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Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Proper 9 (Pentecost 4), Series C
Saturday, July 6th, 2019
Sunday, July 7th, 2019

Sermon: In the Cross of Christ I Glory

Text: Galatians 6:14

Focus: Christ's death on the cross is the only thing that can save us from sin.

Function: That they would boast (glory) in the cross of Christ.

Structure: Text-Application

Locus: "I believe that Jesus Christ... has redeemed me, a lost and condemned person, purchased and won me from all sin, death, and the power of the devil, not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death..." (SC, 2nd Article of Apostles' Creed).

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from the crucified and living Lord Jesus! Amen.

"But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ..." (Gal. 6:14a,

ESV).¹ In the early 4th century A.D., shortly after the Roman emperor, Constantine, legalized

Christianity, his mother Helena, who believed in Jesus, went on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem in

search of the True Cross. After superficial excavation at the alleged site of Golgotha—the hill

on which Christ died—she found the remains of three wooden crosses, which she declared to be

those of Jesus and the two thieves crucified with him. Soon after, the bishop of Jerusalem kept

this cross in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, bringing it forth for veneration on special

occasions. Then, one by one, the parishioners would line up, pass by the cross, and kiss it.

Several deacons stood guard nearby because, already in the early years, pilgrims would try to

bite off a piece of the wood to keep as a souvenir or good luck charm.

After the Muslim conquest of Jerusalem, the supposed True Cross was held ransom by various sheikhs and sultans as a bargaining chip during wars against the Byzantines and, later,

¹ All Scriptures, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

the Crusaders, during which possession passed back and forth between various European and Persian armies. At one point, the Christian king of Jerusalem carved off a splinter that he presented ceremoniously to the king of Norway. So the tradition of chipping off pieces of the True Cross continued. Eventually, the cross fell back into Muslim hands, and its last recorded location was Damascus, Syria, although legend states that the Knights Templar brought it back to Europe.

During the Middle Ages, hundreds of wood fragments and splinters popped up in churches all around Europe, which local lore claimed were parts of the True Cross. For viewing these holy relics, people could receive indulgences that, supposedly, would lessen their time in purgatory. People who touched even a sliver of the True Cross attributed miraculous healings to it. It nearly became an idol. Thus, by the time of the Protestant Reformation, Jean Calvin quipped that if all the purported pieces of the “True” Cross were brought together in one spot, there would be enough wood to build an entire ship! In other words, the whole thing was a hoax no better than the search for the Holy Grail. Clearly, people got more than a little carried away.

So in today’s epistle, when St. Paul writes, “Far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Gal. 6:14a), I hope it is obvious that he does not refer to the actual wood on which Jesus was crucified! Paul references not a holy artefact, but rather the holy *act* of Jesus dying on the cross to forgive our sins. For if Jesus did not die and rise again, then our faith is futile, and we are still in our sins (cf. 1 Cor. 15:17). But, in fact, Jesus *has* died and risen, shedding his blood on the cross as the perfect payment for guilt, and rising from the grave to give us eternal life. Because Christ died, we can live forever, if we believe and trust in him.

And yet the cross still seems a strange thing to boast about! After all, how can Paul (and we) boast about something *he* didn’t do or accomplish? *Jesus* died for us—not Paul or Martin

Luther or Pastor Chris (cf. 1 Cor. 1:13). *Jesus* carried his cross to Calvary (with a little help from Simon of Cyrene, of course!). *Jesus* bore our blame and took our punishment for sin. So what in the world does *Paul* have to boast about?

Perhaps Paul's statement is a little bit like a proud father or mother boasting of their son's accomplishments in sports or school work. Parents know they can't take credit for their kids' achievements, but they *can* share in the joy. We get excited when our loved ones do great things. Paul loved Jesus, and Jesus accomplished everything—and gave up everything—necessary to be our Savior. So he boasted about it like a boy on the playground insisting, "My dad can beat up your dad!" So our God is greater than anyone else's.

But there's more to it than that. When we boast in the cross of Christ, we give glory to God. We praise his name and worship him because of all that he did for us. Before Christ comes into our lives, we have a tendency to boast of our own works and accomplishments. But now that you believe in Jesus, there's nothing and no one better to talk about than our Savior. Just like Americans enjoy displaying patriotic pride on the 4th of July, how much more does the Church want Jesus to shine!

Perhaps another reason that boasting in the cross sounds bizarre is that the cross is *ugly*—an implement of torture and execution. This may be lost on many of us, who are accustomed to ornate wall crosses and fine jewelry. No wonder, then, that I often hear people complain about other churches which they visit that don't have a cross prominently displayed. Or they complain that the priest or pastor isn't wearing a pectoral cross over his vestments (or business suit). "What's wrong with them?! Are they ashamed of the Gospel? Why don't they have a cross?"

But did you know that the Bible doesn't say that you have to put up a cross at your church? Some Christian traditions even regard crosses as graven images *forbidden* by the First

Commandment! But, strictly speaking, it's all a matter of local custom. Crosses fall under the category of *adiaphora*, things neither commanded nor forbidden by Scripture. Whether or not your church decides to display a cross is entirely acceptable either way. They're not a bad church if they *don't*. They're not a better church if they *do*.

The house churches that met during the first centuries of Christianity didn't display a cross out front. The thought would never occur to them because crosses were instruments of death. Crucifixion was the bloodiest, most painful, most horrific form of public execution the world has ever seen. If you think the cross is beautiful, then just a few minutes of Mel Gibson's *Passion of the Christ* (2004) will quickly cure you of that idea. So for the first Christians, displaying a cross on top of your church would make about as much sense as building gallows or a guillotine in front of ours. Wearing a cross necklace would be about as fitting as wearing a vial of poison for lethal injection—or a miniature representation of an electric chair.

What matters most is not whether or not a church displays a cross. What matters is whether or not the cross of Christ is at the center of every sermon. For that is the one, true cross—not a splinter of wood hidden in the Vatican vaults, but the story of Jesus' death *for us*. Don't worry whether or not the pastor wears a cross or the church mounts one on the wall. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer once quipped, "Pay attention to the preaching, not the preacher."

I once heard a seminary professor deride Lutheran preaching as "a weekly bus trip to Calvary." (He was not one of my favorite profs.) Another pastor friend (not a Lutheran) once asked me, "Why do you *Lutherans* talk about the crucifixion in every sermon? Do you really have to give people the Gospel every week?" First of all, I didn't like being referred to as 'you Lutherans.' It sounds an awful lot like 'you people.' But I brushed that off and replied, "We

preach the Gospel every Sunday because Paul preached Christ crucified. And if that's good enough for the Apostle Paul, that's good enough for me!" *Zing!*

The cross must be at the center of all truly evangelical preaching because the cross of Christ is our only hope. Sermons are not meant to be chalk full of pop psychology, advice, or interesting facts. "We preach Christ crucified" (1 Cor. 1:23). For without Jesus' death and resurrection, we are terribly, hopelessly lost. That is why Paul boasted in the cross of Christ (Gal. 6:14). That's why he wrote in his First Letter to the Corinthians: "For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2). Many a Christian church displays these words on its marquee or road sign: WE PREACH CHRIST CRUCIFIED. For without Jesus dying on the cross for our sins, we have nothing. But with the cross of Christ, we have *everything*. This is a truth so wonderful that we cannot help but boast—we cannot help but tell others what Jesus has done for us.

So together we sing:

*In the cross of Christ I glory,
Tow'ring o'er the wrecks of time.
All the light of sacred story
Gathers round its head sublime.*

*Bane and blessing, pain and pleasure
By the cross are sanctified;
Peace is there that knows no measure,
Joys that through all time abide.²*

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of ✠ the Holy Spirit. Amen.

² John Bowring, "In the Cross of Christ I Glory," in *Lutheran Service Book* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 427:1, 4.