

Natalie W. Bell
 March 20, 2022
 Third Sunday of Lent

The Foolishness of the Cross
I Corinthians 1:18-31

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. ¹⁹ For it is written,

*“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,
 and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.”*

²⁰ *Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ²¹ For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. ²² For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, ²³ but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, ²⁴ but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵ For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.*

²⁶ *Consider your own call, brothers and sisters:^[g] not many of you were wise by human standards,^[h] not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. ²⁷ But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; ²⁸ God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, ²⁹ so that no one^[i] might boast in the presence of God. ³⁰ He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, ³¹ in order that, as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in^[i] the Lord.”*

Overnight, two years ago, ***most pastors became televangelists,***
 And ***church goers started watching on screens.***

What a crazy two years it’s been, right?

Thank God, those who are able are now coming back to church,
 And we have this safer option for those who cannot!

As most of you know, I’m from ***Oklahoma, a televangelism “mecca”***.
 It’s the home of Oral Roberts, the Victory Christian Center, Lifechurch.tv,
 and countless other big box churches that flooded airwaves and TV screens,
 long before Covid.

There’s a certain theology to some of it.

In Oklahoma we call it *'health and wealth', or 'prosperity gospel'*—because that's the essence of it, it's about self, finding your best life, being filled with health, wealth, and goodness.

And you can understand WHY.

Life is hard.

Life has been very hard for the past two years.

Who doesn't want to hear about good things coming their way, from God?

I'm certainly not a fire and brimstone preacher,

I want people to be encouraged and lifted up for life and service.

Faith IS about hope and help from God!

So where are the *boundaries*, when it comes to God's Word, and the life and ministry of Jesus Christ?

As I surf the web for online worship,

When I see worship spaces ***without a cross***, I'm a little skeptical.

I once heard a televangelist talk about how the cross was a "downer",

So they adopted a globe instead.

When I see worship services ***with only praise***,

but no confession of who we are and why we need Jesus Christ,

I also feel a little uncomfortable.

I do believe we can and should learn from other traditions,

And I enjoy watching other forms of worship.

But we need to know ***what we believe, how we worship, and WHY.***

This week I was listening to a worship service about God opening every door, to bring blessings, freedom, and success.

About how if you've been shut out of abundance,

God's gonna open doors for you today!

Your blessings have been piling up—waiting to be showered upon you!

You will have success, and favor, health and wealth—if you only believe.

If you only pray this prayer.

Now, that's not so bad.

But if that's the WHOLE message, is that the Gospel?

Is it ***Biblical?***

Can we really say that all the heroes of our faith had

health, wealth, and prosperity? Far from it, right?
Think about Paul, David, Moses, Mary...

The symbol of our Christian faith *is actually a CROSS, not a globe.*
And we're not here to just "live our best life now",
That's self-help, not life in Christ.

We NEED the cross.

We need that symbol of his suffering love.
Of his sacrifice that saves us from sin—because we are broken.
The cross is the symbol of God's grace--
A clean slate, a chance to start over, a new life.
It is only through the cross that we get the empty tomb, and Easter morning!

We all want to AVOID suffering, of course,
But Jesus says that everyone who wants to follow him
Must *deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow.* Mark 8:34-35
He says *whoever does not carry the cross cannot be his disciple!* Luke 14:27.

So what does the cross MEAN?

And what does it mean to ***YOU?***
For many the cross has become a piece of jewelry, or home décor—
we've lost the real power and impact of what it is.

It was a form of ***execution.***
It would be like wearing a little electric chair around your neck.
Our Savior suffered this horrific death in the crucifixion.

To find God's power and love in the cross, is not logical or reasonable, is it?
Isn't this why Paul said, "*We proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews
and foolishness to Gentiles*"?
The Greek word for stumbling block is *scandalon*—the root of our word **scandal.**
The Greek for *foolishness* is where we get our English word **moronic.**

So we can understand the ***desire to leave the cross behind,***
Or to take it out of sight.
But Paul reminds us that in this foolish stumbling block is **God's POWER:**
*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.*

The cross is where we get GRACE-- from our Savior's death!
 In an innocent man, dying on behalf of those who are guilty!
 And it is this *act of LOVE that brings wisdom and strength.*
 So Paul says: "God's foolishness is *wiser* than human wisdom,
 and God's weakness is *stronger* than human strength."

When we choose to *believe that Jesus died for us on the cross,*
 We believe that Jesus took on suffering so that he would *know our pain,*
 And *defeat sin and death,* now, and forever when he returns!

When we choose to believe in Christ crucified
 it doesn't help us to make sense of the world,
 it becomes the *ONLY wisdom and understanding* we need to make it in the world.
 As Paul said, "Since the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided,
 through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe."

To have faith in a crucified Savior is not self-serving,
 or wise, according to the world.
 And it *doesn't necessarily make life easier.*
 We can't just "name it and claim it" as they say in some churches.
 We don't get to use God like a Genie in a bottle.

The cross reminds us that what we get from God is LOVE.
 A *deep, self-giving, self-sacrificing love.*
 In the cross is the GOOD NEWS of Jesus' love and grace.
 And the DEFEAT of sin and death!
 The foolish cross is actually a Christian's **greatest STRENGTH.**

We don't follow Jesus because he makes our lives easier.
 We follow Jesus because he **gives us LIFE ITSELF.**
 He give us life with meaning.
 He gives us **hope** when hope is lost, and **power** when we are weak.

The message of the cross is not a DOWNER.
 It's the *ultimate statement of love, mercy, and hope.*

The cross is also the ultimate statement of *God's PRESENCE—*
even in the darkest times.

Which we need, right now, don't we?
 As we watch the war in Ukraine, the killing of innocent people,

We believe that God is there.

As we see people with free will causing hurt and destruction,

As we see evidence that evil is real,

We also believe that ***God is real.***

And God is in the midst of that pain.

And ***Christ will come again*** to destroy all evil, and death, and bring new life.

A wise professor once said: “*When it is time for me to speak, I want my remarks to begin, continue, and end with reference to the **cross** of Jesus Christ.*

*To understand and believe in the cross is to bear witness to God’s strange **presence** in events that overwhelm us with a sense of God’s apparent **absence**.*

*The **love of God** is decisively revealed in deep darkness.*

*God’s love is always **victorious over evil**,
even when evil seems completely triumphant.”*

In the cross we see that ***Jesus is God FOR us, WITH us, and IN us.***

And brings us new and everlasting life.

Even JOY—in spite of and in the midst of suffering.

So, does this mean that the ***cross is the symbol of ALL SUFFERING?***

Sometimes we use a phrase, ‘that’s just his cross to bear’,

or ‘that’s the cross she has to bear’,

and by that we mean that they are enduring something that seems to be their lot in life.

But is the cross a symbol of ALL suffering?

Or is it a symbol of ***redemptive suffering?***

Is it a suffering that just leads to pain?

Or is it the kind that leads to goodness, grace, and new life?

What if the suffering of the cross is like the ***suffering of childbirth***,

Pain...in the process of bringing new life?

Some people say that “***what doesn’t kill us makes us stronger***”.

Sometimes that’s true. ***But sometimes it’s NOT.***

I’ve met many people over 20 plus years of ministry,

who have completely ***abandoned their faith*** after the death of a loved one, a murder, a kidnapping, the loss of a child.

They cannot understand a God who would do that.

Well, I can’t understand a God like that either.

Thankfully, *we don't believe in a God who causes suffering and evil.*
 Rather, we believe in a God who *stands with us* in our suffering,
 in the midst of this broken world, where people cause all kinds of pain...
 Our God is with us in the pain, as we await the day when all suffering will end.

We *may never know this side of heaven* why bad things happen,
 Only that they DO happen.
 And still God is WITH us.

Christian author Philip Yancey has a wise saying,
 “*We should not confuse God with life.*
Life is messy, sinful, and painful; but God is always good.”

The question is, do we believe that?
 That God is good? All the time?
What if we can find that, as we gaze upon the CROSS?

Some suffering is just—suffering. Pain. Evil.
 But *some suffering has redemptive power*, doesn't it?
 Aren't there times that we *grow stronger* through our suffering?
 Aren't there times that we *grow in our knowledge* of God, as we suffer?
 Maybe this is what Paul means when he says that we have the
privilege of believing in Christ and suffering with him in Philipians 1:29-30?

Could it be what Jesus means when he says *take up your cross*?
 Could that refer to *a suffering that brings hope and power*?
 Like when a *parent* sacrifices for the good of their children.
 Like when *someone stands up* for their faith in the workplace,
 despite ridicule.
 Like when *someone blows the whistle* on abuse or harassment,
 despite great personal cost, and the losses that follow.

What if there is a kind of FAITHFUL SUFFERING?
 A suffering caused by doing the right thing?
 What if there's a suffering caused by doing what Christ wants you to do?

It would be *easier to IGNORE the cross*, wouldn't it?
 It would be easier to just have a cheery symbol up here,
 To preach only what is happy,
 To talk only about what is positive.

But where would the real hope be, in that?
 Where would we *find real meaning and something to hold onto*,
 when we do suffer?
 Where would we find a place to be real?

Friends, we believe in the CROSS--- God's presence in the midst of suffering.
 And if we choose to follow Christ,
 we *pick up our own crosses* and follow right behind him.
 When we follow Jesus, our view of the world is forever changed.

*This is the third Sunday of LENT, when we are on a journey with Jesus—
 to the cross and the empty tomb.*
 But before we can even think about the empty tomb,
 we must stand at the foot of the cross.

We must *look upon our Savior* with nails pounded into hands and feet,
 a loving God beaten, and crowned with thorns.
 An innocent man dying a painful, shameful death,
 But doing it all—*out of LOVE*.
 That we might have grace, hope, and new life.

The empty tomb is meaningless without the cross.
 We cannot understand the glory of Easter,
 unless we grasp the meaning of the cross.

Friends, let us *find our faith in the POWER of the cross—*
 the *presence* of God in deep darkness,
 the *strength* of God in suffering,
 the *forgiveness* of God in sin,
 and the *new life* of God made possible by Jesus' death and resurrection.

And for the gift of the cross, all God's people can say together, Amen.