

A Scandalous Word 1 Corinthians 1:18-25

Third Sunday in Lent/ 4th March 2018

As I shared in the March *Messenger*, this text in Paul's letter to the church in Corinth never ceases to amaze me—amaze and offend. “For the word of the cross,” Paul wrote, “is foolishness to those who are perishing; but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (1 Cor. 1:18). Amazement might make more sense than *offense*. So why offense?

The answer is embedded in the Greek. Paul says that the cross of Christ is “foolishness,” from the Greek *moria*, meaning “folly, absurdity.” Several verses later Paul says, “We preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ is the power of God and wisdom” (1 Cor. 1:23-24). The words “stumbling block” is not strong enough, for behind the English is the Greek word *skandalon*, as in “scandalous.” The cross is not merely “foolish” and absurd, it's also scandalous, offensive, a shock to one's notion of order and propriety, an assault to reason and sense. It's shocking and disturbing and astonishing that a cross—this Roman instrument of brutal torture and unspeakable pain, and, from a Jewish perspective, an instrument of death, of extreme humiliation and disgust (both for the victim and for the one forced to look at a crucifixion)—yes, it's shocking that a cross, of all things, should somehow, some way be a source of life and power and hope.

Indeed, Paul wants us to see that the cross is a *sermon*. “For the word,” the *logos*, “of the cross is foolishness...” What Jesus experienced on the cross, what was revealed about the nature of God on and through a cross, what was achieved on and through the cross, the cross as symbolic act—all of it is preaching something to us, conveying a message, extending a word. We could say, then, that the cross is an event of proclamation. And the cross conveys this “word” or message not once, but time and again. The cross is always proclaiming a message to us through this event that continues to encounter us. Trying to summarize or fully articulate the meaning of this sermon, the meaning of the cross, is, of course, the work of a lifetime, the journey of faith. And often what the cross conveys (from the perspective of the world) is, indeed, foolish, disturbing, unsettling, absurd, zany, and maybe even a little crazy. But to those who have been struck by the word of the cross, who have been moved by its message, to those who have been stirred and transformed by the deeper wisdom of the cross, it is something else entirely. Paul says that those who have been struck by the word of the cross know it is—*remarkably!*—the “power of God.”

This is what amazes me. The cross conveys, transfers, reveals, mediates, articulates, points to and participates in the very power of God. The Greek word for *power* that Paul uses here, *dunamis*, is related to the English word *dynamite* and *dynamic*. Sure, it's an “explosive” image, but it should be viewed less as an expression of violent eruption and more as intense, transpersonal, that is, non-human energy that extends to us the dynamic being of God, a force that *moves* us and *changes* us and *transforms* us. Paul uses the word *dunamis* (power) to describe his own personal experience of Christ, as well as the work of the Holy Spirit.

All this probably sounds unusually abstract. I'm not trying to be theologically obtuse. Instead, I'm trying to emphasize and draw out what's embedded in the text. What I'm trying

to express is very real and concrete—there’s nothing more real than the excruciating suffering of a body on a cross (especially for the one being crucified). I’m trying to suggest that the cross was not just a one-time event in Jesus’ life; the event itself reveals something to us in our present. It opens up something about the nature of God for us, something about the grace of God; something that was true then and true now. In Fleming Rutledge’s recent book on *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ*, a magisterial study almost 600-pages in length, taking eighteen years to write, she asks an important question, “On the cross, was Jesus simply showing us something (that is, something about God)... or was something actually happening (that is, did Jesus achieve something for us on the cross)?”¹ Probably a little of both. However, whatever was shown and whatever meaning it has cannot be mediated to us apart from the crucifixion as scandal. Actually, we need to remember that, “In the early days of the Christian movement the *scandal* of the cross was far more self-evident than its *meaning*.”² The “meaning” took centuries to articulate—I should say “meanings,” because the Church has never spoken with one voice or with one understanding of the cross.

Almost two thousand years later, contemporary Christians are prone to talk about the meaning of the cross, and over the centuries theologians have conjured various “theories of the atonement,” attempting to articulate what cannot be articulated.³ We throw around statements such as “Christ died for my sins,” assuming that “understand” the cross, that we understand what Jesus was doing on the cross. Our desire to focus on the “meaning” of the cross can too easily become an abstraction, thus moving us away from the scandalous nature of the cross. Whenever we say what something *means*, we freeze-frame it, define it, domesticate it to control it, tame it. Once we think we know what it means, we’re done with it and we move on.

The Apostle Paul knew what we tend to forget: the cross is always scandalous. It’s an affront to reason and sense. The “foolishness” of the cross, Paul said, preaches an unsettling word. And its message is no less disturbing for us than it was for him. For Paul, the scandal was and is that the power of God, the wisdom of God could be at work in the most surprising and disturbing and shocking events and people—as in a crucified body. The cry of dereliction from a crucified body is heard by the Living God, indeed, is the cry of the Living God. Through Christ, God experiences the pain and anguish of a crucified body. Indeed, God is—can you believe it?—known, revealed in a crucified body. God’s love and judgment and grace and power are at work in a crucified body—suffering, crying, struggling, loving, dying. This is nothing less than scandalous—and it needs to remain so. We should be wary about moving too quickly from the offence of the cross to its meaning. And we should always be suspicious of anyone who says *this*—and only *this*—is what the cross means. Yes, the cross has meaning(s) for us, but it’s also scandalous, and it’s the scandalous nature of the cross that we need to respect, honor, and preserve. Because, you see, if it’s true that we discover God at work in Christ suffering on a cross, this means that we cannot run from or avoid similar “bodies,” that is, people who are being crucified today, in one form or the other. In other words, attention given to the scandalous nature of the cross will open us up to meet God precisely in places and people and situations that scandalize and disturb us.

In *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*—referring to the widespread practice of lynching in American society during Jim Crow—contemporary theologian James Cone connects the lynching tree in the African-American experience and the suffering of Christ on the cross (also known in scripture as a “tree”). Cone says, “When American Christians realize that they can meet Jesus only in the crucified bodies in our midst, they will encounter the real scandal of the cross.”⁴ Just sit with this for a moment.

Where is Jesus in the world today? Do you want to know where Jesus is in the world today? Wherever bodies are being senselessly crucified. He's not causing the pain, but sharing in, being present to the pain and suffering. God is encountered in human suffering, not apart from it. We must not be afraid to enter the wounds of God's people, face, share in the suffering of our neighbors. We must not be afraid to meet God in our deepest wounds. That's where we meet Jesus today. That's where Jesus always is, has always been, participating in human suffering. God is not "up there" in the sky, distant, aloof, detached. God is "down here," all the way down into the depths of human suffering and pain, all the way "down" into hell itself. This is just as scandalous for us today as it was for Paul and the early church—and it's just as liberating for us as it was for Paul and the first Christians.

When we enter into the places of deepest suffering, such as a cross, when we share in the suffering of our neighbors, when our lives become cruciform something of God's power and wisdom and transforming love are experienced—I don't know how or why, because this makes no sense to me, it's foolish and absurd, but it's true.

Like you, I've been very disturbed by the shooting, several weeks ago, at the Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. And, like you, I've been impressed by the bold, courageous voice of the students. There's one image I can't seem to shake, though, which was shared in the press around the world. It's the photo of a parent crying inconsolably, in anguish, holding a young woman in her arms, a student, also crying. There's so much pain in that photo. Then you notice something else. On the mother's forehead is the mark of the cross in black ash. It was Ash Wednesday. I don't want to read too much meaning into this. I don't know what it means. But there's something profound about the juxtaposition of the beginning of Lent, the symbol of the cross, and unfathomable human suffering experienced that day. It's scandalous. I wonder (perhaps I'm being naïve or foolish) if this Ash Wednesday shooting, with its image of the cross of ash, is allowing us to enter into the suffering caused by gun violence in a new way. There's something different about the response to this shooting. Something has moved. Consider the "March for Our Lives" for gun control, in Washington, DC, on March 24, which will be led by our children. Youth and adults from this church and other churches in the presbytery will be there; I plan to attend. Baltimore City will be sending sixty busloads of children to the march. I can't help but think of Isaiah... "a little child shall lead them" (Isaiah 6:11).

As we move through Lent and soon relive the drama of Holy Week, I invite you to reflect and to pray and ask and share with family and friends: consider the cross. What is the "word of the cross" to you? If you wear a cross, what does it mean to you? What is the cross saying to you? Where is the scandalous suffering of the crucified revealing the power and presence of God, leading you to act?

¹ Fleming Rutledge, *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 17.

² Joel B. Green and Mark D. Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross: Atonement in New Testament and Contemporary Contexts* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2000), cited in Rutledge, 17.

³ For a helpful overview of these "theories," see Colin E. Gunton, *The Actuality of Atonement: A Study of Metaphor, Rationality, and the Christian Tradition* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2003).

⁴ James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2016), 158.