

The Center

a sermon

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Trinity Reformed Church

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I Corinthians 1:18–31

A few of us here have spent some time at Camp Fowler. If you haven't been there, then you really ought to go.

This wonderful church camp, nestled in the south-central region of the Adirondack Mountains, has been a place of ministry to young and old for more than sixty years. It lies along a beautiful little lake with the idyllic name "Sacandaga" (not to be confused with the large reservoir about 30 miles to the south). And on the grounds of the camp there are two cabin areas (one for the girls, the other for the boys), an athletic field, a labyrinth, a garden, a chapel, a beach, several hiking trails, and lodging for staff and guests.

But there's more.

The area where all of it comes together, and where *everyone* comes together, where you find the dining hall, the nature center, the athletics building, the nurse's station, the tetherball court, and the camp office, is what many call "the center of camp."

Which is kind of funny.

Because the "center of camp" is not really, well, in the *center* of camp. Not physically. Not when marked off in feet and acres. It isn't in some geographically precise "middle."

And yet it is truly the *center* of camp, maps and surveys notwithstanding. Because it is the center of activity, the center of attention, the heart of where things happen, the place where everybody has a place, the point from which all in the camp go and to which they all return.

Yet some might call the center of camp "The center of camp," while at the same time feeling deeply in their hearts that another place is the center for them, *their* center, perhaps the Chapel, or the outdoor chapel, or the beach, or the porch of Lakeside Lodge.

Which means, of course, that the center is about attitude. It's about perspective. Which means that it can shift. It can change. It's a matter of choice, and will, and desire. And that means that there might be *many* centers, depending on who and when and why.

When we identify something as the center, *our* center, we mark its importance for us. We say that it molds our outlook and guides our behavior. We signal our desire to *continue* making it our center.

That's the power of a center.



In the Bible passage I just read, the Apostle Paul makes very clear what is at the center for him. It's the cross of Jesus Christ.

This was no easy thing.

That's because, as Paul says, the cross of Jesus is a stumbling block to some and foolishness to others. The gospel, the "good news" of Jesus, offends. And what offends about it is the cross, the suffering and death of Jesus.

The gospel focuses on that terrible event, and says of it, "Here is the meaning of life." And about Jesus, who suffered and died there and then, it says, "Behold, your God." The gospel makes the outrageous claim that in the cross, which by human standards appears to show both weakness and foolishness, we are shown the strength and wisdom of God.

The cross, in other words, is the *center*:

the center of all of God's interactions with us,
the center of Paul's message,
the center of the church's being and witness,
the center of what Christians have to say and do.

It's the cross of Jesus that, for Paul, is at the heart of everything: inspiring every thought, guiding every act, impacting every motivation of those who desire to follow Jesus.

Not all would agree with this. Paul knew this. He knew that to those who had no faith in Jesus this was nonsense.

It made no sense to them that the one holy God would bless the death of
this treasonous rabbi.

It made no sense to them that the pure and ideal maker of all things would
become involved with such an ugly event.

It made no sense to them that the master of the universe
would touch this death,
embrace this death,
use this death for the salvation of many,
vindicate this death by the resurrection of its victim.

But it was not only non-Christians who had trouble with the cross. Paul knew this, too. It was even other Christians who could not agree that the cross was the center. Sure, not all of them came right out and said that. But what their words and actions showed was that they really did not agree with Paul that the cross was the center.

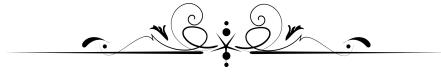
So Paul had to draw a distinction between what *he* was saying and what *others* were saying. He had to make clear that even though others want to talk about other matters, even though others feel that other things are more important, "*We* proclaim Christ crucified."

We see this struggle in the verses I read, along with those that come before and follow thereafter. We can see it quite a bit in most of Paul's letters. It was a struggle that did not end in Paul's time, but persisted and grew for many years. There remained among Christians this *problem* with the death of Jesus, as well as with his humanity, his hungering, his thirsting, his suffering — all of it.

Some would try to explain it away, claiming that he only appeared to be human, or that he only appeared to be divine, or that he did not really *die*, or that *he* did not really die (it was someone else on the cross besides Jesus!).

All these evasions and denials arose out of a deep discomfort with the heart of the good news that Jesus, the Beloved Son of the Father, suffered death on a cross in order to save this world so loved by God.

We proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.



I believe that the same is true today. The message still is “Christ crucified.” It still is our message, what we must tell people. It still must be the attitude-forming and action-inspiring center of our lives. As important as other things are, and as appealing as it may be to speak about them rather than Jesus Christ and him crucified, they are not the core message.

But it is also true today that many have difficulty with this. Many cannot accept this.

How could they? After all, to recall something a columnist in the New York Times wrote the other day, so many today “see[] everything ... as a struggle for dominance, in which you only win at somebody else’s expense.”¹ From that perspective, the message of God’s love shown in the death of God’s Son must appear to make no sense at all.

Even many Christians have trouble with the cross, with the confounding yet liberating truth

that not in our best selves,
nor in our most noble actions,
nor in the beauty of nature,
nor in the grand movement of the planets,

but instead *there*, on the cross, we are decisively shown God’s love for us and the means by which we are made whole.

The cross is too simple, they think. The cross is just not enough, they suspect. There must be *more* ... that we can add on, that *we* can add on:

some philosophy,
some theology,

some poetry,
some music,

some mission,
some program,

some patriotism,
some family values.

To say no more would be unexciting. Boring. Insulting.

The cross *alone*? By itself? Well that’s just nonsense.

Time and again, Christians have tried to get around the centrality of the cross. And we *join* them in removing the cross from the center,

¹“Making the Rust Belt Rustier,” Paul Krugman, Jan 27, 2017, NYTimes.com

whenever we treat it as merely decoration,
or as a piece of jewelry;
whenever we make it unnecessary for our faith,
and find no place for it in our walk with God;
whenever we pretend that Christ's self-giving was just an event in the past,
offering us no example of how we are to live today;
whenever we use snippets of scripture
to rationalize our thirst for vengeance,
and justify our lust for war,
whenever we enlist the trappings of religion
to make respectable our hatreds
and sensible our prejudices
and rational our fears;
whenever we abandon compassion for the sake of expediency,
and justice for the sake of victory;
whenever we decide that "because it works"
is more important than "because it's right";
whenever we want an Easter with no Lent,
an empty tomb with no cross,
a baby Jesus, or a teaching Jesus, but *not* a suffering Jesus.

When we do this, we end up offering a gospel that falls far short of the real deal, proclaiming instead, in those great words of H. Richard Niebuhr:

"A God without wrath
brought [people] without sin
into a kingdom without judgment
through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross."²



What we must proclaim, the heart of our message, is not

how nice we are,
or how nice we *should* be,
or how *bad* we all are and that God really wishes we would all just shape
up,
or how wonderful, or wayward, a country this is,
or how we here are a family that cares for each other so well and, oh,
wouldn't you like to be a member of this family, too?

²*The Kingdom of God in America*, New York: Harper & Row, 1959 [1937], p. 193. Cited in the Wikipedia article on Niebuhr.

As nifty or even important as these might be, they are not themselves the gospel. They are not our message. They might truly be said *in the light of* the gospel. They might be *implications* of the gospel. But they are not themselves the gospel. They are not the heart of the Christian faith. *That* would be, instead, the simple and confounding message of Christ crucified.

Yet we often show that we'd prefer for the cross of Jesus not to be at the center. In many ways, at many times, we try to avoid the message, or change the subject.

Sometimes, we're just not sure it makes sense.
(I get that.)

Sometimes, we're embarrassed by it.
(I get that.)

Sometimes, we're bored by it.
(I *don't* get that.)

In any case, we'd often rather talk about ourselves and the things we do.

Sure, the cross is foolishness. But it is *God's* foolishness. And so it is greater than the highest forms of our intelligence. It is the foolishness by which we can be saved. "For God's foolishness is *wiser* than human wisdom, and God's weakness is *stronger* than human strength."

The cross, in all its bare and horrible simplicity, is really the center of it all, no matter what some say. No matter how we might behave.

We want a happy faith that plays in the shallow pool of our own niceness. And Jesus offers a joyful faith, calling us to embrace the truth that we are sinners who are forgiven by God at great cost to God.

Or we want a positive faith that exults in the power of positive thinking. And Jesus invites us to take up our own cross and follow him.

Or, we want a muscular faith that is strong and dominant in the face of all enemies and adversities. And Jesus shows us the strength of God by enduring the pain of the cross and by dying for his flock.

Or, we want a successful faith that comes out on top, above all other "losers," because we've got no patience for "losers." And Jesus goes to the cross.

So often, we in the church craft and package our message as all sorts of things other than the saving death of Jesus. We talk about almost anything else besides that. We want to have the conversation be about us, our families, our nation, our politics, our transient and distracting culture wars. *These* are the things we want to hear in church, anything but what lies at the center: *Jesus*,

dying so he could rise,
suffering so he could save,
showing divine strength in weakness,
and turning everything upside down.

Here's the thing: the cross of Jesus is not an embarrassing *part* of the message. It *is* the message.

The Jesus who rose from the dead, well, he rose from *the dead*.

The Jesus who was born and laid in a manger and the angels sang at his birth and the shepherds came to him in awe, well, he was born to enter into and take on our suffering and dying.

The Jesus who taught grateful and astonished crowds, well, he taught a message so offensive that the powerful and connected, with the approval of the crowds, put him to death.

With Jesus, all his roads, all he said and did, lead through his death. His death makes a difference for everything else we say about the gospel. Jesus, who suffered and died, Jesus, *with* his suffering and dying, must be at the center:

the center of what we believe about God,
the center of what we believe about ourselves,
the center of how we see and treat other people.

In the cross of Jesus,

we see the grace of God,
we receive the love of God,
we know the blessing of God,
we experience our growth in God.

The cross is the center. So it must be the center:

for us,
for our hopes,
for our plans;
in what we say,
in what we do;
for how we read the news,
for how we greet strangers;
in our living,
in our loving,
in our serving,
in our dying.

The cross of Jesus, at the center: this is who we must be. This is who we are.



My friends, may we all come to see the cross of Jesus at the center of our faith:

reminding us of the death of Jesus,
teaching us of God's power made known in weakness,
overturning our beliefs in coercion and violence,
making us more and more like him.

May we all, more and more, place the cross of Jesus at the center of our lives.