

The Sign of the Cross
I Corinthians 1:18-25
March 8, 2015 SOH

Theme: Living the Cross

We are revising our church logo right now. Some have said the existing logo with its stylized logo resembles the stylized caricature of a devil. The new one is a bit more contemporary and swoopy! I hope you like it.

Whether you like or dislike a particular logo, sometimes, it's the story behind the logo that is interesting and important. For instance, the United Methodist Logo is a cross with a double flame. The cross is self-explanatory, but it's the flame that is interesting. In 1968 the Methodist Episcopal Church joined forces with the United Brethren Church to form the United Methodist Church, so each flame represents each church united toward our mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

It's good to refresh the image of an organization once in a while. Sometimes things get a bit dated and a renewal brings out life and renewed interest. That's part of the reason for Lent and the notion of the sacrifice of fasting during the season. As we fast from something significant in our lives and substitute that with prayer, we create an opportunity for God to renew

our faith and lift our spirit. I hope you are taking advantage of this season to take on a new spiritual practice, fast, or simply spend some additional time in prayer and reading. I have a few copies left of the book, "The Circle Maker" by Mark Batterson that is shaping some of our prayer focus for the church. If you'd like one, please see me after worship.

The single greatest symbol of the Christian faith is the cross. We see it depicted in a variety of forms and shapes, some with the suffering Christ – the Crucifix, most without. As Protestants we usually depict the cross without the Christ because we focus on the resurrection and the new life in salvation. But there is benefit in focusing on the crucifix and the suffering of Jesus, a practice we sometimes take on during this season of Lent. Our salvation and the new life brought about through the transformation of our hearts and minds as we come alive in Jesus came at high cost. We ought not to forget that in the relative comfort of our daily lives.

Some have said we might need a new symbol because some of the vilest rappers, musicians, and even terrorists had worn or used the cross. In many circles it is simply a nice piece of jewelry, an adornment with little meaning. It's been suggested the cross represents evil, bloodshed, and torture, and this is not the message we ought to convey in our faith.

Of course, you can't deny the bloodiness of the cross. The Romans reserved it for the vilest of criminals and it was certainly one of the ugliest, painful, and humiliating ways to die. Nothing Jesus had done deserved such a death. Even if the Jewish ruling council, the Sanhedrin had been allowed to carry out the death penalty for blasphemy, for that is what Jesus was accused of as he claimed to be the Messiah – God incarnate, the stoning death would have been much more merciful than the cross. There were other methods of execution the Romans used, yet no explanation why the cross was chosen.

No other reason except to send a message to the Jewish people of the power the Romans held over them and as a threat that this is what happens to anyone who claimed authority of kingship over the people and beyond Roman authority. Yes, it is a symbol of a bloody, horrible death. We might legitimately ask the question, "Why on earth did the early Christians decide to use the cross as a symbol of our faith?"

Other symbols of the faith include; fish, dove, a ship, an anchor, a lamb, a lyre, shepherd, or the initials of Jesus Christ. The ICHTHUS or fish symbol came to represent "Jesus Christ, God's Son, Savior" and by the third century it was a symbol of baptism. In the earliest Christian writings we see a Greek letter, the *tau-rho* as

an abbreviation for the word cross and crucify. The shape of the letter may have helped represent the idea and depiction of Christ on the cross. These abbreviations date back at least to 175. There is some first century evidence of the cross used in worship from catacombs in the middle east and as far west as Rome. Not until Constantine converted around 400 did the cross emerge as a common symbol, prior to that it would have likely exposed one to ridicule and persecution.

Paul writes, "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." The Jews sought a sign but the Greeks sought wisdom, yet it is the cross which became a sign of life and freedom to the Greek while the Jew could not view it except from the horrible prospect of the Messiah crucified and dead.

Hence, verse 23, "but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to the Jews" – Literally, a scandal. The cross was a scandal to the Jews, to be forgotten and ignored.

But verse 23 continues, "and foolishness to Gentiles." What seems like and looks like foolishness to us, in fact, the hope of more to this life than just existence; there is hope in the resurrection, hope in a

life beyond this one, and hope that beyond the physical death there is something waiting.

Paul continues in verse 24, “but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.”

The world would tell you, teach you, that to succeed you must be ruthless in business, shrewd in your dealings so you come out on top, and that you have to work harder than the next gal if you want to get ahead. “Get to the top.” Break the Glass ceiling.” “Climb the Corporate ladder.” You want to “cook their goose.” God’s seemingly foolish act of the cross reveals our utter inability to understand what is truly important in this life and in the next.

An act of weakness – dying in a despicable manner on the cross, was overshadowed by the power of God revealed in an empty tomb. In the process, revealing the foolishness of greed, human power, and the utter uselessness of pursuing our agenda to control our own destiny.

Certainly God enables and places his people in positions of authority, power and with great resources. But we’re expected to use them for the kingdom. Yes, the cross is in need of a makeover. Its use as a dangly bit of jewelry, or a fancy tattoo meant to impress, and

Christians who have misused the cross as a tool of power and authority over the weak and defenseless will one day answer for their abuse.

Jesus said, “Pick up your cross and follow me.” When you carry your cross, you cannot become proud and arrogant. You cannot abuse the weak and defenseless while the burden of your cross weighs on you. You cannot live in prejudice as if you are somehow better by birth than the next.

The cross begins to change you, transform you into the person God intends for you and in the process you are actually strengthened for this journey. You are enabled with the spiritual gifts and graces you need to serve and worship the risen Christ.

Perhaps an illustration will help. When you see a person in a wheelchair, do you see the chair, or the person? The reality is the chair is part of the person. It is the chair that strengthens the person enabling mobility and interaction, engagement, and active life. So it is for you. The cross becomes part of you. Paul writes, “For I am not ashamed of the Gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes; first to the Jew, then to the Gentile (you).” (Romans 1:16)

If we want to freshen and renew the symbol of Christianity – the cross, we need to pick it up and live as a “cross-shaped community”. We need to live our

lives as active Christians. We need to humbly serve the hungry, the lost, the homeless, the forgotten, the ignored, the immigrant, the prisoner, your neighbor.

How's your cross today?