

1 Corinthians 1:18-25 N.T. Page 156 (NRSV)

¹⁸For 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. ¹⁹For it is written,

“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.”

²⁰Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ²¹For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. ²²For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, ²³but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, ²⁴but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.

1 Corinthians 1:18-25 N.T. Page 156
“All Crossed Up”

Opening Prayer: Please bow with me in prayer. Everlasting Father, in this season of Lent we confess our sinfulness and remember the suffering your Son endured for us. Reveal to us today your holy Word, **Amen.**

Introduction: **On a hill far away stood an old rugged cross,
The emblem of suffering and shame;
And I love that old cross where the dearest and best
for a world of lost sinners was slain.
So I'll cherish the old rugged cross,
Till my trophies at last I lay down;
I will cling to the old rugged cross,
and exchange it someday for a crown.**

As Jesus was making his way toward Jerusalem to meet his destiny on a hill called Calvary, none one was thinking anything about a cross. What people saw was a man who healed the sick, who cured the leopards, **who made** the lame to walk, **and the blind to see**. What they saw was a man who was a miracle worker extraordinaire. **He could turn** water in wine, he could feed the multitudes with five barley loafs and two small fish, and he could walk upon the water **and calm the storm-tossed sea**. This man was the long-awaited Messiah, the anointed One from the tribe of Judah, who spoke with the authority of the prophets of old. In just a couple of weeks, **the crowds would welcome** Jesus into Jerusalem with shouts of hosanna in the highest, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Yes, no one was thinking anything about a cross. No one that is, **but Jesus**. All too soon, on a hill drawing near, a freshly cut cross would stand to inflict immeasurable suffering and unspeakable shame. No one cherished the cross; that dreaded cross, that terrifying instrument of torment and pain.

PAUSE

Move I.

Only God could turn an emblem of death into a sign of life. That emblem of suffering and shame has become for us who believe, a cherished symbol of forgiveness, salvation, and life. That's why we adorn our places of worship with the cross. **We place a cross** on the altar table because the cross reminds us of Christ's sacrifice for our sins. **We place a cross front and center** to remind us that the message of the cross is the everlasting rule for our lives. **We place a cross atop church steeples** because it is Christ's sacrifice on that cross that pardons our sins and lifts us heavenward into the very presence of the Lord God Almighty. We cherish the cross, because the One who died on the cross died for us, and the One who rose from the cross, lives for us making us one with God, and one with each other, and one in ministry to all of the world. That emblem of death is truly now a sign of life.

Our Bible lesson today is a masterful piece of prose that is whimsically playful while simultaneously being magnificently profound. These are not the words of a mere mortal. **They don't rely** on the accumulated wisdom of the ages. **They aren't** the logical outcome of deep human thought. **They aren't** the culmination of intense study of the world and its creatures. These are words **inspired by the Spirit of God** that reveal the mysterious means by which God is making it possible for us to turn around and face God. The Apostle Paul quotes the great Old Testament prophet Isaiah in **1 Corinthians 1:19b (NRSV)** when he writes, **"I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart."** This is not a passage for us to dissect, analyze, and scrutinize deep within the grey matter of our minds. Rather, this is a passage for us to marvel over, enjoy, and cherish within the inner recess of our souls. After all, **"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."** (1 Corinthians 1:18, NRSV).

So, what exactly is this message of the cross that Paul is writing about?

What story does the cross jog in our memories? What emotions does the cross stir in our hearts? I want to give a few of you the opportunity to answer this question in your own words. Remember this isn't a question begging for a deep intellectual answer. It's a question best answered from the joyful experience of your heart.

- So, in your own words, “**what is the message of the cross?** Who does the cross speak about? What does the cross mean in your life? How does the cross encourage your faith? (Allow 2 or 3 people to answer.)

Clearly, the cross means a lot to us. **That's why** we adorn our places of worship with crosses. **That's why** we wear cross pendants around our necks. That's why the early Christians devised a **simple hand gesture** signifying reverent devotion to God. You all recognized the gesture; it's “the sign of the cross.” (Make the sign)

Years ago, I remember once having a Scout Sunday at a church I was serving. A few of these boys were part of that church, but most were parts of other churches in the community. In fact, most of the younger boys **worshipped regularly** at the Catholic church in town. So, during the service, when one of the young scouts turned and faced the altar and crossed himself, I saw more than a few people smiling. He's just a little boy, he didn't know that protestant don't cross themselves. After the service, one of the adults from that Catholic church came to me to apologize. But the truth is no apology is necessary. **We were in a place of Christian worship** and the sign of the cross is always central in our worship. **After all**, it is in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit that we worship today. **Yes, only our God could turn an emblem of death into a glorious sign of life.**

End I.

Move II.

Yet to the majority of the world the cross remains a stumbling block. They get all crossed up. **They can't get past the cruel and unusual suffering** that the cross inflicts. They can't get past the inhuman torture and the embarrassing shame of the cross—the shame not only of the executed, **but the shame of the society** that would endorse such a gruesome means of execution. **They also can't fathom** how the unjust suffering and death of an innocent man could possibly bring glory to God. This bothered Jews and Gentiles alike back in the first century, and it continues to bother Jews and Gentiles alike to this day. **Surly there must be** some way to have a religion founded on love and peace without having **to base it** on the unjust cruelty of the cross. The cross is an embarrassment. The cross is a logical inconsistency. The cross is just so much foolishness. Besides how could God be so weak as to die at the hands of mere mortal human beings? The message of the cross **remains a stumbling block** to most of the world's people today.

Back in 2012, Jefferson Bethke, a then 22-year-old fellow from Tacoma, Washington sprung into the public eye when a video he posted on YouTube went “viral” overnight. Normally the videos that go viral are of silly things like the one by **a young Japanese girl** conducting an experiment of what would happen when you put a **Mentos into a bottle of Coke**. Hundreds of millions of people have watched that video to find out. Network TV only dreams of ever having that many viewers. **But Jefferson Bethke's video** wasn't about some silly inane experiment. Bethke titled his video, “*Why I hate Religion but Love Jesus*”. I'm curious have any of you ever seen that video. If you haven't, just go to YouTube and search “*Why I Hate religion*” and it will be the first video to pop up.

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Not only has Bethke's video had tens of millions of views; it's also received dozens of video responses. One of the most watched of those responses is a **Muslim response by Kamal Saleh**. In his video, Saleh contrasts each of Bethke's points with the Muslim understanding of those same points. Now clearly I don't agree with Kamal Saleh but I have to give him credit for stating the Muslim understanding so clearly. I want you to listen to just a clip of Saleh's response.

{Play "*Why I Hate religion But Love Jesus | Muslim Response*" [0:38]}

Now I hope you're not reacting to how Kamal dresses; or even the fact that I told you he's Muslim. I hope you react simply to his words. Everything he says is perfectly reasonable. He's being completely logical. The cross was used to persecute Jesus, so why would anyone who loves Jesus, including Kamal, celebrate that. To Kamal Saleh the message of the cross is foolishness. And he's not just some radical fanatic. **There are hundreds of millions** of people in the world today who believe exactly what Kamal believes. To them, the message of the cross is utter foolishness. **We see wisdom** in God's foolishness and power in God's weakness. **Yet to the majority of the world the cross does remain as a stumbling block.**

End II.

Move III.

So, preach Christ crucified because it's God's power to save to all who believe. All of us who believe that Jesus actually died on the cross in our place, but more than that, that God raised Jesus from the dead; **so, we believe in God's foolishness** that's infinitely wiser than human wisdom. We believe in the cross, not because we're smarter or more spiritual than others. We believe because God has offered to help us in our unbelief, and we've responded to God's offer.

If there's anything I've learned from a lifetime of being a follower of Jesus Christ, it's that **you can't shove religion down anyone's throat.** I'm not going to win anyone to Christ by the persuasiveness of my arguments. Logic can lead you to the door of faith, **but logic can't open that door.** At that critical moment, you have to trust God and **take that proverbial leap of faith.** You have to stop leaning on your own understanding and start leaning on God. So, the best any of us can ever hope for is that through God's grace, others might catch a glimpse of God's love for us, and therefore take that leap of faith, accept God's offer to help, and find their place in God's kingdom too.

Like so many other pastors these days, I struggle to find ways to say things that doesn't rely on churchy words. That's hard for me since I have spent my entire life in the church. We need always to be on the lookout **for new and fresh ways** to present to gospel of Jesus Christ. We're to be a people who truly love to tell the story of Jesus and his love. I ran across a story, it's not a new story, but it was new to me, and I suspect it will be new to most of you.

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Any of you who are my age or older know who Chuck Colson was. He was a special counsel to President Richard Nixon who ended up spending time in federal prison because of his role in the **infamous Watergate Scandal**. After his release from prison, Colson founded **Prison Fellowship**, which deals with injustices in the prison system. In his later years, before dying in 2012, Colson had visited prisons around the world. I want to close today with a story from one of Colson's prison visits.

Once when he was visiting a prison in Brazil, Colson came across a wonderful example of the power of the cross. The warden assigned a prisoner who was a convicted murderer to take Colson on a tour of the prison. Colson was pleased to see that the prison was neat and clean and that all of the prisoners were hard at work and smiling. Finally, his tour guide offered to show Colson the notorious isolation block where uncooperative prisoners at one time were tortured. His guide told Colson that today the isolation unit housed only a single prisoner. As they arrived at the unit's massive door, his guide asked Colson if he was afraid to go inside. "Of course not," Colson replied, "I've been in isolation cells all over the world." Slowly the guide swung open the door and Colson look inside to see the lone prisoner there in the cell—a **crucifix, beautifully carved by the inmates**. The guide grimed and spoke in a reverent whisper, "He's doing time for the rest of us." That's the mystery of the cross; Christ did our time and sets us free. **So, let's continue to preach Christ crucified because it remains God's power to save all who believe.**

End III.

Conclusion: As Jesus was making his way toward Jerusalem to meet his destiny on a hill called Calvary, none one was thinking anything about a cross. Back then no one cherish that dreaded cross, that terrifying instrument of torment and pain. **Yes, only our God could turn an emblem of death into a glorious sign of life.** That emblem of suffering and shame has become for us who believe, a cherished symbol of forgiveness, salvation, and life. **Yet to the majority of the world the cross does remain as a stumbling block.** The cross was uses to persecute Jesus, so why would anyone who loves Jesus, including Kamal Saleh, celebrate that? But there is wisdom in God’s foolishness and power in God’s weakness. **So, let’s continue to preach Christ crucified because it remains God’s power to save all who believe.** The mystery of the cross is that Christ has served our time and has set us free. Don’t get **all crossed up**— believe!

**Lift high the cross, the love of Christ proclaim
till all the world adores his scared name.**

Closing Prayer: Let’s pray. Almighty God; thank you for coming in the person of your Son Jesus, who died our death and rose for our sake to provide a place in your kingdom to all who believe. **Amen!**

The Great Thanksgiving for Lent: See the Insert and on the Screen

10:30 Closing Hymn: “Jesus Keep Me Near the Cross” Red Hymnal No. 301
All Four Verses

Sending Forth: Don’t get all crossed up. May the cross of Christ be for you the very power of God. Go forth and preach Christ Crucified so all may believe and live. **And all of God’s people said...Amen!**