

“Lift High the Cross”

I Corinthians 1:18-31

Lent 3-B, March 8, 2015

I’ll never forget that memorable August afternoon when I **drove into the city of Chicago** for the first time, with a good friend of mine from Mobile, Alabama who was going to be my roommate in college there that year. We both experienced an **overwhelming sense of awe** when we saw that **windy city’s magnificent skyline for the first time!** The closer we drove to the city, the more those mighty skyscrapers seemed to rise in height! And yet, when we actually drove into downtown Chicago, the more those mighty superstructures also seemed to **shrink in comparison to the famous Sears Tower, which at that time, was the tallest building in the world!**

A few weeks later my roommate and I actually drove downtown again to visit the Sears Tower personally. Standing at its base, right next to this superstructure, we gazed straight upward at the **110-story building** that soars **1450 feet in the air;** built with **76,400 tons of steel;** containing more than **4.5 million square feet** and covered by **16,000 bronze-tinted windows!**

The Sears Tower is an **amazing sight to behold!** **We were astonished at its greatness and grandeur. The closer we drew to it, the larger it grew. And the larger it grew, the more we seemed to shrink!** -- Brothers and sisters, this is what drawing close to something that gigantic will do for you! It will **make you feel smaller and smaller by comparison,** and this is not only true of the physical realm but also in the spiritual realm! For this is also the “dynamic” that occurs in our own hearts when we are drawn near by the powerful ministry of the Holy Spirit to the most awesome display of God’s glory and love that he has ever shown to the world in the cross of Jesus Christ!

Last week, I couldn’t help but notice all the various expressions that came over so many different people’s faces as they came forward to receive the sacrament of Holy Communion, and how many people who really may not have the words to all that many hymns memorized, were able to sing along on that one without their hymnal being opened at all!

“O Lord my God when I in awesome wonder, consider all the worlds thy hands have made! I see the stars, I hear the rolling thunder, thy power throughout the universe displayed. Then sings my soul, my Savior, God to thee, how great thou art! How great thou art! Then sings my soul, my Savior God to thee, how great thou art, how great thou art!”

“When through the woods and forest glades I wander, and hear the birds sing sweetly through the trees; when I look down from lofty mountains’ grandeur and feel the gentle breeze, then sings my soul...

“And when I think that God his Son not sparing sent him to die, I scarce can take it in that on the cross, my burden gladly bearing, he bled and died to take away my sin, then sings my soul...” (LSB 801:1-3).

1. The Foolishness of the Cross

When the epistle lesson begins this morning with those words: **“For 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” (I Cor. 1:18),** St. Paul is reminding us that the good news of the **Gospel**

of Jesus Christ is not always embraced with that same amount of fervency by some as it is by others; or even as wholeheartedly by us at certain times in our own lives as it may be by us at other times! **AND YET, ISN'T THIS TRUE TO A LARGE DEGREE WITH RESPECT TO EVERYTHING BENEFICIAL—THAT IS OFFERED TO US IN THIS LIFE?**

We've all heard about the benefit of eating a proper diet and getting the right amount of exercise, and yet we all know also how easy it is to merely play lip service to that whole idea! But when for some reason our **own health is suddenly endangered or threatened**, then we begin to pay much closer attention to what we are eating and what we might be doing in terms of physical exercise.

We all know how easy it is to become spiritually complacent. And wasn't this even this case for King David, who near the height of his popularity, couldn't help but notice one evening, a lovely lady bathing with the help of her attendants on the top floor of her neighboring penthouse to the King's own palace. You know how David sent messengers to invite the lovely Bathsheba over to his house, and how **one glass of wine that they shared led to another, and then another and perhaps another**, and before you know it she had been wooed by David into the king's own bed.

A child was conceived that night by David with the wife of his Secretary of War; a reputable and honorable man named Uriah. And in his attempt to cover up his own sin, we remember how one of David's one sin, led to another, and even another on top of that!

When he called home Uriah from the frontline to spend time with his wife, Uriah thought it would be dishonorable to his own men, to go into his own house and **enjoy conjunctival rights** with his own wife, when his men were destined to remain out there on the field. As a last ditch effort to save his own political reputation, David had Uriah placed in the line of danger and then commanded his backup troops to pull away their support so that Uriah would be killed.

David seemed to have no conscience problems about any of this until the Holy Spirit of God moved the Prophet Nathan to go to David and confront him with his sin. And when he did, David repented, and begged God for his forgiveness. Many theologians believe it was that incident in David's life, and his true spirit of contrition, that led him to write Psalm 32: *Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. ²Blessed is the man against whom the LORD counts no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit. ³For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. ⁴For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. Selah ⁵I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity; I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD," and you forgave the iniquity of my sin!"*

I am not saying that this is an everyday occurrence in the life of every believer; that we recognize how deeply we are indebted to our God, and how much we each need his forgiveness and grace, but it is especially during those times of such self-recognition that the word of the cross seems especially powerful and comforting to us. You know St. Paul words here can easily remind us of Jesus' own words in his Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 7:14, **"Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. But the gate is narrow and**

the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few” (MATTHEW 7:14)!

Paul writes that those who are perishing consider the Word of the cross “folly” or “foolishness” and the Greek word here is ***moria*** that appears also as an adjective in the Greek word – ***moros*** – from which we get the **English word “moron” or “moronic.”** The Greek word ***moria*** conveys the idea of something that is ***ridiculous, idiotic, stupid and contemptible.*** If anyone has ever turned to you and said, “You moron!” you probably were insulted and rightly so! Here Paul is that many people always consider the cross to be moronic!

There are many reasons for this but the number one reason is our human pride. We all have a tendency to suffer from what theologians call by a Latin phrase the ***opinion legis***; the opinion of the law that somehow things between us and our God are not really all that bad; not so bad that we can’t fix things between us and our Creator by earning a few extra brownie points with him through our good behavior and efforts. **But this is certainly what the Bible tells us in Romans 3:20, “For by works of the law shall no one be justified in his sight; for by the law comes the knowledge of sin!”**

Secondly, many people consider the Word of the cross to be moronic because the Gospel declares that God’s salvation is now to be offered to all people everywhere and no one is to be excluded! While the unbeliever considers the cross utter nonsense, the Christian sees it as “the power of God.”

And then St. Paul goes on to provide us with Biblical support for what he is saying by quoting **ISAIAH 29:14-15. “For it is written: ‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart!’**

Isaiah’s real contention here is that **all human schemes that fail to take God into account will run aground (Isaiah 30:1-2).** Isaiah uses these words to **mock the failed scheming of the worldly-wise Jerusalem politicians who sought to ensure Israel’s safety solely by relying on their own human ingenuity and strategies.** Their human plans were thwarted though because the very alliance they formed with Egypt to make themselves hopefully more secure, **so alarmed the Assyrians that it sparked the very Assyrian invasion** that they, above all else, were trying to avoid!!!

None of us would have ever come up with the plan of salvation that God did. In our “wisdom” we would have made it much more ***confusing, complex, and inequitable.*** But God designed a salvation free for all, available to all, by sending His Son to die for our sins. **In the death of Christ, God displayed His own sheer genius in masterminding a plan of salvation whereby God remained, as St. Paul tells us in Romans 3:26, both “just” and “The Justifier.”**

2. **Then St. Paul reminds us that God planned the foolishness of the cross.**

Down through the ages people have sought to describe God in varying ways, but one of the most definitive and descriptive ways is to say that our God is a “SURPRISING” God. Anyone even mildly acquainted with the stories of the Bible can recall **example after example** of this truth. So many of the ways God interacts with his people present themselves as sheer foolishness in our human way of thinking! **(1)** Initially the

unconditional trust and obedience of Noah to the commands of God looked like sheer foolishness. How ludicrous to build a boat of such an enormous size so far from any known body of water! **(2) And who would have dreamed that Moses, slow of speech, and fleeing Egypt for the murder of an Egyptian,** would one day return to stand in the courts of Pharaoh and emphatically pronounce God's judgment upon Pharaoh. **(3)** Even the patriarch's wife Sarah had to learn through her pregnancy in old age that what looked foolish and an impossibility to human beings is frequently wise and very possible for God. **BUT THE clearest example of God's ability to surprise his creation is found in the foolishness of his becoming one of us and "being born in the likeness of human flesh!"**

All of this raises the question: "Why did Jesus have to die on the cross?" And St. Paul answers this profound question for us when he writes in **Galatians 3:13, "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us—for it is written 'Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree'"** (DEUTERONOMY 21:23)!

In our Old Testament lesson today we are given the Ten Commandments which the LORD God first gave to Moses to give to the people of Israel. And it says in DEUTERONOMY 27:26: **"Whoever keeps the law but fails in one point is guilty of breaking the whole law of God"** (GALATIANS 3:10 and in JAMES 2:10)! **When it comes to keeping the law of God, either you do it perfectly or you don't do it at all. There is no such thing as "almost" keeping the law.** That's like saying I am "almost" pregnant; either you are or you are not. Someone once said that "almost" only applies to horseshoes and hand grenades! Either you are righteous in God's eyes or you are not!

Isn't this also what helps to make the Word of the cross such a powerful Word? In the Old Testament days, a person who committed a capital crime would be executed—usually by stoning! If the crime was particularly hideous, the dead criminal would then be hung from a tree as the ultimate form of disgrace and shame. This also served as a warning to others. But the central idea was to **bring shame to the criminal, because for the Jews to be hung up like that was disgraceful.** It was obvious to all that a person hung on a tree was cursed!

3. Indeed, the entire life and ministry of Jesus ran contrary to Hebrew and Greek thought.

A. The Jewish people were looking for a Messiah who would restore the throne of David and the glory of Solomon; a role that could never be fulfilled in their minds by someone who was crucified on a cross. The very thought was a scandalous thought and a stumbling block in the minds of the Jewish people.

B. The Greeks considered the Word of the cross foolishness, first of all, because they had a great disdain for the flesh, and thought only the spirit was of ultimate significance in our human makeup, certainly not the flesh. They could not tolerate the notion of a God who became flesh in order that he might dwell among his people. Yet this is precisely what happened. The **Christmas narrative reminds us that God has come "to pitch his tent" alongside ours (John 1:14).** He came to be one of us! Even for us today, the magnitude of this event defies full comprehension!

Secondly, the Greeks had no use for Christ or the cross because they were certain that if they tried hard enough, they would be able to find happiness on their own. The Greeks believed that by training the mind and the body one could get rid of undesirable qualities and achieve a god-like status. While the Greeks made advances in science, math, and government, their philosophizing didn't lead to lasting happiness. That's because **Greek philosophers failed to recognize just how corrupt human nature is. They thought there was enough good in mankind to override our moral corruption which makes this world such a trying place to live.**

Instead of our ignoring sin, however, Paul says that we who are members of Christ's Church are to "Lift High the Cross" and to acknowledge it! Acknowledge that what put Jesus on that cross, that what made him suffer rejection by his heavenly Father was not only our rebelliousness but **HIS GREAT LOVE FOR ALL OF MANKIND. What? Admit that we've done wrong?**

Go ahead and admit it, the world may also sometimes say to us, just don't take the blame for it, don't take responsibility for it! The reason you **lied to your parents about where you were as a teenager, when they asked you, is because a friend asked you to cover for him. The reason you were "short" with your sister on the phone is because she never asks how you are doing. Maybe you wouldn't be so impatient with others in your business dealings if everyone was as efficient and responsible as you...**but let's face it: They are not! No, you're not to blame for your sins. So don't harbor any negative thoughts about yourself. Think only positive ones and you'll be happy.

Just as the driver who ignores his poor alignment may, as a result, get himself into a serious accident, so those who fail to take responsibility for our sin will find themselves in a serious bind come Judgment Day.

The Word of the cross is here to tell us that God has fixed our alignment for us!

You see the message of Christ crucified is not so foolish because it does not sweep our problem of sin under the rug. God exposed our sin and revealed his hatred for it when he punished his Son on the cross. But God also demonstrated his love for us in that Jesus took our sin upon himself willingly. The cross proclaims that our sin has been neutralized, not minimized. The cross is like the scar from your last surgery. It testifies that the tumor, which would have killed you, has been cut out, not ignored in hopes that it would go away.

4. **How does the word of the cross relate to our lives? Hopefully we will take out time to ponder the wonder of the cross—and isn't this the special challenge we have all accepted together during this holy season of Lent?**

And yet we know full well that the cross is a very popular symbol today. We see it in stained glass windows and on top of churches of widely varying beliefs. It is found around the necks of the deeply religious, the thoroughly superstitious, and all shades in between. The sign of the cross is made by baseball players before they bat, by pilots before they take off, and by boxers before they fight. **In fact, you may have heard of the gambler at the race track who happened to see a Catholic priest making the sign of a cross over a horse, and promptly bet his paycheck, rent money, and car payment on that horse. When the horse came in last he sought out the priest and demanded to know why the horse had done so poorly when he had just**

blessed it. With surprise the priest responded, “I wasn’t blessing that horse. I was giving it the last rites.”

Unfortunately today, there are churches in the United States of America who are abandoning the Word of the cross. The March 4, 1991 issue of the **PRESBYTERIAN OUTLOOK** much like our official publication **THE LUTHERAN WITNESS** reported that **Occidental College**, which at that time was a 103 year old Christian college of the Presbyterian fold removed two crosses from the outside of its campus chapel. The crosses were removed from the chapel because some faculty members were afraid they gave false signals to the community as to their nature of their commitment to Christianity. In a sense, the crosses on the chapel, some faculty members believed were considered a modern-day stumbling block to the kind of liberal, pluralistic, education community **OCCIDENTAL COLLEGE** wanted to become known as. The crosses, they believed, were bad for their public image.

In 1990, a popular song entitled **“From a Distance,”** written by Julie Gold and made popular by vocal artist Beth Midler, won the 33rd Annual Grammy Award for “Song of the Year.” And this song “From a Distance” suggests that God is high and lifted up; a transcendent God who not only made this wonderful world as its transcendent Creator, but unfortunately only now watches us from a distance. God is exalted and apart from us “watching” us!

Yet, the Word of the cross preaches the message of “Christ Crucified;” about the God who came to the earth as one of us to show his love for the whole creation by his willingness to share completely in our human nature and to take upon himself our pain and suffering.

It’s hard to believe that it now was seven years ago that **THE AMERICAN RELIGIOUS IDENTIFICATION SURVEY** conducted a huge, nationwide survey in 2008; the first they did since a similar survey was made in 2001. They asked people to identify themselves in terms of their personal religious beliefs; also as Christians be they Roman Catholic, Anglicans, Lutherans, Greek Orthodox, Methodists and Baptists, Pentecostals and Evangelicals.

The only group of responders that grew substantially in every state of the 50 states of the USA was the group that checked the box indicating that they **HAD NO RELIGION**. The first time when the number of responders, over 50%, identified themselves as having no personal religion or faith, won out over the number of Christians in our nation! Something unfortunate is happening in our land!

We need to **“Lift high the cross, the love of Christ proclaim,** till all the world adores his holy name!” This is a song that, by the way, we will be singing in our worship services next Saturday/Sunday in response to our hearing Jesus say to Nicodemus, “Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up that whoever looks upon him and believes will be saved! Amen!