

Stumbling, Foolish Truth

By
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from the pulpit of
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1 Corinthians 1:18-31

¹⁸For 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. ¹⁹For it is written, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.” ²⁰Where 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? ²¹For 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. ²²For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, ²³but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, ²⁴but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵For God’s foolishness is wiser than human

wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength. ²⁶Consider 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. ²⁷But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; ²⁸God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, ²⁹so that no one might boast in the presence of God. ³⁰He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, ³¹in order that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."

Micah 6:1-8

Hear what the LORD says: Rise, plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice. ²Hear, you mountains, the controversy of the LORD, and you enduring foundations of the earth; for the LORD has a controversy with his people, and he will contend with Israel. ³"O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me! ⁴For I brought you up from the land of Egypt, and redeemed you from the house of slavery; and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. ⁵O my people, remember now what King Balak of Moab devised, what Balaam son of Beor answered him, and what happened from Shittim to Gilgal, that you may know the saving acts of the LORD."

⁶"With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? ⁷Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" ⁸He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

All in all, it's a rather ugly symbol. Two pieces of wood, perpendicular at their intersecting point about two thirds of the way up the vertical beam. Its ugliness is matched by its horrific utilitarian function: to make someone suffer a good long while before they finally expired. The cross is an instrument of death.

And I say it's rather ugly, but we have done quite a good job of trying to make it not so hideous. We gild it. Maybe the gold makes it more palatable, I don't know. We bejewel it. Tiffany's sells a cross brooch, crusted in 18k gold and diamonds for \$24,000. I was going to make a joke about that, but I don't know where everyone shops, and I don't have everyone's pledge card back.

Kings and Emperors parade it on their soldiers' breastplates as a sign of conquer and carry it through their streets as a symbol of imperial glory. We cover it in palm branches on Palm Sunday and then in flowers on Easter. We either turn it into a symbol of power or try to camouflage it.

Last summer I toured a stunning, local church that was entirely constructed on site in the manner of a 14th century cathedral. It was truly magnificent gothic and Romanesque architecture. Yet something was amiss the entire time I was on the tour. I couldn't put my finger on it at first, but it finally struck me that there was not a single cross anywhere. Not in the stone masonry, or the woodwork, or any of the stained glass, minus one small image tucked into the farthest corner of the chancel, away from the view of nearly anyone.

I asked the tour guide why that was so. He said, "Oh we are a church that wants to focus on the joyful parts of Christianity. We choose not to spend time dwelling on suffering." You can't see it from the back pew, but I'm rolling my eyes. That's what I did to the tour guide as well. Now what is that about? We don't want to dwell on suffering.

And it's not just that church, there's a whole movement of self-described *seeker-friendly* churches where you won't find a single cross in their worship spaces either, gilded or not. They don't want any visitors scandalized by it. They want to be seen as winners and dying seems like the ultimate loss.

At its core Christianity is a faith that expresses an understanding of who God is as revealed in Jesus of Nazareth. To be sure, we adore the morality of his teachings. It's what unites us with the world's great religions, calling us to ways of peace, compassion, gentleness and healing. People can get on board with that. But then someone asks us what happened to Jesus, how did his story end? And how do we answer that without naming the horror of it?

He was executed by the state when he was only in his mid-30s for causing too much trouble. He was drawing people with nothing and people with great means and seemed to be disturbing the peace. His message was a threat to Rome and all the little powers that coalesced around it.

And the message was that the reign of God is inbreaking into our world; and if we can face it, and lay claim to it, and let it lay claim to us, then its power will reshape everything. If that wasn't foolish enough for Jesus to be going around saying, he went to Jerusalem and said it there.

He knew the threat was real, and yet he kept at it; kept blessing, and healing, welcoming outcasts, and strangers, forgiving sinners, and calling all to repentance. It was only a matter of time before his death warrant was signed. And when it happened, his closest disciples fled. People have been fleeing the scene ever since.

It's why Kierkegaard says, "For this reason his whole life was a terrible collision with the merely human conception of what love is."¹ What did his deep love for God and for God's people get him? It got him killed. It's just too much. We either flee from it or sanitize it.

But Paul said, "I have to preach the cross." That's because of what the cross tells us about God, and what it tells us about ourselves.

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First, we should acknowledge the sheer violence of it. Crucifixion was a horrible way to die; a mixture of brutality and shame. It was surely an act of political violence, orchestrated by the government. But was it

¹Kierkegaard, Søren, and George Pattison. *Works of Love*. Translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. First Harper Perennial Modern Thought edition. New York, New York: HarperPerennial, ModernThought, 2009., p. 115.

sacred violence? Did God warrant Christ's death? What does his suffering mean?

Christian history has long wrestled with those questions. Growing up, my church told us that Jesus had to die because the bill had come due. The theory went something like this: because God is a just and righteous deity, and we as people are just the pits, a punishment was now warranted for the folly of humanity. A sacrifice had to be made. So Jesus took one for the team. A sinless man consumed the sins of the world to appease a Holy God.

Thankfully there were always those in the life of the church that arrived at other conclusions to the tragedy of calvary. Many have noted that no less than in the world of antiquity, our current day is a world filled with violence. War and exploitation and self-aggrandizement are still glorified. The powerful still do what they must to keep their power. Vulnerable people are still hurt.

This is the real world where salvation occurs. And of course, once we face the violence of the cross, we gain the capacity to fathom its power. The late theologian, James Cone, made the connection between the cross and the lynching tree for black people in American society during the latter 19th and early 20th centuries.

He wrote, "In that era, the lynching tree joined the cross as the most emotionally charged symbols in the African American community—symbols that represented both death and the promise of redemption, judgment and the offer of mercy, suffering and the power of hope.

Both the cross and the lynching tree represented the worst in human beings and at the same time 'an unquenchable ontological thirst' for life that refuses to let the worst determine our final meaning."²

Do you know what he's saying? He's saying that Christ crucified manifested God's liberating and loving reign in the contradictions of a community that was undergoing persecution and suffering. Marginalized people found—and continue to find—in the cross-God's critique of power.

² Cone, James H. *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*. Paperback edition. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2013, p. 3.

This weekend we witnessed again inexplicable violence committed against a black body at the hands of the state. Footage of Memphis police officers revealing their barbaric acts that led to the death of Tyre Nichols, illustrates in painful, powerful, and prophetic ways what the cross says to people without power.

The cross doesn't explain the full causation of suffering, but in its witness to unjust suffering, it offers the answer of the depth to which God will descend to join us in our broken nature. To not abandon us when the world seems hellbent on destroying us. That's what the cross means to me.

Last summer my family spent a week at the shore in North Carolina and my wife, Abby, reminded me to pack some good beach reads. So, when she looked over at me one day sitting in my beach chair, I was minding my own business and casually reading the *Confessions of St. Augustine*. It was her turn to roll her eyes and say loud enough for the lifeguards to hear, "You are the only person on this coastline that would consider that a beach read." But I pretended I didn't hear her, and you know what I read? Let me tell you.

Augustine, writing in the 4th century, said, "He who for us is life itself descended here and endured our death and slew it by the abundance of his life...he did not delay, but ran crying out loud by his words, deeds, death, life, descent, and ascent—calling us to return to him."³

I read that on the beach, looking at my children out there in the waves, splashing around without much care in the world, and I was reminded of the beauty and terror of our faith and its symbols. And I remembered that wonderful line of Buechner's when he wrote 1600 years after Augustine, "Here is the world, beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid." That's what the cross means to me.

St. Paul says the message of Christ crucified was foolishness to some, a stumbling block to others. He says that what counts is not what one knows, but by whom one is known.

³Augustine, and Henry Chadwick. *Confessions*. Oxford world's classics. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008., p. 64.

Another theologian said, “It was divine ‘necessity’—the necessity of God’s gracious and non-coercive love—that the love of God be fully expressed in all its vulnerability in Jesus Christ. It was sinful human ‘necessity’—the necessity of a world of our own making—that this one who mediated God’s forgiveness and inaugurated the reign of God characterized by justice, freedom, and peace should become the victim of our violence because he threatened the whole world of violence that we inhabit and will to maintain.”⁴

The death of Jesus stands for the paradox of God’s ultimate weakness and strength. God shows us that power is not about might, but about vulnerability.

Brené Brown, known for her research on courage and leadership says that vulnerability is the core of shame and fear and our struggle for worthiness, *but* it appears that vulnerability is also the birthplace of joy, of creativity, of belonging, of love.

On the power of vulnerability, Brown said in closing to her now famous Tedx Talk from 2012, “This is what I have found: To let ourselves be seen, deeply seen, vulnerably seen ... to love with our whole hearts, even though there's no guarantee - and that's really hard, and I can tell you as a parent, that's excruciatingly difficult - to practice gratitude and joy in those moments of terror, when we're wondering, ‘Can I love you this much? Can I believe in this this passionately? Can I be this fierce about this?’ Just to be able to stop and, instead of catastrophizing what might happen, to say, ‘I’m just so grateful, because to feel this vulnerable means I’m alive.’”⁵

Now I am not certain that Jesus is who Brown had in mind when her research bore out this conclusion. But her reflections point me to the richness poured out in this act of a crucified God. To be vulnerable is to risk shame and fear and our struggle for self-worth, and it is simultaneously to birth joy, creativity, belonging, and love. That’s what the cross means to me.

⁴Migliore, Daniel L. *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans, 2004., p. 189.

⁵ Brown, Brené. *The Power of Vulnerability*, 1293115500.

https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_the_power_of_vulnerability/transcript.

Our violent world put Jesus on the cross, and it broke God's heart. But here's the Good News: in the breaking, God's heart seemed to shatter into two billion pieces. And now we all have a piece of it. We can carry it around and share it. Resting in God's love; yet restless for a better world. Paul said, "I have to preach the cross." Don't you agree? Amen.