

Numbers 21:4-9
1 Corinthians 1:18-25

St. John's Presbyterian Church
Devon, Pennsylvania
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THE BRIDGE

1 Corinthians 1:18

To the soul, the cross is as food for one who is starving. It is a rope thrown out to a drowning victim. It is air to one who is suffocating. One who is dying does not generally step back from such moments of personal crisis and ponder, "Well, now, let me analyze the appropriateness of this offer before I accept it." There's a basic wisdom to accepting a gift that you desperately need.

In the Apostle Paul's day, the Jew and the Greek were reaching for the wrong lifeline. There was nothing on the other end. Wisdom for the Jew was founded in the law. Wisdom for the Greek—that is, the gentile—was found in philosophy. Both were helpful to a point, but both relied on the wisdom of the world: the law had wandered away from God; philosophy was groping for the mind of God. The wisdom of God, on the other hand was, and is still, as foolishness to many because it asks us to become like children again and simply trust God at God's word. It asks us to embrace a mystery.

The cross is a paradox. The ancient Greeks told a parable to illustrate paradox. It tells of a certain traveler who found himself between villages on a stormy night, and desperate for lodging and food noticed a tiny hovel nearby in the darkness. Knocking on the door, it creaked open to reveal an old man standing on a dirt floor. Might he come in for shelter, and perhaps a little food, the traveler asked. The old sage welcomed him, offered a seat by the fire, and noticed his guest blowing frantically on his hands. He fetched his visitor a bowl of gruel from a pot above the fire, then noticed once more the traveler, this time blowing on his food. Whereupon he grabbed the visitor by the scruff of the neck and hurled him out into the night, muttering that he would have nothing to do with a man who could blow hot and cold with the same breath.

The cross is such a paradox, a thing of glory and a thing of shame; an instrument of torture and brutality, while still an instrument of salvation for all who look upon its occupant in faith. The cross upsets our ordinary understanding. It upsets our notion of common sense. The cross proposes a voluntary assumption of pain and suffering on God's part with no obvious benefit to God. There is still widespread suspicion of the cross when we might think no less of God for avoiding it, and no pressing need of our own for such radical intervention in the first place.

Analogies are always imperfect, especially when they toy with explaining mysteries. But at the risk of failing, let me ask you to consider for a moment a short film that was circulated some years ago. A brief movie with a poignant message, it was called, "The Bridge." It tells the story of a young couple who have a son. They are an extraordinarily happy young family, and the boy is trying desperately hard to grow up to be just like his father, whom he adores. We watch as the father goes off to work one day as a switchman on the railroad. He operates one of those old manual switching stations close to a narrow single line bridge over which the trains must travel. It's vacation season and the trains are jammed with holiday makers.

The part of the line that goes over the center of the bridge is purposely severed at the center of the bridge where it is raised up to let boat traffic through. It was the function of the man, at the last safe moment as the train was approaching, to lower the bridge over this busy waterway so that the train with all its passengers could go through. But we, the viewers, see what the father does not see, that his beloved young son has followed him on the way to work and is walking across the narrow bridge. As the whistle blows to signal the approach of the speeding train the father suddenly sees the boy. And he knows with a horrible certainty that if he lowers the bridge the boy will die, yet if he does not, the people on the train will die. We watch the agony on the father's face as he wrestles with the decision. He loves his son more than life . . .

There was a certain congregation that voted to build a new sanctuary. Their minister surprised them by asking that he be allowed to take care of the design and purchase of the cross for the new sanctuary. He'd demonstrated good judgment in the eyes of the congregation many times before. He had good taste and a fine sense of style, so they were delighted to grant him the request. It was agreed that no one would see the cross before Easter morning when it would be unveiled in a grand dedication ceremony.

When the sanctuary was finished it was indeed a beautiful place with gleaming white walls, a great vaulted ceiling, and deep velvet upholstery in the pews. Great slabs of quarried stone floored the chancel, and the sanctuary was surrounded by huge stained glass windows which, in many brilliant colors, depicted the life and ministry of our Lord. All around was a beautiful visual perspective. At the steps to the chancel stood a great baptismal font carved of a single block

of Italian marble, and in the chancel itself was a native oak communion table fashioned with over three-hundred hours of the craftsman's art. Raised high behind the table stood the awesome dimensions of a cross, its huge form still shrouded in secrecy under a great cloth. No one in the congregation had yet seen it.

After the sermon they sang a glorious hymn to the accompaniment of a new tracker organ, the finest of instruments from a celebrated French organ builder. And the hymn that they sang was, "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross." At that moment the pastor reached for the cord that let fall the great cover shrouding the cross and there, amidst resplendent lilies of the Easter decorations and the blaze of colors from the congregation's newest wardrobe, stood the bleakest, gauntest cross they'd ever seen. It looked like two coarse railroad ties, its rough arms all uneven and askew, the two planes of the cross roped together in a hideous embrace. Three metal spikes with heads all chipped and edges furred from hammer blows were embedded in its timbers. And midway down the upright a vicious wedge-shaped block had been fixed which pointed upwards, which Roman soldiers sneeringly called "the saddle." Rough strands of old rope hung limply from the ends of the patibulum, the cross beam of the cross, as if hacked away in a hurry to release some former burden.

All stared in shock with disbelief of different sorts etched upon their faces. Some stumbled in their singing. The organist faltered.

After the service a meeting of the congregation was hurriedly assembled and the minister called to task.

"It's a hideous disgrace," muttered one.

"It is," said the Pastor.

"It's an insult to good taste," said another.

The pastor nodded.

"It's an affront to decent people," said yet another.

"That, too," said the Pastor.

"It ought to be on the city dump," voiced another.

"Oh, it was," said the Pastor.

"It's very realistic," someone said, trying to rescue the moment.

"It's shocking to think that a grown man, and a responsible religious leader at that, would do such a thing."

"Isn't it, though," agreed the Pastor.

"Then why in the name of all that's holy is it up there?" demanded another.

"Well, that's the point, exactly," said the pastor.

Why do *you* think it was up there?

I heard of another clergyman here in Philadelphia who once substituted a monstrous electric chair for the cross on the communion table one Easter morning. By and large, his congregation was also less than impressed. At least he suggested in that instrument of death a more humane means of execution than the cross, particularly for one who was innocent.

Reflect upon the cross and see what we have made of it over the years. It has become less a symbol of the cost of our redemption, more a badge of respectability to be worn around the neck. I don't intend by this to upbraid everyone who wears a cross; I'm pointing to what it has often become, to the frivolous manner in which we have demeaned its power. Ironically, it is often worn by those with no interest in the church or commitment to its founder, Jesus Christ. It is less a reminder to us of an instrument of death and torture. We Protestants do this, in part, by removing the figure of a suffering God from the cross, leaving the cross empty both of its offense to us and the memory of its cost to God. But the cross is not a hood ornament; it is the engine of the Church. Our crosses have become more the focus of the craftsman's art, of the artist's sense of grandeur and aesthetic purity. It is good to combine the symbols of faith with artistic skill, to a point. But the cross is not finally something to be admired.

This is a large part of what Paul meant, who himself died a hideous death on a cross in Rome, when he expressed his fear that "the cross of Christ [might] be emptied of its power." Paul's claim is that the power of God sweeps over us as we come to terms with the implications of the cross of Christ, not as we are swayed by eloquent wisdom. Indeed, says Paul, I came to you preaching the gospel "not with eloquent wisdom," lest the words get in the way of Christ, lest the cross lose its power.

Later on, in chapter 2, Paul writes, "for I decided to know nothing more among you than Jesus Christ and him crucified . . . and my speech and my words were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power." Paul, of all people, was not one to use false modesty to cover his inadequacies. Anyone who could write with the rhetorical gifts and the genius of expression of Paul was not short on preaching skills. He simply believed that the cross was its own best interpreter. To the Greeks, birthplace of philosophy and the arts of reason, the cross was as foolishness. To the Jewish authorities, on the other hand, the guardians of moral law, the cross was a curse because their scriptural law said that anyone who was hanged on a tree was accursed. That it was the curse of their own sin, which Christ freely took upon himself to save them from, was not evident to them. But then, neither is it evident still to the majority in our age.

That something so ugly and evil as the cross could become an instrument of grace and reconciliation is still touched

with the profoundest mystery; a mystery that is entered by faith, not by reason. Yet the greater mystery is that it could happen at all, that a sovereign God should be convicted and killed by God's own subjects. Also that God would go to these lengths to demonstrate what love there is for us.

There is a deep, impenetrable chasm between God and humankind. It is a chasm dug out by sin, by our own willfulness and frantic efforts at self sufficiency; a void mined out by men and women little different than you and me, and including you and me. We, who so often think that contentment, peace, and freedom can be found in personal effort, in self indulgence, or in doing our own thing.

The chasm became so deep between ourselves and God, creating such a void that no manner of human effort could fill it or bridge it. So Christ came to spread his arms across the void between earth and heaven. With one hand he grasped the hand of God, and with the other hand across that chasm he grasps the hand of all who will take it. He becomes the bridge.

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And have we yet grasped that hand?

By the way, the father—in the film—pulls the lever and lowers the bridge. We see the people in the train, laughing and having a splendid time as the train races over the bridge. They do not know how narrowly they have been spared disaster, nor at what cost to the switchman—the father. Amen.