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1 Corinthians 1:10-18

What Matters

Not too long ago, as we were driving through Swannanoa, one of my children asked me why some churches have a cross out front. It is a good question, I responded, and the answer probably differs depending on what church you are talking about. Then I told them that for most, the cross is a reminder of Jesus' death; yet the fact that the cross is empty is also a promise that death did not end his story or ours. Now, either my response satisfied them, or they just did not want another sermon, but it apparently ended our conversation because they turned up the radio. It is not easy to be a preacher's kid.

That conversation, though, has continued to linger in my mind. Why do some churches feel it is important, perhaps even necessary, to put a cross out on the front lawn for people to see when they pass by? I still stand by my original response – the reasons are probably as different as the churches. For most, though, I would suspect the proclamation of Jesus willingness to suffer and die on the cross is the most important thing about who they are as Christians.

For many, the cross is the primary expression of our atonement – that is the theological word for the way Jesus made us one again in relationship with God. Jesus' death, they would say, is central for our life. And I don't disagree with that, though I also think the way he lived his life is central to our atonement, our being put back in right relationship, as well. Professor Delores Williams once wondered what might have happened if Christianity had fish and loaves as its primary symbol, instead of the cross. But that is another sermon. My guess, though, is that for many churches, an empty cross on the church lawn symbolizes theological affirmations they feel called to make visible to the world.

But I've been wondering how Paul might feel about a cross standing on the church lawn. My guess is that it would depend on how it was being used. Was it being used as a way of proclaiming their faith in a God who did not let anything, not even death, separate us, separate the world, from God's love? Paul might be okay with that.

But what if the placement of the cross was intended to be more of a symbol of religious superiority—sort of like what is implied on church billboards that proclaim THEY have THE answer, and anyone who disagrees with their answer is just plain wrong at best, destined for damnation at worst. I don't think Paul would approve of that kind of reason for placing a cross on the lawn of a church. After all, as Paul claims near the end of this particular passage, the cross subverts our claims of wisdom and power; it does not endorse them.

And it was Paul's comprehension of the cross as primarily subversive that made him intolerant of all the petty quarreling going on in the Corinthian church. "Chloe's people told me about you," he writes in the beginning of this letter, "and you are fighting with each other!" You can just hear the disapproval in Paul's voice. After all, it was not like they were fighting over something important, something crucial to who they were as people who followed Jesus Christ. Rather, the Greek verb used for fighting suggests that the Corinthians were bickering about small

things, petty thing, things defined more by jealousy and a desire for power, than by theological significance.

In short, at least one thing the Corinthians were arguing over was which leader was the most charismatic leader of the church – Paul, Apollos, or Cephas. They were having a popularity contest of sorts over which preacher/leader the people found most effective. So the church members were lining up in different camps and making their case. And all of it was driving Paul nuts! “What are you doing!?” he writes, “Has Jesus Christ been divided? [an implied no, of course] Was Paul crucified for you or were you baptized in Paul’s name?” he asked them.

Then, he does something I know all too well—he makes some incorrect claims, but he does it in a way that is without doubt, before he realizes his mistake. He thanks God that he did not baptize any of them. But then he remembers that he did baptize a couple of them; oh and wait, he baptized a whole household of them—but who cares, Paul essentially decides. “I don’t remember who I baptized,” he announces, “and I am glad about that.” Because that is not what matters! Your petty quarrels do not matter, he implies. All of your struggles over jealousy and power do not matter. They are actually antithetical to the Gospel.

What matters, Paul indicates, is that in a world defined by the cultural values of wisdom, eloquence, and power-- which was the world of the Greeks in that time, an environment perhaps similar to the world of celebrity in our time-- in **that** kind of a world, a crucified savior, symbolized by the cross, is horribly counter-cultural. A crucified savior flies in the face of both Jewish and Greek conceptions of strength and lordship.

Let us not forget that crucifixion was the Roman’s form of capital punishment. It was a dehumanizing form of torture and death reserved for revolutionaries, terrorists, slaves and the worst criminals. The “cross” was associated with weakness, shame, low status, and the dregs of society¹. My guess is that even if persecution were not a factor, no church back in that time would have ever considered putting up a cross on the church lawn. It would be like putting an electric chair in ours.

But even without the symbol for all to see, preaching that a crucified Jewish man was God’s way of saving the world, of putting us back into right relationship with God, sounds plain foolish, ridiculous, like complete nonsense to those who have not yet been claimed by baptism. Who worships a God who suffers and dies? And yet, the proclamation of the cross, of God’s foolish wisdom through vulnerable love, the declaration that God loves this world so much that God was willing to suffer and die is what matters, Paul claims. That proclamation is central to the Gospel. It is why we are who we are.

None of this is about who is the best preacher or evangelist, writer or teacher. Actually, the cross, Paul might assert, should always stand as a challenge to our own wisdom. It should always stand as a challenge to our own power. Because when it comes to what we know about God, if what we know makes sense and fits as comfortably into our lives as a cross necklace might fit around our necks, but it doesn’t challenge our worldview, there is a good chance it isn’t Gospel.

So I wonder if Paul would even care if churches were putting up crosses in their yards or not. He might argue that it is a superfluous issue—sort of like the Corinthians arguing over whose baptism was the best because so-and-so administered it! The question, Paul might pose, is not “Is there a cross out front,” but rather, “Are the people living a cross-shaped life?” Is the congregation living a cross-shaped life? Are they focused on living out the proclamation of a crucified and risen Savior, a Gospel that shuns traditional understandings of strength and wisdom, of power and might, of who counts and who doesn’t?

Are they focused on living a cross-shaped life that always challenges their worldview, never lets them get comfortable with the ways things are, but always calls them to reexamine what is truly important for discipleship? Rather than making sure the cross is standing up straight out front, are they living as counter-testimonies to a world that highly values eloquence and wisdom, power and might—where the story of Justin Bieber’s arrest makes the top news while the increased killing in Ukraine is in a small paragraph on page 5? That is the kind of stuff that matters, Paul would argue both to the Corinthians and to us.

And Paul’s focus on a cross-shaped life as what matters brought to mind a story that a friend shared with me about Ruby Bridgesⁱⁱ. Ruby Bridges, as many of you know and remember, was just 6 years old when, in 1960, she stood before a judge who ordered her to go to first grade in the William Franz Elementary School in New Orleans. No other black child had ever before stepped foot on that ground. In her memoir, Ruby recounted “My mother and I went to school with the marshals. The crowd outside the building was ready. Racists spat at us and shouted things like ‘Go home (I won’t repeat the word they would add). [You] are not allowed here.’ One woman screamed at me, ‘I’m going to poison you. I’ll find a way.’ That woman made the same threat every morning,” Ms. Bridges remembered.

And that was Ruby’s routine for much of that year. She went to school with the Federal Marshals and walked past an incensed crowd making threats of physical violence against her, a 6 year old child. And then she would learn all by herself in a classroom where every single white child had been withdrawn from school. She was not even allowed to eat her peanut butter and jelly sandwich in the lunchroom. She always had to eat alone still in the classroom. And then she would go home and just do it all over again the next day. That was her first grade year.

One day, however, there was a break in her routine. Her teacher, Mrs. Henry, noticed Ruby walking toward the school and the many protestors, as usual. But then, Mrs. Henry saw Ruby stop, turn toward the angry, howling crowd, and seem to speak to them. The crowd looked ready to pounce in response to Ruby and the marshals were trying like crazy to keep Ruby moving. Finally, Ruby stopped saying whatever she was saying and walked into the school.

Mrs. Henry immediately asked Ruby what happened. Why did she try and talk to that crowd? Ruby responded that she had not stopped to talk with them. “But Ruby, I saw you talking,” Mrs. Henry pressed. “I saw your lips moving.” “I wasn’t talking,” said Ruby, “I was praying—I was praying for them.” You see, her parents were raising her out of her baptism and it was part of Ruby’s routine to stop every morning to pray for the people who hated her. But on that morning, she had forgotten to do it until she was already in the middle of the mob. So she stopped to do it then.

After school that day, Ruby went back through the crowd as usual and then headed for home, accompanied by her two federal marshals. And after they made it past the crowd, she paused, as she always did, to pray again the prayer that she repeated not just once, but twice a day—before and after school. *“Please God, be with me and try to forgive these people,”* she prayed, *“Because even if they say those bad things, they don’t know what they’re doing. So you could forgive them, just like you did those folks a long time ago, when they said those terrible things about You.”*

I don’t know if Ruby’s church had a cross out front, but when every student in her class withdrew rather than be in a room with her, Ruby prayed for them. That’s a cross-shaped life.

I don’t know if she had a cross around her neck, but when a community of people aligned itself against a six year old girl, screaming with hatred, Ruby prayed for them. That’s a cross-shaped life.

I don’t know if Ruby’s family ever suffered the violence of having a cross burned on their lawn by the Klan, but when a woman threatened her every single day for a year, Ruby prayed for her. That’s a cross-shaped life.

It is the antithesis of petty church quarreling. It is the antithesis of our era’s celebrity culture. It is the antithesis of what many might call wise or powerful. But the way Ruby lived, even as a 6 year old girl, is what matters, Paul would proclaim. That’s what holy power looks like. That’s what Gospel looks like. And that is what the cross is about—a symbol that demonstrated God’s willingness to be weak in power in order to be strong in love; a symbol that reminds us that hate and death and our certainty do not have the last word, but God does.

The cross is not a symbol to lord over others, or to make one feel more religious, or to be abused as a symbol of power or control. Frankly, it really does not matter whether or not your church has one out on the church lawn. What matters, Paul would claim, is if the cross, this counter-testimony to human wisdom and power, eloquence and certainty, if that is what shapes the way you live your life or not.

ⁱ McLaughlin, Jarrett. A paper written for The Well in 2010. I am grateful for his work that infused this sermon.

ⁱⁱ Jarrett’s paper that cites www.pbs.org/wnet/aaworld/history/spotlight_september.html and a third person account on www.everystudents.com/wires/prayer.html. Ruby Bridges backs up this story on her own website.