

The Second Sunday in Lent
March 12, 2006
Sermon by Timothy A Leitzke

I never made the sign of the cross as a child. I starting making it in seminary, both upon myself and as a blessing to others, and by the time I was an intern it was second nature. Once we were driving to the hospital in Boston and two girls in a black Jetta cut us off. We quickly made the sign of the cross just in time for the passenger to turn around and gape in horror that they'd just cut off two priests. The cross has become so central to the Christian faith that the two are nearly synonymous. Our crosses today are lovely pieces of art, fashioned in gold or stained wood. We wear them on necklaces. They adorn our clothing in pretty, symmetrical, antiseptic appliquéés.

Crucifixion was not invented for Jesus; it was the standard Roman punishment for rebels and other threats to national security. Thousands upon thousands of people died this way, beaten and flogged, forced to heave their own crosses to the execution sites, attached to the crossbeams by the arms—the Romans encouraged creativity here, so it wasn't always by clean nails—and then left hanging, not for hours, not for days, but for weeks, long after the criminals had coughed out their last breath and been feasted upon by crows. It was ghastly. You know how you insulted someone in Roman times, what you did to someone who cut you off in their little black chariot? <Make the sign of the cross> “If any wills to follow behind me, let him <make the sign of the cross> and follow me.

Lutheran Christianity is fraught with paradox, and Jesus the Christ is perhaps its most paradoxical figure. “Jesus loves me, <make the sign of the cross>.” Jesus is a crucified Christ. A Christ is supposed to be someone victorious. He’s the Mark Messier who brings the Rangers the Stanley Cup. He’s the King David who brings power and glory and nationhood to his people. He’s the Martin Luther who purifies the faith and brings people closer to God. He’s not supposed to wind up gruesomely butchered before he even has a chance to fight. No wonder Peter forbids Jesus to speak of being crucified! What would Mark Messier be if he broke his leg in his first training camp and retired having never played a game for New York? What would David be if he fought Goliath and lost and was never heard of again? What would Martin Luther be if he had been burned at the stake before he even conceived of his ninety-five theses? “Surely Jesus you cannot really mean this!” “Yes, and if you want to follow me you’ll carry your own cross.”

Friends of Christ, the paradox is this: God is revealed to us in this Crucified Christ. We live in a state of Sin. Now, some of you would say, “Well, duh: we’re in New Jersey.” There’s no state line we can cross to evade Sin. It’s in the universe; it’s in the world; it’s in our bones. We are separated from God and can’t do anything about it. In the Crucified Christ, God reveals that God has done something about it. God says, “Let’s say that I’m Jesus, and there he is, humiliated, shamed, and murdered. I’ve just done the most shameful thing there is. Why? So there’s no more separation! I’m right on the same level you are—always

have been, always will be—and since I'm here with you I can take you back with me.” Sin does not operate this way. Sin tells us that the Crucified God is a failure. God's reply is, “Of course I am! That's the point. I'm one of you. Now, let's go home!”

If that doesn't make any sense to you, you're not alone! It doesn't make any sense to St Peter either. Sin keeps us from understanding. We see a crucified man and are ashamed of him, yet St Mark writes that the Son of Humanity will be ashamed of those who are ashamed of him! If he's serious, and he certainly sounds serious, what could we do? We'd have to buy back God's love, but what could we possibly give? We could never afford the price of our own souls, even if we gained the whole universe. The God who gives up power to be with us is not impressed by what power we have. Playing the game by Sin's rules—grabbing power, crushing our enemies, looking out only for ourselves, loving wealth, worshipping success—will get us nowhere with God. It would be as if the Trinity Troubles were playing softball, oblivious to the fact that they were on a sheet of ice and that the game was really hockey.

Friends of Christ, God is so radically different than Sin that it takes that constant reminder of the cross to show us the difference. The cross trains us to see God at work, and we carry our own crosses as part of that training. It's particularly evident in Lent. We mark ourselves with ashen crosses. We crucify some of life's pleasures, like desserts. We take on other responsibilities. We worship on Wednesday evenings in the shadow of the crucifix. We replace our flowers with

dead sticks. We do these things to help us see God at work in ways that go against everything that our Sinful world teaches us. We carry our crosses to train ourselves to see God.

In Jesus the Christ God is crucified. God has given up power, wealth, prestige, success, and self importance. If this were not so we would all be in serious trouble with nothing but despair remaining to us. God would just be some big scary guy. Only the Crucified God offers us any hope! The Crucified God is gentle. The Crucified God provides us with what we need. The Crucified God cares for each one of us regardless of who we are or what we have done or left undone, and loves each of us more than we could love everything that ever was. The Crucified God does not measure our success in life but raises us to new life. The Crucified God does not seek selfish pleasures but pours himself out for each of us. The Crucified God does ridiculous and silly things in order to stay faithful to us. The Crucified God is head over heels in love with us, and where the world would say “give up, they’re not worth it”, the Crucified God just keeps on loving us. The Crucified God, and ONLY the Crucified God, is our hope. So the ancient insult becomes our most common blessing, the symbol of gruesome execution becomes our most common symbol of hope, and the life we now live we can live in the Name of the Father, and of the **<Make the sign of the cross>** Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen