

**Sermon, Pastor Mike Button**  
**Occasion: 4 Epiphany**  
**Date: February 2, 2014**  
**Theme: The Wisdom of the Cross**  
**Text: 1 Corinthians 1: 18-31**

**NRS 1 Corinthians 1**

*<sup>18</sup>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. <sup>19</sup>For it is written,*

*"I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,  
and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart."*

*<sup>20</sup>Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? <sup>21</sup>For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. <sup>22</sup>For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, <sup>23</sup>but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, <sup>24</sup>but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. <sup>25</sup>For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.*

*<sup>26</sup>Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. <sup>27</sup>But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; <sup>28</sup>God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, <sup>29</sup>so that no one might boast in the presence of God. <sup>30</sup>He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, <sup>31</sup>in order that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."*

**May the blessing of the Lord rest and remain upon you always, for the sake of Jesus the Christ. Amen.**

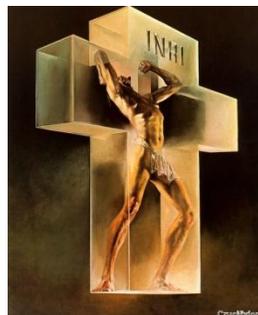
**Every week Renae, our administrative assistant, and I spend several hours searching for images to project in our Sunday morning worship.**

**We consult a variety of websites, several of which suggest images relevant to the day's lessons and to different parts of our liturgy. Sometimes we're spot on, sometimes not so much, and occasionally I'm asked at the end of service, "What was that?" Thank you for your support!**

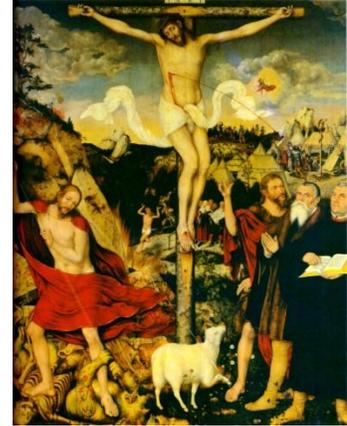
**Mostly we do okay, but I often find myself struggling over images of the crucifixion. I'm certainly not an art historian, but I'd wager that the crucifixion of Jesus has been painted, sculpted, or otherwise depicted more than any other image in the vast library of Christian iconography.**



**There is an enormous array of art**



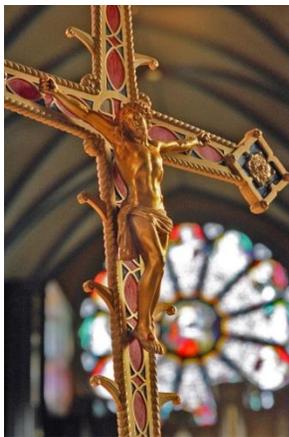
work showing Jesus being judged by Pilate, scourged by the Praetorian guard, carrying his cross, being nailed to the cross, hanging from the cross, being taken down off the cross, and finally being entombed by Joseph of Arimathea. I would even venture to guess that there are more pictures of the crucifixion than of the resurrection. A lot of this cross art has a Roman Catholic pedigree, but historically Lutherans, too, have included very graphic depictions of the crucifixion in their sanctuaries. We see here Luther standing at the foot of Jesus' cross while the blood of Christ's wounded side spews forth on Luther and his colleagues as he expounds the Word.



Here's another image of how the people of his own day understood Luther as preaching Christ crucified.



Over the top? A lot of people would say so, myself included, which may explain why more and more churches, including Roman Catholic ones, now tend to shy away from having a traditional crucifix. While I was at Luther Seminary, not quite a thousand years ago, a big fight broke out over the acquisition of a processional cross that had the corpus, that is, the body of the crucified Jesus attached to it.



Some students and faculty argued that we, like Paul in First Corinthians 1, must preach Christ and him crucified. Others insisted that, like Paul in First Corinthians 15, if Christ is not raised from the dead then our faith is in vain and we are, of all people, most to be pitied. Crucifix, or empty cross, that's the big theological question, but for me and for many other pastors the question is also much more practical. Do we want a crucifix in the chancel that might possibly scare our children or otherwise freak out visitors who are new to the faith? But then how are we to understand the cross if we're too squeamish to show it as the actual instrument of torture on which our Savior was left to hang and die?

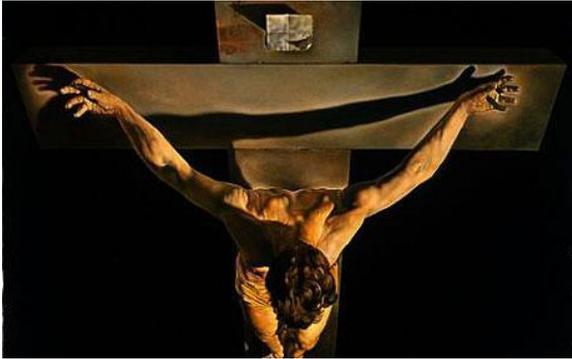
As Paul attests and as the art of the ages affirms, the cross is at the center of our faith, and the cross has always been controversial.

In the first centuries of Christian mission, preaching Christ the healer, or Christ the teacher, or Christ the worker of miracles was an easy sell. People were then, as they are now, eager to hear how Jesus raised the dead, stilled the storm, or revealed secret wisdom. But when the talk turned



to the crucifixion people would then, as they do now, start waving big red flags. People would ask, "He saved others, but he couldn't save himself?" Or, "He died in a way that his very own Scriptures (Deuteronomy 21) describe as cursed?" Or, as people are wont to ask today, "How is it that you say Jesus died for my sins? Is God the Father of Jesus so blood thirsty that only human sacrifice could persuade him to forgive our failings?"

**This is what Paul described as the scandal of the cross, folly to Greeks and a stumbling block to Jews.**



**When you get right down to it: We proclaim as our savior a man who died a state criminal in the most humiliating, ignominious fashion humans have yet found to kill one another, which is saying something. This is a hard sell, but you can make it an easier sell by discounting or minimizing the cross. You can say, for example, that the cross was just one of those sad, tragic things that sometimes happen to great men. You could say that Jesus was the victim of a vicious religious elite, or that he was**

**done in by a corrupt Roman governor, all of whom sold their souls for a handful of shekels. Or you could say that since Christ is now raised, then the cross really doesn't matter anymore. With Christ now ascended to the right hand of the Father, all that was past has now been swallowed up in the glory of the resurrection. You might call this last option the Corinthian theology of glory.**

**As I described in last week's sermon, the Corinthians were sort of like Christian sophomores. Under Paul's tutelage, they had experienced some very powerful, even life-changing spiritual gifts, including things like speaking in tongues, angelic utterances, and other demonstrations of divine power.**

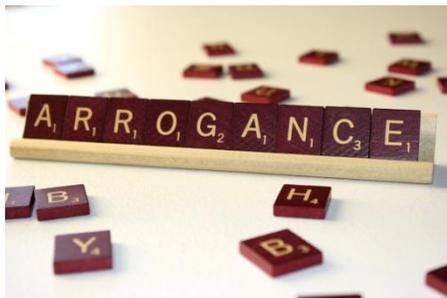


**They had, you might say, touched the hem of the risen Christ's robe, but in the process they have now lost sight of the cross. And having pushed aside the reality of Christ's cross, these Corinthians are starting to push on one another. They're beginning to one-up one another over who is the more spiritually gifted. They're dividing into various factions, aligning themselves with the**

**teachers they have come to know, be that Paul or Apollos or Cephas. There's one group who thinks that they are so spiritually exalted that they will only take instruction from Christ himself. It's definitely getting ugly, to the point that their pushing and shoving has even begun to intrude on the Lord's Supper.**

**The Corinthians have come down with a bad case of the spiritual big head, a well-known syndrome in church life.**

**As a younger pastor I lamented, long and loud, over how terribly the previous generation of clergy had messed up the church. But now -- Praise God! -- the Lord had raised up new leaders, like me, who would right all their bone-headed wrongs. (After church you can ask me how that's worked out.) So you can understand how Paul occasionally gets a little snarky with his Christian sophomores, but much more constructively, Paul answers their hot-air theology of glory with the earthy, real-life theology of the cross.**



**As you read today's Second Lesson, you'll notice that Paul does not attempt to explain the cross in terms of either the forgiveness of sins or the justification of the ungodly, as he does elsewhere in letters like Romans and Galatians. Instead, Paul proclaims the cross of Jesus as God's way of blowing up human**

wisdom. Think about it. If you were to dream up a religion that would sell like hot cakes, would you try to convince people to follow a crucified Messiah? Of course not!



you fat. Glory, glory, hallelujah!

Likewise, you'd look to build a church with every possible convenience, a full slate of challenging, but comforting programs, and of course, lots of people just like you or just like you want to be, cool, confident, and above all, classy.

You'd promote a Savior who would satisfy your every need, destroy your every enemy, and promise you an endless future of never ending glory. You know, harps, crowns, streets of gold and wings of angels.

Heaven would be a great celestial mall in the sky, where the stores never close, your credit never runs out, where no bills ever come due and the Cinnabon rolls are the ultimate health food that never makes



But Paul says that this is exactly the type of thinking that God explodes in the cross of Jesus.

Why? Because this is exactly the type of thinking that makes us greedy and self-centered.

This is the type of thinking that turns us from being servants of God to consumers of goods. This the type of thinking that makes it easy for us not just to ignore the poor but to blame them, the type of thinking that puts the focus on me and mine, that makes selfishness a virtue and sacrifice a folly. If you really think about it, this is exactly the type of thinking that makes possible exactly the type of world we now inhabit.



“But we proclaim,” writes Paul, “Christ crucified,” a stumbling block to the religiously enlightened, foolishness to the philosophically inclined. We proclaim Christ crucified, who stands the world’s wisdom on its head and breaks open our souls to bear the fruits of righteousness. We proclaim Christ crucified, who calls fools like me to speak his Word and elects poor souls like you to be his Body. We proclaim Christ crucified, who stops every tongue, bends every knee, and humbles every heart that we may be transformed to be salt, light, promise.