

Uncomfortable: The Awkward & Essential Challenge of Christian Community

“Uncomfortable Cross”

[1 Corinthians 1:18-25](#)

Talking about the cross always reminds me of the most challenging Children’s Time that I ever did about three decades ago. It was Easter Sunday, and I was telling children the story of Jesus’ resurrection. I started with a question, “Children, you all look great today in your Easter outfit. Do you know what we are celebrating today?” They answered in one voice, “Easter!” I continued, “That’s right. We are celebrating Easter today. Jesus died on the cross and was buried. On the third day of his death, early in the morning, some women went to the place where Jesus was buried only to find out he was not there. Instead, there were angels, and they told the women that Jesus rose from the dead. He came back to life!” Pointing to the big cross that was suspended in the front of the church, I said, “Look, Jesus is not on the cross any more!”

Right then, a little boy whom I did not recognize said, “I saw Jesus on the cross.” As I was trying to figure out what he meant by that, he just kept shouting, “I saw Jesus on the cross. He is on the cross.” People began to laugh, and I felt so embarrassed because I did not know how to handle the unexpected situation. Frankly, I do not remember how I continued and ended the Children’s Time that day. But, I remember a further conversation that I had with the boy in the Sunday School classroom a few minutes later. I asked him, “Can you tell me where you saw Jesus on the cross?” He said “He is in my church!” Only then did I realize that he was a visitor. The church he usually attended probably was either a Catholic church or a Lutheran church, where all the crosses would have the corpus, the body of Jesus on them!

Whether it’s a bare cross or a crucifix, the cross is the most important symbol of Christianity today. For a typical church building, the cross is found on the steeple, in the front of the sanctuary, in the Sunday School classrooms and other places. Some pastors wear it along with their robes and stoles. But, the cross is used not only as a religious symbol but also as a decoration and accessory. So, we are used to seeing crosses in many different sizes and shapes.

However, in the ancient world, the cross was not something to be looked upon as decorative. To fully understand what the cross really meant to the people of the 1st century, let’s consider today’s capital punishment methods. In the United States, the primary means of capital punishment have been hanging, electrocution, lethal injection, gas chamber and firing squad. Now, try to substitute any of these devices for the cross. Can you imagine an electric chair with its straps placed on the top of our church building? How scandalous this would be? Or suppose we had an image of a needle used in lethal injections or an image of a gun used by firing squads mounted on the front wall here in this sanctuary. Wouldn’t they make you cringe and feel uncomfortable every time you come to worship?

And that was exactly how the cross was perceived by the people of the first century. Crucifixion was a barbaric method of capital punishment, reserved for the worst of criminals. Typically, the convict would be stripped naked, tied or nailed to a large wooden beam and left to hang in public until his final breath, some-

times lasting for several days. Used by the Greeks and Romans, crucifixion was the most painful, humiliating, and gruesome death imaginable for deserving criminals.

Then, who would believe that the one who died in such a humiliating way was the long-expected Messiah? It's not difficult to see how Jesus' death on the cross became a stumbling block to the Jews. Because who would want to profess that the one who died in such an embarrassing way at the hands of Roman soldiers was actually the King of the Jews? And of course the message of the cross was perceived as folly, foolishness by the Greeks. It didn't make any sense that the Savior of the world, the Son of God, would meet such an ignoble end.

So, writing to the followers of Jesus in the city of Corinth, Paul confronts both Greek and Jewish Christians with three questions: "Where is the wise person? Where is the teacher of the law? Where is the philosopher?" For Greeks, a wise person or philosopher was considered to be the most looked-up-to type of person. For Jews, teachers of the law were to be most respected people. But, Paul continues with boldness, "Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?... the world did not know God through wisdom... Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles."

Actually, the cross of Jesus was perceived as foolishness even to those in his inner circle. As recorded in the 8th chapter of the Gospel of Mark, Jesus told his disciples "the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again (v. 31)." Do you know how Peter, the head disciple responded to Jesus' prediction about his future? He took Jesus aside and rebuked him! Indeed, Peter could neither understand nor accept such a depressing picture of Jesus' future.

However, Jesus was not delusional, and he himself rebuked Peter, even calling him Satan. He said to Peter, "you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." Then, he immediately called the crowd along with his disciples and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel will save it (vs. 34-35)."

Today, no one would cringe at the image of the cross because it is no longer perceived as a symbol of shame, humiliation, and embarrassment. Yet, the cross still remains folly, foolishness because its message does not align with the logic and wisdom of the world. The true message of the cross is unpopular and makes people uncomfortable because it advocates weakness instead of strength, humility instead of pride. And, following Jesus remains impossible without God's grace because it means joining him at this unpopular and uncomfortable cross. As Brett McCracken writes in his book, *Uncomfortable*, (which inspired the current sermon series) "To be a follower of Christ is to join his journey of abandoning comfort and enduring suffering, a journey that is foolishness in the eyes of the world."

McCracken lists several losses that we are to suffer when we are serious about following Jesus, when we join him at this unpopular and uncomfortable cross.

First, the loss of being your own boss. In a world which relentlessly emphasizes the pursuit of your own dreams, following Christ means surrendering yourself to God's dreams. In a world which emphasizes seeking full control of your life, following Christ means putting aside your own desires to be the master of your life and surrendering yourself to God's sovereignty.

Second, the loss of consumer religion. In a society driven by consumerism, many people approach the church with an attitude of “Does this church have what I want?” But, the church is not a store where you pick and choose what you want. The church is the body of Jesus Christ. Christianity is not about personal gain and comfort, but sacrifice and service. Because we follow the example of Jesus Christ, who “came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45).” This was a hard concept to understand for Jesus’ disciples. So, even after he talked to them about his suffering and death on the cross, Jesus found some of his disciples discussing their future status and power. And Jesus said to them, “whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all (Mark 10:43-44).”

Third, the loss of pride. The cross is a symbol of God’s forgiveness, and it is offered to everyone, regardless of who they are and what they have done or have not done. The grace of God welcomes everyone into God’s kingdom. And, there, the first can be last, and the last can be first! This is probably, for many Christians, one of the most troublesome and offensive aspects of the cross.

McCracken talks about a movie scene that captures the scandal of this grace of God very well. It’s a Korean film called *Secret Sunshine*. The scene takes place in a prison, as Shine-Ae goes to visit her son’s murderer. Shin-Ae is a new convert to Christianity and wants to forgive him. She sits down to confront the prisoner on the other side of the glass. Shin-Ae finds him unexpectedly happy, peaceful, even joyful. “You look better than I expected,” she observes. And then she tells him about her new-found faith. But, to her surprise, her son’s murderer says to her, “Since I came here, I have accepted God in my heart. The Lord has reached out to this sinner.” “Is that so? It’s good you have found God,” Shine-Ae says very tentatively.

The murderer continues, “Yes, I am so grateful. God reached out to a sinner like me. He made me kneel to repent my sins. And God has absolved me of them.” “God.. has forgiven your sins?,” Shin-Ae mutters in disbelief. “Yes,” he replies, “And, I have found inner peace... My repentance and absolution have brought me peace. Now, I start and end each day with prayer. I always pray for you, Ms. Lee. I’ll pray for you until I die.”

As you can imagine, this hit Shine-Ae hard. When she leaves the prison, she collapses, overcome by the horror of an idea she had not considered: that God could beat her to the punch in forgiving her son’s killer, offering this criminal the only real absolution he needed. She can’t accept this seeming injustice. How could God place a law-abiding, good citizen like her and a convicted killer on the same level of grace? She just can’t take it, so she abandons God.

The message of the cross is that God’s grace is extended to all God’s people, regardless of who they are and what they have done or not done. And it is scandalous. For many Christians, it is like “a pill too hard to swallow.” That’s why many good Christians identify themselves rather with the older son in the parable of the prodigal son, who was angry when his father gave a lavish welcome party to the younger son who wasted all his inheritance... Following Jesus demands that we let go of our own thoughts and pride and join him at this uncomfortable cross.

Once a symbol of shame, the cross is a symbol of victory for those who believe. In Christ, we, his followers are victorious and more than conquerors. The cross is a symbol of God’s forgiveness and reconciliation. Jesus has set us free from the law of sin and death!

Following Christ, taking the Gospel seriously, requires wrestling. We wrestle with the unpopular and uncomfortable cross. And our faith journey will invite the rebuke and scorn of others, perhaps even from members of our inner circle. But this is the way of Jesus Christ. And those who have come before us, the cloud of witnesses, assures us that this is the way to life. My friends, my sisters and brothers in Christ, our Christian belief may sound foolish, and our actions of faith may look foolish according to the world's standards. But, that's okay. That's okay because as the apostle Paul said, "We are fools for Christ's sake."

Thanks be to God! Amen.