

A Good Word From the Cross

I'll start with a confession. To the best of my recollection, this is the first time I've ever chosen "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross" to sing in a worship service. That's going back almost fifteen years. For most of that time, I avoided this song because I thought it was somehow inappropriate to sing this graphic depiction of the crucifixion of Jesus.

In my experience of the United Church—and this may or may not be your experience—in my experience, we tell the story of Jesus' crucifixion, especially during Holy Week, and we refer to the crucifixion and to the cross; but our language is normally quite restrained, cleaned up, sanitized. As Protestants, we take pride in our empty cross, scrubbed clean of any evidence that it depicts an instrument of torture. We seem to have a kind of unspoken agreement that we never mention the word "blood" in worship, not even in Communion, where we break with much of Christian tradition in our reluctance to say, "the blood of Christ."

I think all of that context influenced my avoidance of songs like "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross," and other songs like "The Old Rugged Cross" that we sang last Sunday. In the passage from 1 Corinthians that Mark read for us just now, Paul speaks about

Jews and Greeks, and their different approaches to faith.

What I've been describing is the Greek or the Gentile approach to faith: sanitized, austere, high-minded; removing all of the grubby realities of the story, and focusing on the wisdom that we might distill from it. Like the Greeks, we are seekers of wisdom.

There was one moment—about eight years ago—when I was strongly tempted to sing "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross" for a service. It was on a pilgrimage trip to Rome that Don and I went on, with a group organized by two minister friends. During our time in Rome, we stayed at a guest house next to the Basilica of Santa Croce in Gerusalemme. This was a church that was first built by the Empress Helena, mother of the Emperor Constantine.

Helena built this church to house relics that she had brought back from a trip to the Holy Land, including many relics of Jesus' crucifixion: the sign that Pilate had posted above Jesus on the cross, some thorns from the crown, part of a nail, and three pieces of the wood of the cross.

There is even a story that Helena brought back soil from the site of Jesus'

crucifixion and used it to cover the floor of the church she built.

Santa Croce means Holy Cross, referring to these relics. Now, whatever one thinks of relics—and there is a lot of science around this—those small shards of wood, and the other items, have still drawn the prayers of countless thousands of pilgrims over at least a thousand years. In that way they are icons, helping people see into the story of Jesus' crucifixion.

Okay—so I've been talking about the cross, and blood, and relics—you may be wondering where I am going with this! But stay with me a little longer.

One day we had the opportunity to have the chapel where these relics are kept all to ourselves. Just our group in this 'holy of holies.' And the group leaders had us sing "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross" as we processed into the chapel. And the words of the song got me right here.

The combination of that place, and the worshipful procession, and those relics, those icons of the crucifixion—altogether it was like I was transported, drawn more deeply into the story.

I was particularly moved by the juxtaposition in the song between the markers of worldly success—"all the vain things that charm me most"—and the supremely costly love of God, in Jesus, for me.

Yet when I got back home, I lost my courage, and couldn't overcome my

discomfort with the imagery of the song.

So today I found the courage; or perhaps the foolishness to have us sing this in worship. You can tell me later whether it was courageous or foolish.

This juxtaposition that I just spoke of—between the markers of worldly success and the costly love of Jesus—is at the heart of what Paul is getting at when he writes to the Corinthians. And I'll tell you something: the more I read Paul's letters to the Corinthians these days, the more I feel like he could be writing to our contemporary United Church.

Often in his letters to this church, Paul is cautioning them, calling them to pull back from their high-minded, lofty pursuit of disembodied wisdom; calling them back to the cross, to poverty, to their humble beginnings; calling them to make common cause with the weak, the lowly, the despised. Those who are well-acquainted with the cross, those who have not been able to rise above it and turn it into a mere symbol.

Paul is anxious to ensure that as the Corinthians develop in their faith, that their faith remains connected, grounded, rooted in the cross. Paul is a big believer in humility, a word that comes from the Latin *humus*, meaning ground, soil, like the earth Helena brought back from Jerusalem for the floor of the church.

Paul knows that he is dealing with people immersed in Greek/Gentile culture. This is a culture that prizes wisdom and knowledge; it's a culture

that tends to value the things of the mind over the things of the body; it's a culture that prizes technology, prosperity, and self-sufficiency. In this setting, spiritual growth is highly valued and it becomes a marker of one's advancement and status.

This is a culture that has the gruesomeness and humiliation of the cross in its rear view mirror, and is moving away from it at full speed. It's a lot like us really.

But the danger in all of this forward movement is that it draws us away from the story at the heart of our faith. To put it more plainly, this kind of advancement draws us away from the God that is revealed in Christian Scriptures. Our God is not a god of worldly wisdom, or pie-in-the-sky philosophy. Our God does not wash his hands of the dirt of human existence, but instead puts on flesh and gets into the humus with us. Our God suffers with us, and bleeds with us, and dies for us; goes to hell and back for us. So much does our God love us.

So, why is it important for us to remember this? Last week I was tremendously moved by Tony Kuhn's testimony as he stood up here and recounted two stories from his life.

The first was the story of how as a boy of twelve, he set out on an ocean voyage in a ship that was tossed about by giant waves, and how he was carried safely to the other side unscathed.

And then Tony spoke of how he and Edna and their family lost their son at the age of ten. And again, how

through that dark and unimaginably painful time, the waves did not overcome them.

It's at times like these that it's important to know what God is like, that God is there for us, that God cares about us, that God is with us. Those moments when "all the vain things that charm me most" have lost all their power to charm us, or to cheer us, or to save us.

Those times when we'd dearly love to have all our suffering in the rear view mirror and be moving speedily away from it, but all we can do is move slowly through it.

In those moments when all our plans come to nothing, and all our best efforts won't be enough to save us: that's when it's important for us to know what God is like. That our God is not a god of bigger, faster, higher, stronger; but a God of earthy things, well-acquainted with suffering.

For us as a church, too, it helps to know that this is what our God is like. For as much as we'd like to be like those Corinthians and put suffering in the rear-view mirror and go full speed ahead, lately we've been running out of gas and our forward momentum has been stalling.

We're getting older, and smaller; we're not exactly thriving. Sometimes our first response is to want to recover what we once were, when we more self-sufficient. When we didn't need to call on a God who could suffer with us.

Sometimes our second response is to say, "Well maybe we should just throw in the towel; we've done our best but our best is no longer working." As though God has somehow moved on to other things.

Both of those responses reflect our lack of acquaintance with the cross. The cross reminds us that we are not called to self-sufficiency, and we are not called to worldly success. We are called to solidarity with the God who meets us on the cross in Jesus. We need to recalibrate, to let go of our plans for the church, and get back in sync with God's plans.

A couple of years ago, I spoke with the parent of a young family that had started attending Trinity. He confessed, "When we first came here, we thought it wasn't going to work; there just weren't enough people our age." But then he said, he and his wife decided that if they wanted Trinity to be a more welcoming place, the best way to do that was to join up and contribute to making it more welcoming.

That's a way of thinking that is connected to the cross. Instead of looking for markers of success, and for evidence of services or programs they could receive, this family chose to throw in their lot with us, to get in our fragile boat, and join the journey.

Together, this unlikely group of people is called to make common cause with the weak, the lowly, the despised. Those who are well-acquainted with suffering. We are not called to success

or self-sufficiency as the world defines those things; we are called to show the world what God is like.

We cannot know what is ahead for us as a church. We can know that God will be with us, that God continues to meet us, and all the world, at the cross. Amen.

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