

Holy Cross Day
Text: I Corinthians 1:18-24
Preacher: The Rev. R. Bruce Todd

St. Peter's - Lafayette Hill, PA.
September 14, 2008

“Something Bad Becoming Something Good”

Today - September 14th - is observed as Holy Cross Day in the Liturgical Churches. The Cross has become such a central figure in Christianity, that people wear them as jewelry around their neck, as earrings, or have them tattooed on their arms. We sing Hymns about being In the Cross, Beneath the Cross, or Lift High the Cross. In the Baptismal Service, we hear how we are “Marked with the Cross of Christ - forever.” The Cross is a focal point in Christianity. Look at the Cross on our Altar. We see it every Sunday. It is present at Worship, at Weddings, Baptisms, Funerals, Concerts, Eagle Scout Ceremonies and all the functions we have in the Church.

But what would the reaction be if we had a hang man's noose from the old westerns on the altar? Or perhaps a Gun from the old Firing Squads? Or maybe the more modern Electric Chair? The Cross, like the Hang Man's Noose, Firing Squad or Electric Chair, is a tool of Execution. They were used to kill Criminals. If someone from the outside came in and saw an Electric Chair or a Hang Man's Noose on our Altar, they would think we were kind of foolish. Well for the Early Christians, the people in Corinth saw them using a cross as the focal point of their worship. And they thought, “what a bunch of fools.”

We have all seen things that seem foolish. The next time you fly on a commercial airline, check out the safety instruction card that is usually found in the seat pocket in front of you. Here's what one United Airlines card said: If you are sitting in an exit row and you cannot understand this card or cannot see well enough to follow these instructions, please tell a crew member. Obviously, those directions present a slight problem. If people can't understand the card or see the instructions, how can they be expected to tell a crewmember?

The Bible is a lot like that safety instruction card. Many people read Scripture without understanding it. It makes absolutely no sense to them, not because they lack eyesight or reading ability, but because they lack faith. As Paul wrote, “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” In other words, unless you have faith, you won't understand the Bible. But unless you understand the Bible, you won't have faith. That's why we have the Holy Spirit. When we come to the Bible with a willingness to learn, God sends his Holy Spirit to reveal what it is saying. God also uses people like us to explain the Bible to unbelievers. When someone tells you they don't understand the Bible, that's like an airline passenger telling a flight attendant they don't understand the safety instruction card. It's up to us to make it clear.

To unbelievers the message of the Cross seems foolish. Part of our job is to show how it makes sense. We can see the Cross as a sign of Victory over death, while others will only see it as an agent of Death. Two people can look at the same thing and see something entirely different. During World War II an engineer at General Electric named James Wright was searching for a synthetic rubber substitute. In one of his experiments, he poured boric acid into a test tube filled with silicone oil, and it became a soft, malleable substance. When he dropped a glob of the substance on the floor it bounced! With a little more investigation, Wright discovered that the substance could also be stretched, flattened, rolled, and sculpted into many different shapes. Around the General Electric labs, the substance became something of a novelty. Soon many GE employees were taking some home to show their family and friends. Unfortunately, the new substance proved to have a rather short shelf life, which made it useless for engineering purposes. It was dismissed by the GE engineers as an interesting, but worthless, discovery. But a writer named Peter Hodgson became intrigued with the amazing substance after he saw it demonstrated at a party.

Hodgson, a copywriter for a toy catalog, had a feeling that the failed rubber substitute would be extremely popular with children, even if it was not useful for engineers. After testing the material for safety, Hodgson packaged the stuff in plastic eggs and added a name to it. Within months the weird rubber known as Silly Putty became one of the hottest-selling toys in America. What one person saw as a foolish failed experiment, another person saw as a potential new product.

Some of you may know I use to have a real job. I worked for the telephone company. In fact, I worked for the phone company way back when Touch-Tone dialing was just becoming available. For those of you who may not know it, you use to have to dial numbers with something called a "Dial" that you spun around. But on Touch-Tone dialing, each number had a different tone. And if you pressed two horizontal or two vertical buttons at the same time, you would get a note. Well, being the musician I am I figured out how to play different songs on the touch-tone dial. I would call friends and play "Happy Birthday" or I could do the opening part of Beethoven's 5th Symphony. In fact, I had about 10 different songs I could play. It was a foolish little novelty I did for fun. Well what "I" looked at as something foolish someone else saw as something valuable. They published these little song combinations in a booklet, copywrote them, and sold them to other people so they could play songs to their friends on the phone. Something foolish to one person has value to someone else.

"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. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, 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."

Paul wrote these words to the Christian church in Corinth, a wealthy and famously immoral city. Corinth was a center of learning and philosophy. It was also famous for its many temples celebrating many different religions. Among these was the Temple of Aphrodite, where 1,000 male and female prostitutes serviced their clients as part of their worship ceremonies. Money and exotic goods flowed through Corinth's major trade routes, making it a wealthy and materialistic society. To a Corinthian citizen, learning, money, and physical pleasures were the reason for living. So imagine how the Corinthians responded when a new church appeared in their city. This one didn't have temple prostitutes. It didn't feature learned scholars holding debates in the courtyard. It didn't use magical incantations or promises of wealth and power to draw people in. In fact, this new church accepted rich and poor, men and women, slaves and free men, educated and uneducated persons on an equal basis. Its followers didn't value money and material possessions; they shared their wealth with one another. They didn't exploit the body by offering sexual pleasures, nor did they exalt the mind by heavy philosophical debates. Instead, this new church emphasized the Spirit of God living in each believer. This all seemed very foolish to the non-Christians of Corinth.

Then they learn that the Christians use a CROSS for their symbol of faith. Crucifixion was the most shameful form of death. It was reserved for the lowest of criminals. So imagine how these words from Paul affected the Corinthian church: "For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ is 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."

Paul was letting the Corinthians know that what happened on the Cross was not something God did *TO* Jesus - but rather something God did *THROUGH* Jesus. Through Jesus God made something bad into something good. The Cross, which use to be an instrument of Death, has now become a symbol of New Life! People who were doomed to a life of Sin, were now promised Salvation and the gift of Eternal Life!

You know, 8 years ago we would have thought it was foolish to walked through a metal detector, hand over our liquids, and take off our shoes before boarding an Airplane. But something happened seven years ago that made what would once have been foolish into something that is now a necessity for safety. We never thought there was any danger so we never took precautions against the dangers. But now that we are on this side of 9/11/2001, we know of the dangers and we take precautions.

That's the danger for those who think we are foolish. For those of us who think we are foolish for believing that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and that he died for us on the cross and then rose from the dead to tell us about a place he has prepared for us. We already know what lies on the other side of death. But there are still too many people who don't think there is anything to fear. They are the ones who are foolish if they are willing to wait until their death to realize they needed Christ's promise of Eternal Life!

Today we rejoice that Chad Jeremy Fetters isn't taking that chance! He has now been marked with the Cross of Christ forever. And now he will join us as we continue to Lift High the Cross of Jesus Christ no matter how foolish people may think we are at times. Because it is better to look foolish than to be foolish.

Something bad becoming good. The Cross, an instrument of Death, is now a symbol of Eternal Life. Us - Sinful human beings - through Baptism we become saved Children of God. When we are on the other side of death we don't want to look back and laugh at those who did not heed the message of Salvation. Instead, we want to know that those people are with us as we all laugh at death. So display the Cross - wear the Cross - sing about the Cross - but let's also be sure to tell why we Lift High the Cross. Amen