

Epiphany 5A17, I Corinthians 2:1-13, February 5, 2017, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, PA, Kurt S. Strause

Almost thirty years ago this congregation extended a call to a young assistant pastor to come to Lancaster and serve as your pastor. For almost five years I worked with another pastor, the senior pastor of St. Paul Lutheran in Beachwood. My responsibilities included worship leadership and preaching, of course, but as is often the case with a senior and assistant pastor, my preaching responsibilities were limited to about once a month, maybe close to every third Sunday. Several retired pastors were members of this congregation and often helped me in those first few years. When Emmanuel extended a call to me I remember talking with one of these pastors, someone I respected a great deal. I spoke to him about my excitement, but also my fear about now needing to preach every Sunday to a congregation. "How will I keep their interest? What if I run out of things to say?" I wondered to him. And I remember his answer distinctly. "Know nothing, except Jesus Christ and him crucified." He then went to speak of the center of our proclamation, how our preaching as pastors should always focus on the cross, on Jesus Christ, and his death and resurrection. He said, "there are always lots of people out there who will give out bits of sage wisdom and advice, who will counsel people how to lead better lives or build up their self-esteem. Some of those people are pastors in pulpits. But a pastor of Christ's church will always be pointing to Christ on the cross."

And so it was, almost thirty years ago, I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. St. Paul's words to the Corinthian church which we heard this morning ring very true in my ears at least. That's how I felt those many years ago, and it's how I still feel today. Even though I'm now very much used to preaching every Sunday, it's always with a sense of fear and trembling I step into this pulpit. Not because I am afraid of you, or of your opinion concerning me. Rather, because of the radical, life-changing and world-changing message entrusted to those who proclaim the gospel. For the proclamation of the cross, of Jesus Christ crucified, is all we really have. Everything else we say or do as Christians, as the church, begins and finds its source in this message. If our message is more about us and who we are, or who we hope to become, or giving out practical bits of advice in order to help us be better people, but it doesn't have its source in the cross, then we are, as St. Paul will later say in his letter, a "noisy gong and a clanging cymbal." But to speak of Christ crucified, and the cross as God's supreme and life-giving message of hope generates fear and trembling because it is a message that runs contrary and counter to what the rest of the world holds to and proclaims.

Let's take, just as one rather minor, but telling example, what will occur on a field in Houston, Texas later this afternoon. Two mighty football teams, the New England Patriots and the Atlanta Falcons will square off against each other in Super Bowl 51. Each team stands at the pinnacle of their conference, having defeated their opponents and prevailed in head to head combat. The Patriots, looking to take home their fifth Super Bowl trophy, are led by Tom Brady, himself out for vindication after a four game suspension at the beginning of the season. They're up against the Falcons who haven't appeared in a Super Bowl since 1999 which they lost to the Denver Broncos. But the Falcons have been flying high the last half of the season, with the best defense in football today. Only one will emerge victorious. One will go home in defeat. Strength is everything. Will and determination and superior play will determine the outcome.

The Super Bowl serves as a kind of microcosm for how many people see the way of the world. Strength is everything. Will, power, superiority mean everything. Even though the Super Bowl is really just a game played by some very large and athletic men, we still assign it great

symbolic status. The Super Bowl, and football, and maybe even athletics in general are so wildly popular because that is how we understand the world really works. A struggle between two opposing teams, squared off on a field, each trying to win, to overcome, to defeat an opponent. Because that's the way of the world. There is always someone, something, some power or force or person who threatens us, to impoverish us, to take us down. Think how we even speak of illnesses. Cancer or heart disease is something we fight against, we wage a battle over, and we win or even sometimes say, "he put up a courageous fight, but he lost the battle."

In the Super Bowl, as in life, we believe there is no room for weakness. No room for fear. No place for trembling. Confidence, strength, will to win, defeat of the opponent; that's all that matters. So, do you see how Paul's message of proclaiming only the cross runs so counter to the prevailing wisdom of the age? Can you sense how little sense it makes to have someone stand before you and say, "you see all this you hold dear, all this strength, all this power, all this wisdom? It's all come to an end. God's power is known only in weakness, not in strength. God's plan and purpose for this world is found in a cross, an instrument of defeat, humiliation and execution. The powers of this world put Jesus to death; but it's a death that just signals their own end, their own demise. For from here on in, if you will see God's power at work you must look to where you will find weakness and fear and trembling."

It's when we are at our most vulnerable, our most weakened state, that God's power will be most evident. When we find ourselves unable to cope, battered and beset by fears and doubts, trembling and weakness, God's power and love will always be there as the one thing upon which we can rely. The cross of Jesus Christ is God's perfect power, hidden and unseen to the rest of the world. But you have received God's Holy Spirit. You are gifted by God with new eyes, a new heart, not as the world sees or believes, but for those who belong to Christ. For it's the cross of Jesus Christ alone that reconciles us, forgives us, creates in us new and honest hearts.

Yet when St. Paul said, "I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified," he doesn't mean that he doesn't know anything else. The cross is the center of our proclamation. But the cross for St. Paul also serves as a lens. Most of you wear glasses or contact lenses. You see the world more clearly when you look through this lens of glass or polycarbonate or whatever it's made of. Just so, the cross of Jesus Christ is the lens through which we now see the world. It's the lens of the cross that sharpens our vision to see the ones Christ saw, the weak and vulnerable, the least among us, those rejected by the strong and powerful. These were the ones Christ sat at table with, the ones who were attracted to his teaching.

When pastors such as myself see examples of people continuing to be marginalized or exploited by the strong and powerful we are doing so through the lens of the cross. Sometimes we point this out as part of our preaching, calling attention to God's long history of standing in solidarity with the poor and opposing the powerful as the prophet Isaiah said: "to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?" The cross opens our eyes to these with whom God stands in solidarity. The cross is the lens that sharpens our vision.

It's an interesting history lesson if I point out that the prophet Isaiah is speaking to a situation in which the Israelites, just returned from captivity and exile in Babylon, are now themselves keeping captive the poor by exploiting them and thinking that they are justified by their religious faith in God in doing so. But if a pastor looks at a current day situation and sees

much the same thing going on, in which the poor and vulnerable are exploited and marginalized in the name of religion, and comments on it then some will say we are introducing politics into the pulpit.

Maybe, from time to time, you'll hear some politics from the pulpit. But let it be sufficient for now for me to tell you that what I really hope will happen is that you'll begin to see the world through the lens of the cross of Christ. I hope you see it in your own life, where in your own weakness and vulnerability God meets you there, lifting you up with his gifts of grace and love and forgiveness. But also that you begin to see everything through this lens. That when you read the paper or watch the news or scroll through a newsfeed on your computer you see where the weak are exploited by the strong, where God speaks up for those who have little or no voice of their own, where the powerful are interested in lining their own pockets at the expense of the poor. If you start to see the world through the lens of the cross it will even affect the way you understand politics.

Knowing only Jesus Christ and him crucified doesn't mean we don't know anything else. It means we know the most important thing, the most central thing about God and the world. That in the cross of Christ God is at work, restoring, healing, reconciling and lifting up all people, all things to himself. Amen.