

18-31

RESTORING THE CROSS  
I CORINTHIANS 1:17-25  
FEBRUARY 1, 1987

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In Milan, Italy, Leonardo da Vinci painted Jesus and the disciples at the Last Supper on the refectory wall. As the centuries passed the paint faded, and other painters were commissioned to repaint over the original. Recently, restoration was begun on the painting. Art technicians working with delicate tools carefully scraped away the layers of paint which had obscured da Vinci's masterpiece. Only after the restoration was completed did people realize how much beauty had been lost because of the glossing over by inferior painters.

Something like that has happened to the cross. Over the years, the cross has been glossed over with cosmetic gold and jewels to where it has become little more than an impotent talisman, dangling from our ears or our rearview mirrors. The cross wasn't the hood ornament on Paul's theological vehicle, it was the engine--the power plant. Nor was the cross a pretty decoration. The hymn we have just sung gives us the real picture, "...rugged cross, emblem of suffering and shame, stained with blood." Paul warned the Corinthian Christians (I Corinthians 1:17), "lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power." We have let the world decorate the cross, gloss over its tragedy, and obscure the message. Paul wrote (vs. 18), "the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." Lest the cross be emptied of its power.

The priest at a Roman Catholic Church in North Carolina placed three crosses out in front of his church on Good Friday, all draped in black. Soon he received a call from the Chamber of Commerce. "Look preacher, we've been getting complaints about those crosses out in your churchyard. They are offensive. The retired people here don't like them; they find them depressing. The tourists will not like them either. It will be bad for business. People come down here to get happy, not depressed." Popular American religion is a cross-less religion. We would rather deny death, pain and suffering. We would rather trust in positive thinking or possibility thinking. But when you take the cross out of our religion, when you gloss over the cross and make it a decoration, you remove the very heart of Christianity.

When you look at the cross, the cross above the communion table, the cross that is processed on special Sundays and placed next to the table, what do you see? When you look at the cross, the rugged, blood-stained cross on which Jesus died, what do you feel?

When I survey the wondrous cross, when I look at the cross--the rugged, blood-stained cross--I see humiliation and shame, "emblem of shame," says the hymn. It was humiliating for anyone to be crucified on a cross. Common criminals, murderers were executed on a cross. Oh, what had become of Jesus' movement? Jesus had preached and taught, "the kingdom of God is near." And, this is the kingdom? Death, a humiliating, shameful death, on a cross? Where were the faithful disciples when the soldiers arrested Jesus? Where were his loyal friends when the soldiers taunted him, teased him, put a mock crown of thorns on his head and jeered, "Hail to the king!" Where were his followers when Jesus led them to the hill of Golgotha? Where were those who had seen a glimpse of the kingdom, a vision of what life on this planet could be like, when the soldiers hung Jesus on the cross, pounded in the nails, and raised it in the air to let him die in the hot sun. They let Jesus die alone, a humiliating death.

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Yesterday I heard a report of the recent Sunday School convention held in Houston, Texas. Thousands of persons participated, including eight from our conference. On Sunday morning two women from our northern California delegation decided to worship at a nearby United Methodist Church. The church seemed to be full when they arrived. They approached an usher who shook his head "no." They approached another usher who shook his head "no." They approached a third usher who shook his head "no." None of the ushers spoke, offered any explanation, or apologized. One of the women was a black woman from Oakland; the other was a Native American woman from the Shasta District. Humiliating! And this occurred in 1987 in a United Methodist Church! Minority persons still bear crosses of humiliation.

Some of you women here this morning are bearing a cross of humiliation and shame because of the way you have been treated by some men--sexually harassed, embarrassed or even victimized. According to the statistics, it is estimated that 1/3 of the women here this morning have experienced incest, 1/2 of the women here this morning have been raped, and 2/3 have been beaten, battered, or pushed around. The humiliation that some women feel is so strong they have told no one of their shame. It is a painful secret. But, look at the cross. The humiliation and shame of Jesus crucified as a criminal, an enemy of the state on a trumped-up charge, was transformed into hope. God raised Jesus from the dead. Humiliation was not the last word. Look at the cross and see humiliation transformed into hope.

When I look at the cross--the rugged, blood-stained cross on which the Son of God died--I see weakness. The world calls Jesus weak. According to our standards, why didn't he fight back? Why didn't he organize his forces and overthrow the Romans? You heard Cantor Unterman from Beth Am explain from this pulpit that one reason why Jews historically do not accept Jesus as the Messiah is because Jesus died, executed on a cross. If he were the messiah, the world says, he would have been strong. He would have conquered. The cross is a stumbling block, an obstacle, to the world; folly, foolishness to the world, said Paul.

But, God took what the world calls weak and made it strong. God turns the world's values upside down. God takes what the world calls foolish and uses it as a means of changing the world. God takes what the world calls simple---fishermen, tax collectors--and calls them to change the world. God actually uses weak folks like you and me! Paul wrote, (1:25-27), "For the foolishness of God is wiser than people, and the weakness of God is stronger than people. For consider your call; not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth; 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."

Consider Mother Teresa, a tiny, "weak" woman missionary from Yugoslavia who was deeply moved when she arrived in Calcutta and saw a homeless, dying woman lying in the gutter, being eaten by rats. She persuaded the government to let her use an abandoned Hindu temple and convert it into a crude makeshift hospital. She said, "Nobody should die alone." Mother Teresa was once asked, "How do you measure the success of your work?" She looked puzzled and then replied, "I don't remember that the Lord ever spoke of success. He spoke only of faithfulness in love." Who can measure the influence of this one small, seemingly weak woman, who is not motivated by success but by faithfulness to

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Jesus Christ. Look at the cross and see weakness transformed into power.

When I look at the cross--the rugged, blood-stained cross--I see pain and death. Jesus experienced pain. In a moment of despair, he even cried out, "My God, why have you forsaken me?" Some of you bear a cross of pain. Some cry out, "Why is this happening to me? Why is God punishing me?" Jesus knew pain and suffering. God knows what it is to suffer pain and torture, but pain and torture are not the end of the story. Through the resurrection, the pain was transformed into glory. Look at the cross and see pain transformed into glory.

When I look at the cross--the rugged, blood-stained cross--I see the heart of God breaking in grief and love. I see the essence of God revealed in the cross--suffering love. God let Jesus die. Rather than save him, rather than retaliate, rather than giving humankind what we deserve, God let Jesus die, out of love for you and me. "God so loved the world that he gave his Son." God suffered in love. God's heart broke in grief that day. True love is a suffering love. A little girl defined love: "Love is when my mother reads me a bedtime story. True love is when she doesn't skip any pages." True love suffers through the story, and usually reading it over and over again!

True love bears all things. Some of you bear a cross on which your heart is breaking. Some parents watch their children, agonize with their children when they make a mess of their lives. A son or daughter gets in with the wrong crowd and gets hooked on drugs. What does a parent do? Kick him out of the family? Ostracize, excommunicate her? No, a loving parent suffers, bears the pain, the heart breaks in love, until the child asks for help, wants to change.

When we look at the cross and see God's heart breaking, our response will be remorse and repentance, "My God, what have we done? What are we capable of?" The tragedy of Jesus' death will be repeated again and again until we see who and what we are, and make some drastic changes. The Nazi holocaust, the wholesale slaughter of innocent Jewish women, children, and men, should cause thinking and sensitive people of all cultures and religions to cry, "What have we done?" Repent and resolve, "Never again." I remember the city square in Nuremberg, citadel of Hitler's Nazism. There is a graphic photograph of the destruction of Nuremberg with the words emblazoned in red, "NIE WIEDER!" Never again! Look at the cross and see God's heart breaking in suffering, agonizing love, and cry, "Oh, God, forgive us! Never again!"

When I look at the cross--the rugged, blood-stained cross--I see Jesus laying down his life, not necessarily willingly, for he prayed in the garden, "Oh, God, let this cup pass from me;" but he concluded with total commitment, "Nevertheless, not my will, but thine be done." Jesus laid down his life for his beliefs. Jesus laid down his life for the kingdom of God. Jesus laid down his life for you and me, and all humankind, out of love for us, that we might see and believe.

While Oliver Cromwell was ruling England, a young soldier was tried and sentenced to be shot at the ringing of the curfew bell. The soldier's fiancée climbed into the bell tower before curfew time and tied herself to the bell's huge clapper. At curfew time, when only muted sounds came out of the bell

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DOUGLAS NORRIS  
FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH  
PALO ALTO, CALIFORNIA

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tower, Cromwell demanded to know why the bell was not ringing. His soldiers went to investigate and found the young woman cut and bleeding from being knocked back and forth against the great bell. They brought her down and Cromwell was so impressed with her willingness to suffer on behalf of someone she loved that he released the soldier saying, "Curfew shall not ring tonight."

Do you love anyone or anything so strongly you will lay down your life? Some of you bear a cross of humiliation. Some of you bear a cross of pain. Some of you bear a cross of heart-breaking suffering love. But all of us are called to be willing to lay down our lives. You have a mission on this earth. There is a special reason for your life. You have been placed here to learn and to serve. You are called to be totally committed to Jesus Christ and be willing to lay down your life for the mission.

"Take up your cross," Jesus said. Bear it willingly. Bear it gladly. For in the bearing of your cross you will find humiliation transformed into hope. You will find what the world calls weak transformed into power. You will find pain transformed into glory. You will find suffering, heart-breaking love, become redemptive for those you love and serve. Make a total commitment to Jesus, even the laying down of your life. "When I survey the wondrous cross....love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all."