we may be pulled in opposing directions and even then our decisions may have unfortunate consequences.

Which brings us back to sin.

The sentences following our recitation of the Decalogue taken from the 1 John are pretty clear, *"If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sins, God, who is faithful and just, will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness."* 1 John 1:8,9

So yes, we are sinful but God also promises forgiveness if we ask God in the words of our psalmist to *"cleanse me from my secret fault"*. Perhaps the most important point is the acknowledgment of complete dependence on God. There is no place here for pride, or independence from life in God and in community. These are antithetical notions for Americans but they underlie what it means to be obedient. That obedience is grounded in trust.

The psalmist trusts that following God's law is helpful and constructive, that following God's law will bring joy, and in keeping God's law there is great reward. The disconnect comes when people think that following God's law, and trusting in God means that nothing bad will ever happen, that those who do so will be rewarded with material possessions and power, the ability to act autonomously, to be freed from dependence on God and each other. And if that is not bad enough, then the corollary is that people who suffer, people who are not successful, people who are oppressed are somehow not living into God's commandments. Blech and double blech. It's like being told that you didn't pray hard enough if God didn't answer your prayers. This goes along with how we look to blame the victim whether it is women who have spoken out in the #Me too movement, or those who have spoken out against police violence, particularly in the black community, or even the knucklehead from Alaska who said that if the Jews had been armed there wouldn't have been a holocaust!

The reward for following God's laws, by which Paul means faith working through love, these rewards are what Paul refers to in his letter to the Galatians (5:22-23) as the fruits of the

Spirit is “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness gentleness, and self-control.”... Admittedly some days are better than others.

Please note that none of these qualities are reserved for life-after-death. To experiencing these qualities is to live into the eternal life that Jesus has promised. All of these qualities were exhibited by Jesus as signs of his obedience to God. These are qualities of life in the Kingdom of God, the kingdom that Jesus initiated with his incarnation and into which he lived bringing healing and hope to those whose lives he touched. Jesus brought healing and hope in spite of the crushing violence of the Roman occupation, in spite of the blind indifference with which the Jewish leaders regarded those under their control, in spite of our natural reaction to fight violence with violence.

The cross is a sign of obedience. Most remarkable of all, that cross, that sign of suffering and death is also a sign of the triumph of life. The cross we hold is empty. Our Lord was raised from the dead. Our Lord triumphed over sin and death and in perfect obedience returned to his Father in heaven.

*“For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.”*

Amen