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Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Epiphany 5, Series A
Saturday, February 8th, 2020
Sunday, February 9th, 2020

Sermon: Nothing but Christ Crucified

Text: 1 Corinthians 2:1-12

Focus: The Christian preacher must give people Jesus crucified and risen for them.

Function: That they would believe in the crucified and risen Lord Jesus.

Structure: Text-Application

Locus: “I believe that Jesus Christ... has redeemed me, a lost and condemned person... with his holy, precious blood and innocent suffering and death” (SC, 2nd Article of Apostles’ Creed).

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ! Amen. “For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:2, ESV).¹

Several years ago, a pastor friend of mine—not a Lutheran—asked me, “What is it with you Lutherans?”

“*You* Lutherans?” I asked, knowing that a criticism was coming. (“What’s wrong with you people?!”)

“Yeah. Why do Lutherans preach the Gospel every week? Why do you talk about Jesus dying on the cross in every sermon?”

I smiled for a moment, then replied, “I preach about the cross every week because I preach to sinners—and I’m one of them.”

Now we certainly want to teach God’s people all the articles of faith, including the Ten Commandments, Baptism, the Lord’s Prayer, and the Lord’s Supper, as well as creation, sanctification, eschatology, and stewardship, among many others. As one of my profs once said

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

in class, “You guys have to preach the *whole* counsel of God. Just don’t try to do it in one sermon!”

I once heard someone else describe Lutheran preaching pejoratively as “the weekly bus trip to Calvary.” But if all people hear in my weekly sermon is that God loves them and sent his Son Jesus to die on the cross and rise again to save them from their sins and give them eternal life, I consider that MISSION ACCOMPLISHED. After all, as the apostle writes in today’s epistle lesson: “For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:2). Jesus was the center of Paul’s preaching. Our entire salvation hinges on the cross of Christ. And what can matter more than the saving of souls on Sunday morning (or Saturday night)?

Paul had a problem. When he wrote to the Corinthian congregation, he wrote to a church divided by doctrine, personalities, and scandalous sins. “For it has been reported to me by Chloe’s people that there is quarreling among you, brothers” (1:11). The Corinthians fought about everything: the Lord’s Supper, speaking in tongues, women in ministry, food offered to idols, and even whether or not Jesus really rose from the dead. They even had a spicy sex scandal to deal with! In other words, the first century church sounds an awful lot like the *twenty-first* century church.

In other words, the Corinthians had lost the plot. They forgot what really mattered: God’s love for them in Jesus Christ, as demonstrated by Jesus dying on the cross for their sins. That’s it! That’s the basic message, the “gospel in a nutshell,” the core of Christian belief: the cross of Christ. They forgot that the main thing was to keep the main thing as the main thing.

Oftentimes, we want to rely on big, expensive programs or a particular style of worship in order to draw people into the church. Sometimes we get a Field of Dreams mentality like the

Crystal Cathedral in California: “If you build it, they will come.” But will they? The Crystal Cathedral went bankrupt and had to sell its empty building to the Catholic Archdiocese. We think that if we do a facelift and dress up our old, dusty doctrine, then maybe we’ll be able to “appeal” to the next generations. We use buzzwords like “authentic” and “relevant” while pretending to be something or someone we’re not. We turn the Gospel into marketing and forget that Jesus is enough. “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor. 12:9).

Now I’m not saying that we should take down our road sign, delete our website, stop planning and praying for the future, and sing the most boring, monotonous hymns we can find. Most of those are good things and have their place. But whenever we view a particular program or staff person or strategy as the silver bullet that’s going to solve all our problems, we’ve exchanged Jesus for an idol of our own making. And idols always let you down.

God doesn’t want us to focus on the wrong things. That’s why the apostle Paul writes, “And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom” (1 Cor. 1:1). “And my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God” (vv. 4-5). Apparently, Paul was not a particularly impressive preacher. The Corinthians themselves said that Paul’s “bodily presence is weak, and his speech is of no account” (2 Cor. 10:10). Some people even thought he was crazy (Acts 26:24).

The message of the cross always sounds like madness. But it’s God’s honest truth. “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” (1 Cor. 1:18). “For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles” (v. 23).

As sinners, we tend to crave or focus on the wrong things. We want glitz and glam, wham and bam. But God usually doesn’t work like that. Neither should his servants or his church. The Corinthians focused too much on Paul and not enough on what he was saying. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said in a sermon: the congregation ought to “pay attention to the preaching rather than the preacher.”² The pastor’s personality, appearance, sense of humor and education do not matter so much as the *content* of his sermon. Who or what is at the center of his message: Jesus Christ and him crucified for our sins, or the news of the week, pop psychology, politics, a Facebook meme, or the latest pop culture fad? A sermon is not supposed to be a stump speech or a standup comedy routine. The preacher ought not to be a peddler of God’s Word (cf. 2 Cor. 2:17)—an entertainer, or an interesting lecturer. He mustn’t tell us what our itching ears long to hear, but rather “sound teaching”—healthy doctrine (2 Tim. 4:3). The pastor is called to preach Law and Gospel, judgment and hope. He must give the people Jesus.

In the American Church we put too much emphasis on personality and technique. What we *should* focus on is the cross of Christ. For no matter who you are, where you’re from, or what you’ve done, Christ died for you. He took your sins and nailed them to the cross and left them there. As he declared, “It is finished” (John 19:30). Christ has done everything necessary for you. Christ is enough. As one poor, berated congregation once begged of its pastor, “Please sir, we wish to see *Jesus*” (cp. John 12:21).

Jesus will take care of his Church. He promises, “On this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Matt. 16:18). Our role and our job in building

² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Ambassadors for Christ,” in *The Collected Sermons of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ed. Isabel Best (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 89.

the Church is not to have the coolest music, the best-looking preacher, or the “funnest” children’s ministry. Our job, as Christ tells us, is to “let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 5:16). In other words, Christ simply calls us to love and serve our neighbors, to get to know people, and to joyfully point them to Jesus. It’s really that simple.

Evangelism is not a program. Outreach is not a board. The Great Commission is a call for *all* Christians to enter the mission field. All of us are missionaries wherever we go in life, work, and school. We all can shine the light of Christ in Castle Rock. That doesn’t mean that you have to go house to house, knocking on people’s doors and asking them if they know Jesus? Sometimes evangelism is as simple as telling people you’re a Christian—and then not acting like a jerk afterwards. Evangelism is a lifestyle, a way of being.

Jesus calls you the light of the world! He doesn’t say that you *have* light or will *become* light. He says you are *already* light.³ So let your light shine before men so that they will give glory to God in heaven. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

³ This idea is in *The Cost of Discipleship* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer.