

Agnus Dei, Qui Tollis Peccata Mundi
Deo Volente
Sermon Preach at Stouffville United Church
By the Rev Dr. John S. Niles MSM

“The Paradox of the Cross”

March 26, 2023

1 Corinthian 1:1-25

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OsMyv9Q4_OU at the beginning
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N_lrrq_opng At the end of the sermon

We see it every day. It dangles as jewelry around our necks. It is tattooed on peoples arms; it dangles from hip-hop artist’s necks. The cross is everywhere in the world. A crucifix adorns the wall of the local hospital room. It’s image stands engraved on a stone marker in the cemetery. The steeple above a church points to the heavens with the cross at its peak. The most common of sights for a Christians – the cross. We could hardly imagine the faith without it. Yet, this piece of jewelry so beautiful remains an instrument of torture so hideous that even in the Roman Empire it was band for a while as being too inhumane

Yet, as we approach that day of days when Jesus was pierced for our sins and wounded for our iniquities and hung on a cross we are faced with the paradox of the Cross. For some it will be considered a stumbling block to others foolishness, but for the believer—the Christian—it is wisdom even if at first it appears as foolishness.

I

The paradox of the Cross is that the Christian receives **wisdom through foolishness**. Paul states in Corinthians that the Gospel is thought to be madness to a great number of people. It was to the Jew a stumbling block; and to the Greek intellectual’s folly. And people’s opinions of it haven’t changed that much today. It is still considered to be foolish to follow Christ to the Cross.

A tourist got of a flight and took a taxi. After giving directions the taxi took off like a bolt of lightning. As it approaches a red light the passenger expected the driver to stop, but he didn’t. He sped right through. And then another and another. The passenger became quite irate with the driver at this point and asking him what was he was thinking. The driver said, don’t worry, I come from a family of taxi drivers. My mother and father were both taxi drivers, and all my brothers are taxi drivers. And with that he went through another red light. Then he came to a green light and the passenger took a sigh of relief but the driver stopped. The passenger said, “What are you thinking you stop at green lights and go through red?” “What I was thinking is one of my brothers is going to go through that red light.”

Sometimes wisdom at first presents itself as foolishness. That is what Paul was trying to tell people. He was trying to inform people that there is a paradox to the cross. For some it will

be considered a stumbling block to others foolishness, but for the believer—the Christian—it is wisdom even if at first it appears as foolishness.

Then, like now, it was considered foolish, because the Cross calls us to sacrifice ourselves, as servant to all; but society calls us suckers, because it says, above all else, we must seek success for ourselves not others.

It is foolishness to follow the cross, the world says, because the Cross calls for sacrifice, and we must have success. The Cross demands obedience, and the world desire obsessions. The Cross calls for dedication, but we want to do our own thing. The Cross has always caused concern because of the commitment it demands. And it is no less true today.

I had the honour of meeting and spending nearly an hour in private conversation with F.W. de Klerk the former Prime Minister of South Africa who ended Apartheid, freed Nelson Mandela and stepped aside to give him his position of Prime Minister and then spent the rest of his time serving as Mandela's assistant - the very man who had been the arch enemy of de Klerk's political party.

Previously, he was in agreement with the government and with the policy of Apartheid. He had been raised to believe that racism was right. He was schooled in the knowledge that black South Africans were inferior to white South African. And with this training he rose in power to lead the party because of it.

But it wasn't until his faith convicted him of the sin of Apartheid that he changed and rejected everything he previously believed. His friends and colleges abandoned him and called him a fool. Months after freeing Nelson Mandela from jail F. W. de Klerk's wife was murdered. He sacrificed much for what was viewed by the people around him as a "fool's errand". Friends betrayed him, colleges refused to ever speak to him again; yet, what was viewed as foolishness by others was in fact the wisdom of God. His heart moved his head. His heart of faith was moved by God to reject what his head was taught.

II

St. Paul states that the Paradox of the Cross receives wisdom from foolishness, and **strength through weakness**. There is power in what the world calls weakness. This is one of the things about the Christian gospel which people even today find difficult to understand. To admit a weakness, in the world's way of thinking, is the worst thing anyone can do. We are not supposed to be weak. We are supposed to be strong, and self-reliant and self-sufficient. We are supposed to need anyone or anything. To do so, is to show weakness, and that is unacceptable.

But, it is important to understand that Christ's concept of strength, is found only through weakness. For when we face our weaknesses and hand them over to God, we find a strength we did not know was there. As St. Paul said, "when I am weak, then am I strong ... My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Every addict or person recovering from addiction knows this. For it is only when they come to a point where they realize that they are powerless over their addiction. It is only when they admit their weakness that they then can turn themselves over a power greater than themselves.

The way of the believer has always been a problem to the non-believer. They point and say what point is there is praying and going to church. It is just a crutch. Yet, the parents of a little girl by the name of Jadena didn't believe it was a crutch. Rather, when their daughter was abducted by a person with mental health issues everyone told them that after thirty-six hours had

gone past that she was most likely dead. But they held onto the hope she was alive and indeed that faith that sustained them. They held prayer vigils and church services to pray for her safe return. They prayed that Jadena would be found alive, and also that she would be found in a home with children, and thirdly that she would be carried by a Christian home.

They sent out pictures and requests throughout the United States—no one responded. Months past and they went beyond the USA to Mexico and Canada. And when they found her in *my* home their church celebrated an answer to all their prayers after Jadena's parents came to pick her up and return home.

And through their weakness Christ's power was made perfect, and as a result, they had the strength to hold on until she came home.

III

St. Paul states that the Paradox of the Cross is that the Christian receives wisdom from foolishness, strength through weakness and lastly **life through death**. "For we preach Christ crucified..." Paul was saying what is the point of preaching or telling about some person who died on a Cross a couple thousand years ago if it doesn't have significance for life?

Paul came to realize that something spectacular happened on the Cross at Calvary. He came to realize that the person, Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah long awaited. And this is the greatest paradox of all. For what happened to Him happens to us insofar as we belong to him by faith – and that life comes from death.

I received an email from Prof. Carr the leading Sri Lankan Christian theologian to update me on the effects of the crisis in Sri Lanka due to the Tsunami disaster 7 years ago. He said that "If there was any good that was to come out of this it would be that people are turning again to God and have a God consciousness...and that people are turning not only in Sri Lanka but all over the world to help their fellow man. Billions of dollars and thousands of people are reaching out to make a difference." Life is being called forth out of death.

Jesus calls forth life from death just as he did when he called out to Lazarus. Lazarus, *Lazarus*, LAZARUS. I said that in a little country parish and up from the basement came the words "I'm coming, I'm coming." It turned out that the janitor was named Lazarus. If church wasn't over by then it should would have been. And he called life forth through death. And does the same for us today. The Paradox of the Cross is that this is the message hope and help to all people. You think about that.