

Holy Cross Day
September 14, 2008
1 Corinthians 1.18-24
Holy Trinity, Manasquan

Every one of us, at one time or another, has looked at what's on the plate in front of us and thought, "Oh, no...." We've probably heard a child say, "I'm not going to eat that!" and a parent say, "Yes, you are!" We know how the conversation might go: "You can't make me." "No, I can't, but I **can** make you go to your room." In my house growing up, there was a threat of "going to bed without dinner." I don't remember that dire consequence ever happening, though. Somehow I got down those squishy, pale green peas that came straight from a can, and I at least faked eating some of my sister's infamous "salmon log," concocted from, you guessed it, **canned** salmon – and mayonnaise.

After the Exodus from Egypt, the Israelites' flight from slavery, God "set a table" for them in the desert. God provided nutritious, miraculous food, but there wasn't any variety and after a while the people dreaded the "same ol', same ol'" menu. They squawked. They folded their arms and said, "We're not going to eat that!" God didn't send them to their room. According to this weekend's very strange, but interesting lesson from the Book of Numbers (one of the lesser known and not as-well-loved books of the Bible), God sent poisonous snakes to bite and kill the little whiners... ?!

The people, of course, are sorry they said what they did ☺, and ask Moses to ask God to call off the snakes. God doesn't do that, but offers an antidote to the snake venom instead. The antidote is unusual. It's the sight of a serpent fashioned out of bronze and attached to a pole. God commanded that anyone who was bitten should look at it, in order to be healed. It worked.

Anthropologists and historians of religion call that approach “sympathetic magic.” Another example would be making medicine out of a plant or out of the roots of a plant that look like the part of the body that is sick or injured. People believed that a visual connection could heal.

In St. John’s Gospel, Jesus reminds the disciples about God’s antidote for the snake attack in the desert, and says that like the bronze serpent lifted up on a pole, He will be lifted up on the cross, that all might look upon Him and be saved. The Son of God will be the source of healing for the sickness called sin.

Does it ring a bell that St. John has that very strange perspective on the cross, that it serves as Jesus’ throne, that the crucifixion is Jesus’ exaltation, a high point, not a low point for Him and for us? This weekend we celebrate Holy Cross Day, September 14, which marks the **triumph** of the cross. In the second lesson we hear St. Paul’s assertion,

...we proclaim Christ crucified... the power of God and the wisdom of God.
1 Corinthians 1.23-24

...we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, the power of God and the wisdom of God.
1 Corinthians 1.23-24

St. Paul says this because “Christ crucified” was an embarrassment to everybody in the world except Christians themselves. Jesus’ crucifixion was so humiliating that people were embarrassed **for** the Christians when they mentioned it.

You know how careful and sensitive we are when we write obituaries. We want our loved ones to be lovingly remembered, we want to shed the kindest light possible upon their lives, and especially if they died in some way people might frown upon, we withhold information. We don’t usually read in obituaries that people took their own lives or died because of alcohol or drug addiction or even that they lost a battle with AIDS. We certainly don’t read in an obituary prepared by the family that someone was executed because of committing a horrible crime.

Back to Jesus. Crucifixion was the Roman Empire's version of the electric chair or the gas chamber or lethal injection. To talk about Christ crucified was like referring to someone who died in the electric chair as Eddie the Electrified or someone who died in front of a firing squad as Scott the Shot. You just don't do it. Giving someone you revered as a god the title "Christ crucified" was considered to be in the worst possible taste in the pagan and even the Jewish world of Paul's day. That's why he could write:

The message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing [to those who don't get it], but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.
1 Corinthians 1.18

Martin Luther held close to his heart something called the theology of the cross. He put it over against something he rejected and called the theology of glory. Luther said if you're going to be a follower, a disciple of Jesus Christ, you have to stay close to the cross of our Savior, you have to know it's His death, not His miracles, that became our salvation, you have to stake a claim on Calvary and expect to carry your own cross there, just as our Lord Jesus predicted. Remember Robert Schueller's claim, "Tough times don't last, but tough people do"?? That echoes a theology of glory that falsely claims God will exalt God's people in **this** life, that if you live morally you won't suffer, that our "reward" comes **now**. EEERRRHFFF.

The theology of the cross says nothing is truer than Jesus' words we heard in a recent Gospel: "those who save their life will lose it, but those who lose their life for my sake and for the sake of the Gospel will gain eternal life." That's as counter-cultural in the twenty-first century as it was in the first. People back then believed that anyone who was crucified was a loser. Many people now think that anyone who doesn't put him or herself first is a loser.

The theology of the cross says we who humbly call ourselves by Christ's name, Christian, must side with losers like He did. (After all, He even became one!) More than any other group, the poor are seen as losers. Those who serve as their advocates, who become a voice for the voiceless, who exert whatever power they can on behalf of the powerless, are often

seen as losers too. The West Front of Westminster Abbey is lined with statues of such holy losers who lived in the twentieth century. Ten 20th century martyrs from five different continents are depicted. Each one was willing to lose his or her life, and was indeed executed or murdered, for acting like our Lord Jesus, for taking up their cross and following Him in caring for the flock, especially the poorest, the most downtrodden of the lambs. Some of the names we recognize: Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King, Jr., Oscar Romero, Maximilian Kolbe. Others were unfamiliar to me, but certainly not to Jesus, and maybe not to you: the Grand Duchess Elizabeth of Russia, Esther John of Pakistan, Manche Masemola of South Africa, Lucian Tapiede of Papua New Guinea, Janani Luwum of Uganda, Wang Zhiming of China.

In the eyes of the world, these men and women were losers. In the eyes of the church they are saints, like us, to the extent that they lived as Jesus would have lived. They didn't believe success would be measured by length of life or size of bank account or extent of political power. They understood that some holy victories can only grow in the soil of defeat, as we saw on Calvary.

Let's end our reflection with a traditional prayer prayed in front of a crucifix, on which hangs the crucified Christ, whom we are blessed to claim as our beloved Savior:

We praise Thee, O Christ, and we bless Thee,
For by Thy cross and resurrection You have set us free.
You are the Savior of the world.
Amen

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham