

*For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. (1 Corinthians 1:18)*

Last week at this time we were thinking about crosses, what they are, what they mean. A Roman cross was an instrument of torture and death, used on those who threatened the security of the state. But for Christians, *The Cross* is the means by which God created, and still creates, our ultimate security: that is, our new place as whole persons, lifted into God's heart by God's own self-sacrificial love for us.

We also talked about the smaller cross that Jesus told each one of us to bear, if we would be his followers. That might be different for each of us—but in general it means giving up whatever our ego thinks we can't live without (like being an ever-present parent, or belonging to the popular clique in school, or rising to executive level in the corporation, or even having the most influence in our church). The weird thing, Jesus says, is that this letting go, this first step in the way of the cross, is the first step toward real personal fulfillment. Even the ambitions we thought we had to give up will be fulfilled in some way—transformed of course, once the selfishness is taken out—but made more satisfying than we could have imagined. Because *how* we achieve things is finally more important than *what* we achieve.

Today Paul tells us about another cost we will have to pay in following the way of the cross. Paul talks about how other people will judge what we do. Maybe even how *we* will judge what we do, when we get a glimpse of ourselves from outside—you know, the way you sometimes see yourself as others see you. This can be an unsettling experience.

The thing is, if you really believe that the power of Christ comes from *The Cross*; and that letting go of self and taking up *your* cross is the way you should live your life—and if you actually do live your life that way; if that's what happens with you—well, a lot of people will think you're nuts. Just like they thought that Jesus was nuts. "He is beside himself," his family said on one occasion.

*For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.* "Those who are perishing" are people who think that having more power or money or whatever is the road to a fulfilled life—even to immortality. We need only think of Bernie Madoff if we need an obvious example. But more frightening, to me, is the man who shot his wife and children and then himself, because he lost his job. Unbelievably tragic, not to know what your real treasures are. Maybe one of the hidden blessings of these hard economic times is that they force us to re-evaluate our "treasures", our priorities, so we will not be among "those who are perishing".

"Those who are being saved"—literally, made whole—are people who realize that the only way to real joy or fulfillment or eternal life is to give up those little goals and aim for something harder, yet easier. To do what you need to do in order to survive, but without losing your soul. And if you are fortunate enough to be able to look beyond survival—then to let go and just simply do what God calls you to do. Even if it looks stupid.

One example might be the young doctor who goes off to work in an inner city clinic. She earns a pittance—barely enough to feed herself and pay off her student loans. And she had been offered a position in a joint practice in an affluent suburb. What an idiot!—right?

Or the delegates to our own General Convention who affirm the rights of gay people to full membership in the church, because they are children of God like everyone else. Uh-oh—that will alienate a lot of folks. That will get into the papers and make us look bad.

Or the worker in a chemical plant who discovers that it's poisoning the water of a nearby river—and actually reports the situation to his superiors. And when they do nothing, he goes ahead and tells the feds. And when *they* don't respond, he goes to the media. Oh, boy. There goes that career. There goes privacy. There goes peace and quiet, for good. Oh, yes—for good.

So sometimes the way of the cross is laid out by anger. Think of Jesus in today's Gospel lesson, chasing the money-changers and the sellers of sacrificial animals from the Temple precincts. This is what is called "enacted prophecy", a good old tradition in Hebrew history and scripture. The prophet—the one who "speaks for" God—delivers God's message through actions first, then words. In this case, the message has to do with two things. First, the intrusion of selfish gain into a holy place. Second, God's call for economic justice.

If you went to the Temple to offer a sacrifice required by the holy law, you couldn't use ordinary Roman money. You had to use special money, money that didn't have the picture of the Emperor on it. So you had to get your money exchanged. It was just like what we do today if we travel to another country. And just like today, the people doing the exchange would charge a fee. Only there was no shopping around, no choice. And as always in such situations, it was the poor who suffered most.

So when Jesus overturned the tables of the money-changers and drove the animals out of the Temple precincts, he was delivering a strong message. He was saying that God did not approve of what was going on. And standing up for God's values in the face of powers that he was part of the cross that Jesus was already carrying.

Jesus was nuts—or at least imprudent—to behave this way, to alienate the people in power. It was part of the reason they nailed him to *The Cross*. And yet, could he have done otherwise and still been who he was? Because finally the message he was delivering was even more shocking than a denunciation of profit-taking in the name of religion. He was saying that the Temple that really mattered was the Temple of himself—the Temple of the Holy One of God. He was the house that would outlast all temples made of stone. The day was coming when if you wanted forgiveness or protection or the assurance of God's love, that's where you would find it. Not in the Temple in Jerusalem. Not in any building—including this one. In himself.

Today's Old Testament lesson is a restatement of the Ten Commandments—the essence of God's Law, which was enshrined in the Holy of Holies in the Temple. In Jesus' day, the actual stone tablets weren't there any more—they had disappeared about four hundred years earlier when the Babylonians invaded Jerusalem. The Law still existed, of course—in scripture and in people's hearts. And its central idea was that there is only one God and that this God is a liberator—the one who rescued Israel from slavery in Egypt. This God is not to be found in things—in fact, to worship any kind of *thing* is idolatry. And what does such a God demand? To worship God alone; and to love your family and your neighbor by treating them with justice.

Jesus fulfilled that Law in the way he walked the way of the Cross his entire life. His heart is the new Ark of the Covenant. And more than that: the Temple which was and is Jesus Christ offers a love that embodies not just the Law, but the Giver of the Law. The Law alone gives us what we deserve, which is fairness. God in Christ gives us what we desire, which is love.

We know this because of that foolish, foolish thing: The Cross.