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3/3/24, Lent 3, 1 Cor 1:18-25

“What A Fool Believes”

Years ago, I had a good friend who was a member of the Unitarian church in town. Unitarians believe in God, but they don't often believe in the divinity of Jesus or of the Holy Spirit. Somehow, we got talking about religion. She said, “I love the teachings of Jesus and I like a lot of the stories in the Bible, but what I can't tolerate is all the talk about death.”

That's not an uncommon sentiment. In fact, there are lots of Trinitarians that would prefer to downplay the cross and crucifixion. You probably know of best-selling author and pastor of one of the largest churches in America, Joel Osteen. Instead of displaying a cross at his Lakewood Church, they display a big globe. Osteen claims they believe the cross has meaning, but they like to emphasize going out into the world with a message of hope. They like to keep it positive.

The fact is that, from the beginning, the cross has been something of a scandal. For Paul, this was important. He was trying to unite the church in Corinth and convince them Jesus was the Savior of the world, but the message of crucifixion was, as he said, “a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles.”

In other words, Jewish people would not accept a Messiah, a Savior, that died at the hands of the Roman Empire like a common criminal. The Greeks, who placed great value on philosophical wisdom, could not make logical sense of the Son of a God dying on a cross.

Here we are in 2024 and the cross, an ancient instrument of torture and death, is the chief symbol of our religion. The cross still puts us at odds with the culture around us. We're about being successful and being “young at heart.” We deny death, with our age-defying moisturizers and refusal to buy in a 55+ housing development. I became eligible for an AARP membership three years ago. I know there are good financial deals for members, but I haven't taken advantage of any of them, because I don't want to admit I'm old enough for AARP.

Paul thought the scandal of the cross was important enough at the beginning of his letter. He had to address the question: Why the cross? Why is death such a central part of our faith? I think if it was that important to Paul, it's worth taking a Sunday and

considering the cross. I want to share with you two theories about the meaning of the death of Jesus on the cross. Then, I'll conclude with some thoughts on what the crucifixion might say about God.

The first theory about why the crucifixion of Jesus was necessary is called the Substitutionary Theory of Atonement. In the year 1097, Anselm of Canterbury wrote a treatise titled "Why Did God become Human?"

In it, he answered the question why did God need to become incarnate in Jesus with an argument that went like this: Because of our disobedience to God, we are all sinners. Forgiveness requires that compensation be made. To forgive sin without a price to be paid, would imply that sin doesn't matter all that much.

But God is an infinite being, so our debt is infinite. According to Anselm, only an infinite being can pay an infinite debt. Therefore, Jesus was necessary. As the incarnation of God, he is the infinite being whose death pays the price of our disobedience. Therefore, we can be forgiven. That's the Substitutionary Theory of Atonement. Jesus paid the price for our sin by dying on the cross.

The apostle Paul was a proponent of another theory for the meaning of the cross. Some have called it the Participatory Theory of Atonement. In this way of thinking, the proclamation "Christ crucified" becomes a metaphor for personal transformation.

Here's what Paul says in the letter to the Galatians, "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2:19-20). Paul's crucifixion wasn't literal, but it was symbolic of an inner change.

Here's how he puts it in the book of Romans: "All of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death. Therefore, have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:3-4).

For Paul, crucifixion and resurrection, dying and rising, aren't just things that happen at the end of life. They are the way to approach life. They describe the path of personal change. We let guilt and shame die in order to live with assurance and respect. We allow prejudiced attitudes to die in order to live in truth and love. We allow the negative things people have said about us and that we've internalized to die in order to live

knowing we are accepted. It's dying and rising that allowed John Newton to pen those words of the great hymn, "I once was lost, but now I'm found. I was blind, but now I see."

As people of faith, we don't deny death. We accept it as the way to a more full and abundant life. Jesus said, "Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds."

Jesus even invited his followers to participate in what he was doing by saying, "If anyone wants to be my disciple, let them deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me." Of course, Jesus was not literally pointing us to crucifixion, but to the reality that out of death, God can bring new life.

When you think about it, we have a peculiar kind of God. I was thinking about some of the choices God is said to have made along the way, like putting Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and telling them there was one tree they were not to touch. I could've told God that wasn't going to end well.

Of all the people God could have selected to be the "chosen people," God apparently selected a bunch of slaves in Egypt. Of all the women in the world to give birth to God's only son, we claim God chose an unmarried teenager named Mary. The Bible tells us Jesus chose Peter to be the rock upon which he would build his church. Peter who stepped out of the boat and sank because of his lack of faith; Peter who would deny Jesus three times in one night.

Our God has a way of choosing things that might seem a little foolish, such as the way of the cross, but as Paul says in 1 Corinthians, "For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength."

For me, the cross is an indication of how strong and how pervasive the love of God is. We might not like to think about death or talk about it, but there is no topic that's off limits for God. There is no limit to how low God will stoop, in order to meet us where we are. We might not like to think about all the terrible things human beings do to one another, but on the cross, Jesus faced the worst thing that human beings can do to another human. We might not like to get involved in the messiness of politics, but God is willing to deal with all of it.

When I was really young, preschool, maybe first grade, we lived on the corner of a busy four-way intersection. Car accidents were a regular enough thing that, as soon as I

heard the sound, I knew exactly what it was and I knew exactly what would happen. Both my parents would stop what they were doing and run out of the house as fast as they could.

One day, there was a tire screech and a yelp out in front of the house. I followed my parents out the front door. This time it wasn't a car accident. Our dog got loose, chased the truck, and lost its life. My mom and I stood in the front yard, while my dad went up the street to deal with everything.

When my mom told me what happened, I started bawling as hard as I ever would. She sat down in the grass and took me in her lap as I cried uncontrollably. I've never forgotten the look of pain on her face. Even then, I got the sense that her pain wasn't so much because the dog died, but because I was in so much pain.

When I see a cross, like the one here in our sanctuary, it reminds me I have a God who doesn't shy away from suffering. I have a God who sits with me during the most painful events of my life. I have a God who hurts when I hurt and who transforms hurt into healing, tragedy into triumph.

I believe in that kind of foolishness.