

**Preacher:** Pastor Twyla

**Scripture:** 1 Corinthians 1:18-25

*<sup>18</sup> 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. <sup>19</sup> For it is written,*

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

*<sup>20</sup> Where 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? <sup>21</sup> For 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. <sup>22</sup> For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, <sup>23</sup> but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, <sup>24</sup> but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. <sup>25</sup> For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.*

This morning, on this third Sunday in Lent, we continue our walk with Jesus towards the city of Jerusalem and the events of Holy Week. It’s a challenging journey as we engage in personal-reflection on our relationship with Christ and with each other. Perhaps nothing makes it more of a sore spot than when we ponder the suffering Jesus endured as he hung on that hideous instrument of death—the cross. We can’t help but look at the cross and be reminded of why Jesus suffered and died—at least that’s what we assume. Yet assumptions are not always the reality. Has the cross, a symbol Christians have taken on as a sign of their faith, lost its meaning?

Sometimes the advice we get from the world’s signs can be somewhat pointless. The Road Trip America website shows photos of some of the funny signs you can find across America, some with some pretty pointless advice. For example:

- A sign over a motel in Las Vegas that reads: Highly Recommended **By Owner**
- A sign in Byhalia, Mississippi: Road Unsafe **When Under Water**
- A sign over a store in Sun Valley, Nevada: Where Everything Is For **\$1.00 Or More**
- A sign at a Walmart in Springfield, Missouri: 2 for \$3.00. **Was \$1.50**
- A sign in Estes Park, Colorado: In Case Of Flood **Climb To Safety**
- A sign at a store in Tipton, Indiana: Eat Here And **Get Gas**
- A sign in the Blue Mountains east of Walla Walla, Washington: Caution—**No Warning Signs, Next 3 MI**

Some signs are necessary to communicate important and reliable information. Take road signs as an example. Many of them we recognize immediately by their color or shape like a stop sign or a yield sign.

Yet some signs, including road signs, sometimes get ignored or their meaning gets forgotten. One of those signs I believe is the yield sign. I don’t believe people know what it means to yield anymore. Instead of slowing down or perhaps even stopping to give way to the main flow of traffic; it seems to have taken on a new meaning to speed up and push your way out into traffic without regard to anyone else. That’s a pet peeve of mine.

Christians have an important sign—the cross. We see them everywhere. Lots of people wear one as a piece of jewelry around their neck. We see them on shirts people wear. I’ve seen them used as ornaments in yards and fields. The cross has become so abundant that it’s, sadly, blended into part of the background of our subconscious mind. Sometimes it takes a fresh look

at a sign or a symbol to understand what it really means, and there is perhaps no symbol that has been taken for granted more than the cross.

In the Roman world of the first century, wearing a cross around your neck would have been the equivalent of promoting the electric chair. You might as well wear a decorated hangman's noose.

In his book *The Cross of Christ*, John Stott points out that the earliest surviving picture of the crucifixion is a mockery. It's an ancient piece of graffiti, dating from the second century, found on the Palatine Hill in Rome, "on the wall of a house considered by some scholars to have been used as a school for imperial pages." The "crude drawing depicts, stretched on a cross, a man with the head of a donkey. To the left stands another man, with one arm raised in worship. Unevenly scribbled underneath are the words 'Alexamenos worships God.' The cartoon is now in the Kircherian Museum in Rome—it was the concept of worshipping a crucified man which was being held up to derision."

It's a curious thing to wonder if the cross one wears really has any meaning to the person wearing it. Many of the crosses we own are made to look beautiful. But the cross Jesus was nailed to was anything but beautiful. It was rough and ugly. It was a symbol of shame. Only the worse criminals were crucified on a cross—that was until Jesus was nailed to it. It was all of humanity's sin that put him there...not anything he did wrong. The early Christians, however, adopted the cross as a sign of the active triumph of their God over the power of sin and death, and it caused a major change to the sign of the cross. It became a symbol of salvation for Christians.

At the time when Paul was writing the letter to the Corinthians, there were two old signs that tried to point to salvation. For the Jews, it was the sign of the Messiah, and the Messiah himself would do incredible, even miraculous things, that would be observed as signs to prove his anointed importance as Israel's true king and savior. This is the reason that the religious leaders kept asking Jesus for signs, wanting him to prove his power.

For the pagans of the day, on the other hand, salvation was all about health and wealth in this life with no real hope for anything beyond that. A long life and a prosperous life was the best anyone could hope to obtain.

These are not foreign ideas in the times we are living in. People still want God to send signs and even perform miracles to prove that he cares for them, to prove his existence and worthiness of their devotion. Also, health and wealth are still viewed as all that really matters in life. It's viewed as proof that someone has really "made it" in life. They put all of their confidence in what is immediate and in what gives them wealth and prosperity. The cross for these folks is merely a symbol of simple mindedness and foolishness.

The Apostle Paul wrote, "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." When Christians look at or even wear a cross, it's the sign that reminds us that God has provided salvation—a place for us in his kingdom. Paul goes on to write, God has "made foolish the wisdom of the world". What was considered a hideous and pathetic symbol, is now the sign that saves those who believe. The ancient sign of death became a sign of life.

So, how do we recover and foster the symbol of the cross in a world where the cross has become a fashion accessory and a sign that is often ignored? First, the powerful sign of the cross has to take on new life—inspire and motivate deep within—the people for whom it has meaning. Those who have been saved through the grace and power of God, living a life of obedience to God, humbly serving and generously loving others are the best signs of the cross.

On the stern and rockbound New England coast there lived a little brother and sister that frequently played among the rocks along the shore. One day one of them discovered a natural formation in the rocks above them that resembled a cross. After that, they took great delight in filling the crevices that shaped the cross with dry grass and sticks, and setting it on fire to see the beautiful display it made.

As the years passed, the girl remained at the old homestead, but the boy went away to seek his fortune. One stormy winter night he returned on a visit to the old home; and he told his sister he had seen signals from a ship in distress out at sea.

Neither of them knew of any way to help the distressed sailors; but presently the sister remembered the old cross in the rocks. She gathered a large armful of wood and kindling and hastened to the spot. She filled in the crevices, as in earlier days, and then set the cross on fire.

In a short time, the light of the blaze was shining out through the storm. One of the sailors—who had been cheering his comrades on and urging them not to give up—cried out, "The cross! See the light from yonder cross! It will guide us to safety."

They manned the lifeboats and pulled toward the flaming cross. They found the faithful girl, who had remained out in the storm and cold to feed the fire, lying on the shore, frozen to death. She had given her life to direct them to the cross.

Likewise, we demonstrate Christ and the salvation he offers best not by the jewelry that we wear, but through our words and actions. It requires that we admit our own spiritual weaknesses and allow God's grace—Christ's Spirit—to flow through us to meet and touch others.

Yes, the cross has offered salvation to us individually but then also, we begin to live as a cross-shaped community. Paul's letter to the Corinthians was written to address divisions in the church, which muddy the message of the cross to the world. Instead of quarreling and creating division, we are to be "united in the same mind and the same purpose". The early church thrived in the Roman world because it continued to live the life of the cross, despite ridicule, criticism, and persecution (Acts 2:42-47).

In a world that's becoming ever more divided, even within the church, the sign of the cross must once again become the sign that reminds us that it's not about us, but about what God has done for us in Christ. The cross is the sign that allows us to abandon our posturing of individual strength and invites us to become part of a community whose strength is always found in weakness.

At the heart of the city of London is Charing Cross. All distances across the city are measured from its central point. Locals refer to it simply as "the cross." One day a child became lost in the bustling metropolis. A city police officer (A "bobby," as they are referred to in London) came to the child's aid to try and help him return to his family.

The bobby asked the child a variety of questions in an attempt to discover where the boy lived, to no avail. Finally, with tears streaming down the boy's face, he said, "If you will take me to the cross I think I can find my way from there." What an apt description of the Christian life. The cross is both the starting place of our new life in Christ, but also the place we must return to, time and again, to keep our bearings in life.

When the sign of the cross becomes part of our person, then the Person of Christ will change our direction from wandering in a dark, meaningless, and lost life and boost us into a life and the world with new strength! Amen.