

Corinth – Sin City

We're continuing our series on favorite hymns this week, with a focus on the cross. There are some interesting stories regarding these hymns, that we'll get into in just a minute. I want to read our epistolary lesson today, written by the Apostle Paul to the church at Corinth. If you have a Bible or Bible app, turn with me to 1 Corinthians 1:8-25. I'm reading from the NIV Bible today. **Read 1 Cor. 1:8-25.**

Back in the day, the church at Corinth was on the frontline. It was the "Sin City" of its day. Corinth was at the crossroads of the Roman world, receiving trade from Asia, Europe, and Africa. In a lot of ways, they were like America. They were a melting pot. And Christianity wasn't the only religion there. They had temples to various Greek and Roman idols. They did all sorts of secret, immoral rituals in those temples, and then would go to church on the Sabbath. It was a real mess. There was a mindset, fairly prevalent in those days, like we have today about Las Vegas, that "whatever happens in Corinth, stays in Corinth."

Except that it didn't. Word got back to Paul, and he wrote both letters to the church to correct them, and to encourage them. In our passage today, Paul starts by talking about Jesus. "He will also keep you firm to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, who has called you into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord," (1 Cor. 1:8-9). In other words, Jesus is going to help the Corinthians – and us – to stand firm so that when He comes back, He sees us and knows we lived fully as His followers. That's what Paul's telling them here.

Division in the Church

Why is that important? Well, Paul tells us, "I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought," (verse 10). The people within the church at Corinth were fussing with each other. Paul goes on to tell them exactly how he heard about it, and what they've been saying.

"My brothers and sisters, some of Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you. What I mean is this: One of you says, 'I follow Paul'; another, 'I follow Apollos', another, 'I follow Cephas'; still another, 'I follow Christ,'" (verses 11-12). We don't know who, but somebody from Chloe's family told Paul about the bickering going on in the church at Corinth. He was upset enough about what he had heard to sit down and write them a letter. That's what they did back in those days, when it took months to travel across the Roman world, usually by boat and by foot,

because it was faster to send the letter along with a trusted courier than to try to make the journey in person.

See friends, divisions among people who call themselves “Christian” is as old as the Church. People get bent out of shape about something this person or that person says, they feed the rumor mill, and suddenly you end up with church splits. We’ve seen this happen recently in the United Methodist Church. It’s very sad. As the Church in the world, we need to be willing to admit that the Church is the vehicle Christ uses to reach people and spread the Gospel. It is made up of imperfect, sinful people – like you and me – who are just as needy of God’s grace as the ones who are not yet part of the Church.

Paul addresses this. He says, “Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized in the name of Paul? I thank God that I did not baptize any of you except Crispus and Gaius, so no one can say that you were baptized in my name. (Yes, I also baptized the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I don’t remember if I baptized anyone else.)” (verses 13-16). You can tell that he’s pretty fired up about the divisions going on in the Corinthian church. That “I thank God that I didn’t baptize any of you,” is a pretty bold, pretty rough statement!

Different People, Different Skills

What happens next is a shift in the message. Paul tells them, “For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel – not with wisdom and eloquence, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power,” (verse 17). Paul’s called to preach the Good News of the crucifixion, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ – he’s not called to baptize. I think this is an important statement here. I think we tend to look, particularly at pastors, and assume they are all alike. They’re not!

My childhood church’s pastor, right up to high school was Rev. Joe. He was a great speaker, gave great sermons, and always dressed in a three piece suit. I never saw the guy in a pair of jeans. I had started my Freshman year at Houston when he left, and the church hired a guy who moved down from Cleveland, named Rev. Ron. Ron was cool. He was a retired Navy man, had tattoos, smoked, drank, chewed dip when he wasn’t smoking. He always wore jeans, and sometimes cussed in sermons. I think the only time I saw Ron in a suit was at funerals. He was there until after I graduated from Edison, and then he retired due to ill health. Then they brought in Pastor Janet, and she wore these different colored pulpit robes with flashy stoles. I never felt much of a connection to her, and by then I had already stopped regularly attending church services.

My point in telling you all this is to say that different pastors have different gifts, different talents, and different skill sets. We must never be afraid to have different voices and different perspectives at the decision making table with us. That’s why it’s

huge for people in any local church to be actively involved in the decision making process and to work collaboratively with their pastors – especially when there are weak areas – I know that you know that I have areas of weakness. One of the weak areas is in the safety plan arena here at New Hope. If a tornado strikes today, and we're all in here, would you know where to go to be safe in this building? I haven't talked about it, even though John, Matt, and I were at a training back in 2018. Just for the record, if there is ever a tornado, we need to cram as many people as possible into the bathrooms.

The Wondrous Cross

Paul's telling us here, that he's taking a common sense approach to preaching the Gospel of Christ crucified and resurrected. "For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God," (verse 18), he says. This verse is a summary of what a lot of people view as contradictory about the Christian faith. What seems weak and foolish in the eyes of the world is, in reality, the greatest demonstration of God's power and wisdom. Each of the hymns we've sang today, or will sing today, lifts up the cross as the central symbol of our faith and as the key to understanding God's redemptive work in the world.

In just a few minutes we will sing *When I Survey the Wondrous Cross*, by Isaac Watts. Known as the father of English hymnody, he wrote the song in 1707. He had a hard life. His dad was a pastor of a congregational church in southern England, and used to beat him as a child because he didn't approve of all the poetry. As a teenager, Watts finally convinced his dad to let him write a song for their church, and when the congregation sang along, his dad recognized how wrong he had been.

Through his song, Isaac Watts meditates on the love and humility of Christ. His hymn invites us to think about the cross, and to see in it not only the cost of our redemption but also the call to live a life of humility and self-sacrifice. He writes, "When I survey the wondrous cross, On which the Prince of Glory died, My richest gain I count but loss, And pour contempt on all my pride."

Lift High the Cross

Paul goes on in our Scripture, saying, "For it is written: 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.' Where is the wise person? Where is the teacher of the law? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?" (verses 19-20). An amazing thing happens when we look at life and the world through the lens of Scripture. Everything gets flipped on its head. When we let Jesus be King of us, things that used to be real important to us, we find, don't really matter. Other things – people, and building relationships – become high priorities.

Paul goes on, “For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know Him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe,” (verse 21). That’s a great promise! We hear the Gospel message, believe it, and He saves us! And we heard that earlier this morning. “God so loved the world, that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him will not perish, but have eternal life,” (John 3:16).

Paul closes out the passage by making a comparison. It’s ironic, because on the surface, it looks like he’s comparing the Jews and the Gentiles, or “Greeks,” but he’s really making a comparison between those who follow Jesus Christ and those who don’t. Paul says, “Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength,” (1 Cor. 1:22-25).

The first song we sang this morning, *Lift High the Cross*, written by George Kitchin in 1887, was originally written for a church festival in England. It was meant to be sang at the start of the worship service, with a cross-bearer carrying a golden cross into the sanctuary, down the center aisle, and up to the altar space, followed by priests, and other individuals involved in worship. A couple Scriptures speak of Christ being lifted on the cross, including the passage we heard earlier from the Gospel of John. Another influence comes from the 4th century, based on a story about Emperor Constantine, recorded by church historian Eusebius.

In that story, Constantine has a vision of a cross in the sky. Underneath the cross, in Latin, were words written in fiery clouds which translate as, “In this sign you will conquer.” This vision caused Constantine to recognize Christianity as a State religion of the Roman Empire, thus allowing the further spread of Christianity. The song also resonates with Paul’s directive to “preach Christ crucified.” The cross is not just a symbol of our personal faith, but it’s also a rallying point for the mission of the Church to the world. In lifting high the cross, we proclaim to the world the love of Christ, and the power of His sacrifice, for redemption, restoration, and reconciliation.

Above All, The Old Rugged Cross

A few minutes ago we sang *The Old Rugged Cross*. It was written by George Bennard in 1912, and has become one of the most beloved hymns across denominations. Bennard was inspired to write the hymn after enduring a period of great spiritual struggle. As he meditated on the sufferings of Christ, he realized that the cross, though a symbol of shame and death, was also the greatest expression of God’s love and grace. The world sees the cross as a symbol of death and defeat – but for us, it is the source of our hope.

And finally, *Above All*, written by Paul Baloche and Lenny LeBlanc, and made popular by Michael W. Smith. It was written in 1995, and it expresses how Jesus is “above all” powers, kings, and earthly things, yet He chose to lay down His life on the cross. The song didn’t become very famous until President George W. Bush asked for it to be performed live, in 2001, at the inaugural gala held for him on the evening after he was sworn in as 43rd President of the United States.

As we reflect on these hymns and their stories, we’re reminded that the cross in all its seeming foolishness and weakness, is at the core of our faith. It’s the place where God’s justice and mercy meet, where His love is most clearly displayed. The cross confronts the wisdom of the world, and overturns our notions of power and success. Paul’s message to the church at Corinth is as relevant today as it was in the first century. In a culture that often views our faith as irrelevant or outdated, we’re called to boldly proclaim the message of the cross. As we go forth today, let’s carry the truth that Paul so passionately preached: that Christ crucified is the power and wisdom of God. And may we find inspiration in the cross, as the hymn writers did, to allow its message to shape our lives and our witness to the world.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, We come to You in humility, acknowledging the wisdom and power of the cross. You chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and the weak things to shame the strong. Strengthen us in our weakness and fill us with Your wisdom, that we may boast only in You. Help us to embrace the message of the cross, knowing it is the power of God for our salvation. Help us to stand firm in faith, trusting in Your grace to keep us to the end, blameless and secure in Jesus Christ. In His name, Amen.