

LENT IN PLAIN SIGHT: CLING TO THE CROSS

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

March 13, 2022

Not long after I arrived at Second Church, some of us convened conversations about upgrading Second's roadside sign situation. Some of us lovingly refer to the current sign next to the driveway as the tombstone. Once you've seen it, you can't unsee it. Not the best symbol for a lively church and vibrant congregation! Now, those conversations were postponed by pandemic. We've restarted them in recent weeks, and so I've been thinking again about church signs. I've been keeping an eye out for ideas on form *and* content.

This morning I'd like to report to you the results of my exhaustive research. Church signs fall into three distinct categories. Number one: event announcements. "Lenten Concert: Next Sunday, 4 p.m." (That's actually true; please come.) Number two: well-worn biblical verses or simple messages. "God is Love." "Jesus saves." "John 3:16." And number three, by far the most interesting category: churchy jokes, which are often groan-inducing at best. "Seven Days without Prayer Makes One Weak." (I know. I'm sorry.) Some time ago, I saw a third-category sign that perturbed me rather amusing me. I won't say which church displayed it, but the sign read, "Apply Here: Advancement Guaranteed."

Perhaps I should just lighten up and appreciate the humor, but when I read those words on a church sign, I thought of the Apostle Paul. I wondered what he'd think of such a message on a church lawn. I thought of our early ancestors in the faith. In fact, I thought of the Christians living in first-century Corinth. And most of all, I thought of the cross.

Let's set the stage. The church—the one in Corinth—was in big trouble. Paul had started it

several years earlier. He preached there for a time, gathered a community, and then moved on to take the message of the gospel throughout the Roman Empire. The letter that we call First Corinthians was written after Paul learned what happened when he left town. There was division. There were fierce factions. I can imagine that there were heated debates over what the church sign should say. Some ideas: "Corinth Presbyterian Church, the most intelligent congregation in town." How about, "Corinth Methodist Church, where the power people pray." Or perhaps, "Corinth Baptist Church, worship every Sunday with a who's who of Corinthian nobility." Others argued over whose name should appear on the sign. Some wanted to engrave Paul as the congregation's founder. Others preferred Apollos, that silver-tongued young preacher who followed Paul. Still others suggested Peter, the rock on which the Christian movement was built.

The truth is it was getting ugly in Corinth, so Paul drafts a letter to the church with some demands. He expects renewed focus on the core meaning of the gospel. He expects a common commitment to unity, and he wastes no time in getting straight to the point. Here's what your church sign should read. Are you ready? "We proclaim Christ crucified. Only fools welcome here." Paul insists that there is only one symbol appropriate for the church—the cross. In the midst of heated debates over who was the most important, intelligent, impressive, or impactful, Paul reminds the Corinthian Christians that their faith is founded on a scandalous sign of suffering. We worship a crucified savior. In the eyes of the world, it is utter madness. We proclaim the presence of Almighty God on a cross.

No wonder it has been controversial from the outset. It didn't take long after the death and resurrection of Jesus for his followers to begin to seek ways to smooth over the horrific event of the crucifixion. Some creative souls claimed that only the human part of Jesus had died on the cross, while the divine part suffered no pain. Others, flaunting the apostle's insistence that they proclaim Christ *crucified*, suggested that the resurrection had negated the events on Calvary. Concerned about the optics, early Christian leaders tried to bury the cross, to remove it from their roadside signs. After all, it is a symbol of weakness. It's Jesus at his lowest point. It makes us all look like losers—no way to build a following or attract an audience.

In our own time, the same tactics of denial and evasion are regularly employed. Some churches dismiss the centrality of the cross or remove the symbol all together—it's such a downer. And so the way of costly discipleship and cross bearing is replaced by a thin gospel of self-improvement—Apply Here: Advancement Guaranteed. Preachers of the prosperity gospel insist that the cross was merely a temporary setback on the way to total success, and more than that, this same success is promised to you if you truly believe. A shortcut straight to glory. No cross to bear.

And I think it's fair to say that even those of us who would not identify ourselves with such a message struggle with the meaning of the cross. Butterflies and empty plastic eggs are easier to explain. Ash Wednesday and Good Friday never compete with Easter Sunday in popularity. We, like the Corinthians, still find it difficult to believe that the Christ we worship is the same suffering servant of whom Isaiah prophesied. He was despised, rejected, a man of suffering. We held him of no account. No wonder we want the lilies and the palms without the ashes and the nails. Even our crosses are gilded and ornate, worn as jewelry or proudly displayed in our homes. We want the success story. With our spiritual ancestors, there is something in us that resists the notion that the old, rugged cross is the

definition of what it means to follow Jesus. It must be something else.

But here the apostle is adamant. He leaves no room for misunderstanding; though the cross seems foolishness in a culture obsessed with success, in here it is the power of God. It is the power of God to save, to redeem, to transform, to renew. In here we meet the God who does not dutifully meet our expectations at every turn or respond on our demand. Instead, we meet the God who insists on rearranging our priorities. When we ask what it means to live as God's people, we are given not a strategic plan to follow but a cross to bear.

Why? Paul knows that only those who follow Jesus *to the cross* will know who he is. If we stop short of the cross, we misunderstand Jesus. If we stop short of the cross, we will mistake him for just another miracle worker, an exorcist, a wise and compelling teacher. If we proclaim Jesus without the cross, we will proclaim a false messiah, for his true identity can only be known at the foot of the cross, where God's foolishness prevails over human wisdom. And, in human weakness, God's strength is revealed.

For us, the cross remains a reminder that God is God, and we are not. We would never have done it this way. The very ideas of strength in weakness, gaining by losing, the power of sacrifice still seem foolish to those of us devoted to finishing first, to those who thrive on power as prominence. And so at least one message this day for people like you and me, for places like ours is this: We can take ourselves a little less seriously. All this constant self-appraisal, all these bruising comparisons, our obsession with perfection, our compulsion to cover any defects, our desire to deny human limits and pretend we achieve endlessly and effortlessly—we can put it all aside, lay it all down. We can take ourselves a little less seriously. And we can take the cross more seriously. We can take up our crosses. We can bear one another's burdens.

Remember the story that is the heart of our faith: this transcendent God who moved into our

vulnerability, our suffering, our death. The God who joined our weakness and claimed our wounds.

This is the God who calls us to take up our cross. For the gospel truth is that we know God through our suffering, through the bearing of our crosses. And that is good news. For we no longer have to hide behind these masks of stoic control or wear the protective armor of invulnerability. We no longer have to hide our sins and brokenness by declaring that others, over there, are more sinful, more broken than us. We can instead confront our weakness and even affirm with Paul that, “When I am weak, then I am strong.” We can take up the cross with full assurance that Christ has gone before us and will now share its weight and pain with us.

All week long, as I’ve prepared to preach today, a series of images has been on my mind. The pictures were taken by a French cultural protection officer in the city of Lviv. The pictures show a group of Ukrainian men. They are dressed in heavy winter coats and knit caps. With great attention and care, they are delicately wrapping and then carrying a statue of Jesus on the cross, moving it from the Armenian Cathedral in town to a protected bunker for the first time since the outbreak of World War II. I can’t look at those pictures without tearing up or think of them without an uneasy feeling in my chest. Against the terror of unprovoked war—the ultimate act of human pride and selfish hatred—this simple gesture discloses the true meaning of the cross. As so-called religious leaders justify invasion or wrap political authoritarianism in the thin veil of a coopted gospel, these ordinary men literally carried their cross. Literally clung to the cross, the cross that condemns all our attempts to make destruction the measure of our success or domination the aim of our power. The cross condemns it.

For we proclaim Christ crucified. We do not apply for self-advancement. Rather, we seek faithfulness to the one whose suffering gives our life meaning, the one whose sacrificial love sets the model for our own, the one whose death brings life, whose power is made

perfect in weakness, whose grace will never be earned or taken by force, but only received with gratitude and shared in freedom.

Here, in the shadow of the cross, we proclaim Christ crucified, the power and wisdom of God, the power stronger than all human strength, the gift of grace given to all the world. In the weeks ahead, will you pray for the strength to take up the cross that is yours to bear? You do not carry it alone. When all else spins out of control, cling to the cross.

In that symbol, in that sign, is salvation. Amen.