

Sunday September 14 – Festival of the Holy Cross

Readings

Numbers 21:4b-9

But the people grew impatient on the way; **5** they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the desert? There is no bread!

There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!" **6** Then the LORD sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. **7** The people came to Moses and said, "We sinned when we spoke against the LORD and against you. Pray that the LORD will take the snakes away from us." So Moses prayed for the people. **8** The LORD said to Moses, "Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live." **9** So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, he lived.

Psalms 98:1-4

1 Sing to the LORD a new song, for he has done marvelous things; his right hand and his holy arm have worked salvation for him. **2** The LORD has made his salvation known and revealed his righteousness to the nations. **3** He has remembered his love and his faithfulness to the house of Israel; all the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God. **4** Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth, burst into jubilant song with music

1 Corinthians 1:18-24

18 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. **19** For it is written: "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate." **20** Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? **21** 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. **22** Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, **23** but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, **24** but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

Prayer of the Day

Almighty God, your Son Jesus Christ was lifted high upon the cross so that he might draw the whole world to himself. To those who look upon the cross, grant your wisdom, healing, and eternal life, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

John 3:13-17

13 No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven--the Son of Man. **14** Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, **15** that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. **16** "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. **17** For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

Sermon –

Grace and peace to you from God our Father,
God's Son our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit:
Amen.

Today is a day of celebration and of discomfort,
a day of tension, a day deep dissonance. Why?
Because today we celebrate the Festival of the Holy
Cross. In that, we give thanks for the very location of
our justification, the Cross of Christ, and yet we also

recognize the bloody work of Christ's death came only because of our sin.

Now, that surely seems overstated – that Christ only went to the cross because of our sin. Didn't the oppression of the Roman government and the fear within chief priests of Israel result in Christ's crucifixion? Indeed. Didn't perfect obedience to God the Father lead Jesus to the cross? Of course. Didn't Christ come to die on the cross ultimately as an act of God's love? Well surely.

But those who feared the coming of God's kingdom feared the loss of their own authority, and so the move to get rid of Jesus originates in sin. In fact, Christ's obedience to the Father came only after our sinfulness led to his conviction at the hands of Pilate

and Herod. Christ's love, something present in all times and places, would not need to bear a cross if not for our sin.

And so today is a sobering celebration. We celebrate the good work of God through the cross even as we recognize the deep sin within us that led Christ to die upon that cross. Some say the road to hell is paved with good intentions; for Christ, the road to his descent into hell was paved with our sinfulness.

One of the things that I love about music is the ability to put words and tunes together that reflect this kind of tension we experience in the Cross. One of my favorite hymns, What Wondrous Love is This, is within our Lutheran hymnal, though not terribly common in Lutheran circles. I love it because it does

just this. It lives in the tension. The writers combine words of celebration with an eerie tone, and this combination communicates a sort of struggle, a disconnect, a dissonance. In just saying the title, we might think celebration is the main point of the song – **What wondrous love is this!** – but add in the tune, and the rest of the song becomes much more somber.

What wondrous love is this, oh my soul, oh my soul? What wondrous love is this, oh my soul? What wondrous love is this that caused the Lord of bliss to bear the dreadful curse for my soul, for my soul, to bear the dreadful curse for my soul?

There is tension in the cross – celebration wrapped up with mourning. This is our tension today.

There is so much tension in the cross that early Christians refused to use the cross as a symbol of the faith. Rather, the image of Christ as the Good Shepherd, or even as the Lamb of God, dominated Christian imagery until the time of Constantine, when the cross became more standard fare. This is likely hard to believe in our society, for crosses have become not only a central image within the church, but popular jewelry items for musicians and an enigmatic cultural symbol across the world. Within the early Church, however, the cross represented more struggle than success.

Just take a look at this cross here, decked out with Christ's crown of thorns, another image of Christ's longsuffering love. It's plain and splintery,

deceptively strong, with the ability to slowly kill not only a regular human being, but the very Son of God. There's a sort of mockery inherent to the cross, that the Creator could suffer at the hands of creatures, that the Lord of life can lose his own lifeblood, that God can die. How can this tool to torture, this crux of capital punishment, be any part of good news?

Tales of inversion are classic throughout the development of civilization. Today might call it pulling the old switcheroo. Recently stories like the Parent Trap or the Prince and the Pauper have captivated audiences. In each case, a character pretends to be someone else in order to fulfill a particular desire. In the Parent Trap, twin girls trade places in order to meet the parent they never knew and, eventually, to

scheme toward their reunion. In the Prince and the Pauper, a beggar and a prince with uncanny physical similarities switch stations in life in order to know what it is like to be not only in a different social class, but to be treated as different person entirely. These stories captivate us because we often wonder what it is like to be someone else, and sometimes, we even imagine that we could accomplish incredible good if we only lived in someone else's shoes.

The cross is a sort of inversion story. On the cross, God takes our place, for death is the consequence of **our** sin. The cross is the result of **our** sinfulness, and so, much like the Prince and the Pauper, God leaves the heavenly palace and suffers on our behalf. Paul seems absolutely right to call this kind of thing

foolishness. Why would anyone, God chief amongst them, take our place in order to suffer?

Hear again what Paul has to say: "the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written: *I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.*" God has no interest in doing things the way we expect them to be done. God doesn't play by our rules. God is not confined by the structure of our society. Unlike the Prince, who takes the Pauper's place out of a sort of royal curiosity, God takes our place on the Cross with a reunion in mind. God wants to bring together heaven and earth, to bring creation back into relationship with the Creator. So God inverts things,

pulls the old switcheroo, and in so doing, looks foolish to those who don't understand the power at hand.

Nearly 1000 years ago, St. Anselm wrote an amazing little book called *Cur Deus Homo*, or *Why God Became Human*. In it, Anselm suggests two things about the cross. 1st, since humanity is responsible for sin, only humanity can rightfully make up for the consequences of sin. 2nd, since only God is perfect, only God has the power or even the ability to make up for the damage done by sin. What, then, can be done, except for the foolishly impossible: God becomes human and makes humanity right before God. In the words of the Apostle John, God became human not to condemn the world, but to save the world.

The beauty of this is that the entire life of Christ, not only the cross, is part of our salvation. Another ancient Christian named St. Irenaeus once pointed out that humanity became all that God intended it to be in Jesus. Christ restored goodness to all aspects of our life by becoming one of us. The Prince of Peace lived our impoverished life, all that we might become children of the King. And on the Cross, in that final moment where sin ruled human life, Christ lived out the consequences of our sin so that no one else would end in death.

One of the reasons I love visiting with y'all is that every person is a theologian, whether they know it or not. Thursday afternoon I visited a few people who haven't been able to come to church recently.

During our time together, Ilene happened to say this:

“Just a cross is as beautiful as anything.” I think Ilene

was pulling on this tension, that through the cross

Christ heals us of our sin and sets our humanity once

again in union with God. This gets us to the other side

of the cross, the side of beauty, the inversion from

death to life. The cross is the witness that God will

never abandon us, even in the midst of our pain.

Instead, God will remain with us within the struggle.

This doesn't mean that life's pain goes away entirely;

indeed, we know there is sorrow. Yet God chose to

take on suffering so that our lives wouldn't end in

death, but would be carried forth into new life,

heavenly life, life in the Kingdom of God. The cross,

once a machine of torture, now becomes a

gateway into grace, the wardrobe into Narnia, the very location of our justification, where our humanity is finally restored to right relationship with God.

We celebrate the Festival of the Holy Cross because God makes this beauty in the midst of the world's ugliness. Christ is willing to take on this incredibly foolish action in order to make things right between us and God, even if that means taking on the consequence of the Cross. That's the incredible inversion of today. That's the beauty that Ilene showed me. This mechanism of death is no longer to be feared, but to be embraced as a witness to the love of God. It may seem foolish, but we can say along with St. Paul that, in the shadow of the cross, sin has lost its power, and death has lost its sting. We

know that in this foolishness we find the power of God to carry us from death into life. Remember that baptismal promise today as you come to communion: Just as we are united with Christ in a death like His, so too are we united with Christ in a resurrection like His. Because Christ took on the Cross, we need no longer fear death, but instead we may embrace life eternal.

So let us go from this place and tell people about power of God within the foolishness of the Cross. Tell people about a beloved community called Christ Lutheran Church where they may come to know how God is at work amongst us both in our joy and in our suffering. Let us sing amidst the tension, What wondrous love is this that caused the Lord of bliss to

lay aside his crown for my soul? This love. The love we
see on the cross. Amen.