

Pastor John Schwehn  
Sermon, The Theology of the Cross  
October 15, 2017

1 Corinthians 1:18-31  
Philippians 2:1-13  
Mark 15:25-39

It's our third week lifting up some of the gifts of our Lutheran identity this October as we, together with people of faith all around the world, mark the 500th anniversary of the Reformation.

And this week we are talking about what Luther considered to be at the center of our faith: the cross of Christ. And, even though we have crosses all over the place, this central symbol of our Christian identity is often the hardest thing for us to understand, the hardest thing for us to trust.

Because, at the center of who we understand God to be is an instrument of torture and death used by the Roman empire - not a glorious or glamorous thing at all. How does such a symbol have anything to do with a loving God?

Pastor David Lose writes in his book *Making Sense of the Cross* that, "in some ways, the whole New Testament is a response to the cross. It's just not what anyone was looking for from God."<sup>1</sup>

In fact, the New Testament is an attempt by the gospel writers, the Apostle Paul, and others to read all of scripture – all of their tradition – through the lens of Christ's death on a cross. They *expected* God's messiah to come as a might warrior. What they got instead was a cross. Their whole worldview had to change, the foundations of their faith had been shaken!

And we can still today understand how perplexing this must have felt for those first Christians. Luther certainly understood it. It's perplexing because we always and *only* want to think of God as some all-powerful, all-knowing deity. And the last thing we would ever expect from such a

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<sup>1</sup> David J Lose, *Making Sense of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2011).

powerful God is that He would choose to enter into the contingencies and pains of life, to suffer, and to die in agony on a cross

I love how Paul says it in his letter to the Corinthians. You can hear him just throwing his hands up, making such a bold statement of faith. “God has made foolish the wisdom of the world,” he writes. “God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.”

In other words, *everything is upside down now!* Our worldly wisdom is turned on its head – a wisdom that wants to find God only in acts of power, in flashy signs, or in warm fuzzy feelings. On the cross, our own sense of judgment, logic, and power is exposed as foolishness. On the cross, God comes in vulnerability to love us, to suffer with us, and even to die with us.

All we need to do is take a step back and look at our world to see how foolish our wisdom can be. Luther recognized that we are addicted to easy answers and quick-fixes. We hitch our salvation wagons to places where we see power and influence: success, money, politics, the lives of the rich and famous. Luther understood that if we look for God among these things, we will someday be sorely disappointed. Because, like all things that are mired in sin and human brokenness, the salvation they offer us is a lie, bound to fall apart.

Just this week we learned of a widespread culture of sexual harassment and abuse among influential Hollywood executives and stars, some of our more glamorous and celebrated figures.

We’ve learned of a casino in Las Vegas that asked no questions when it comped an expensive room to one of its most successful gamblers, that turned a blind eye to this wealthy patron’s activity there. We know today that this man later gunned down dozens of innocent people at a music concert.

We've seen, in this season of fires and hurricanes and earthquakes, that even the power and beauty of creation can leave devastation and pain in its wake.

Our nation is the most affluent and powerful in the world – we make up 5% of the world's population, yet we consume 50% of the world's morphine. And over half of those prescriptions are for treating those of us who live with anxiety and depression. The truth, my friends, is that we as a people, though we possess worldly power, are in so much pain.

God knows this. God sees us. We cannot hide our brokenness behind wealth or success, behind painkillers or power. So what a gift – what an amazing, surprising, foolish gift – that we have a God who chooses to come and love us fiercely from within this brokenness.

Hear this, my brothers and sisters, this revelation of faith, this teaching that changed my life: When we look to the cross as the starting point for who we understand God to be, we are left with a God who is “vulnerable rather than powerful, a God who is approachable rather than distant, a God who comes to us in mercy and grace rather than judgment.”<sup>2</sup>

When we look to the cross, we see a God who would rather go through *everything* with you – your joys and your fears, your questions and your pain – than sit up on some distant plane of impersonal judgment and power.

A few years ago, in 2014, I heard a news story by a reporter who had just returned from Liberia. Many of you will remember that 2014 saw an epidemic of the Ebola virus sweep through this small country, killing thousands.

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<sup>2</sup> Lose.

This reporter talked about how hard it was for doctors to enforce a culture in Liberia where people were no longer allowed to touch each other, which was the surest way to keep the disease from spreading. She told the story of an Ebola virus survivor, named Patience, who contracted the disease from her 2-year-old daughter.

In her story, this reporter asked Patience, “Why did you touch her? It’s not like you didn’t know that this was Ebola, that you were putting yourself in danger. So why did you do it?”

Patience told her what many of us here already know, have experienced on some level. She said, “When you're seeing a familiar face that you love so much, who is suffering, it's really, really hard to physically restrain yourself from touching them. It is not as easy as we might think.” In her case, Patience was unable to restrain herself from comforting her child, and so she got sick, too.

My friends, on the cross, we see a God who refuses to be restrained. In Christ, God throws his own body over our pain, our suffering, our doubts. As Patience did for her own beloved child, God in Jesus takes on the pain and disease and brokenness of all of God’s people, all of us.

Finally, we recognize in the cross that God is reaching out to us right where we would least expect: in human frailty, in questions (“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”), and in forgiveness (“Forgive them Father, for they do not know what they are doing.”).

And we know that, even in the resurrection, God refuses to play by our rules of fairness or power. Because, on the third day, when Christ conquers death and rises victoriously from the grave, he does not come breathing fire and judgment on those who killed him (us); instead, he comes with scars on his body, breathing forgiveness and peace.

Where are those places – the hurts, the pains, the brokenness, the confusion – where you long most for the presence of God? The good news, my friends, is that the cross reveals to us by faith that God will even meet us there. In the cross, we see not only a symbol of torture but a symbol of God's forgiveness and mercy and reconciliation. There is no place we can go, no pain we can hide, that will escape the wide and gracious love of God in Christ Jesus. We never could have expected such a foolish gift as this. Thanks be to God. Amen.

## CHILDREN'S SERMON

Processional cross – take it to the center of the church

4 L's...Love

We know that this means love because...love is when we sit with someone or rub their back when they are scared or in pain. Does anyone ever do that for you?

Jesus died on the cross...but through that, we see that God wants to love us by going through *everything* with us.

With the cross, we don't see some big God who is far away and sits on a cloud...we see a real person, flesh and blood, who comes to love us.

## 6<sup>TH</sup> GRADE CONFIRMATION CLASS PLAN!

Colaborate Martin Luther video

"name"-ian activity

Tell Steve to set up: powerpoint, pencils, paper, white board

Powerpoint slides + Luther video; then game/activity