

“The Cross”
The Reverend Michael L. Delk
St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky
5th Saturday/Sunday of the Epiphany – 8 & 9 February 2020
I Corinthians 2:1-16; Matthew 5:13-20

The cross is so pervasive. We hang them on our walls, wear them around our necks. Some people have the cross tattooed on their bodies. To which I say, “Ouch!” And our Church is festooned with more crosses than we could count, prominently displayed. Several times during worship, many of us make the sign of the cross: to grant and receive absolution and to bless and receive God’s blessing; in response to the Gospel reading, three little crosses on forehead, lips, and heart; when we utter the blessed name of the Trinity, when we pray over the bread and wine that God might send the Spirit to make those elements holy, and to make us holy that we might receive them with grace. Crosses, crosses everywhere.

It’s a paradox that when something’s ubiquitous, we often notice it less. It’s not so much that familiarity has bred contempt, or that we’re overusing the cross and somehow emptying it of its power. Instead, we’ve become comfortable with the symbol and what it represents, or what we think it represents. And in the process, we forget the scandal of the cross, how radical it is: how surprising it is that God worked through this instrument of death to bring new life into the world; how God took this symbol of shame and transformed it into a beacon of his glory; how God took a moment of weakness and cruelty and transformed it into everlasting strength and mercy.

Of course, we’re far from the first to lose sight of the cross, what it means and what it does, the sheer potential for havoc it possesses. The Corinthians, in their pride, suffering from a massive superiority complex, had either forgotten about the cross, or had come to misunderstand

its meaning. So Paul tried to bring them back there, back to the cross, and have them refocus on the epicenter of the greatest revolution the world has known or ever will know.

For it was through Christ crucified, and nothing else, that the mystery of God's love was fully revealed in the world, a love ready – eager – to sacrifice everything in the hope that some would discern in this grubby hunk of deadly wood a portal to renewed life, to a different way of being, of thinking and doing.

In the mystery of God's wisdom, the unlikeliest of things – an object of oppression – became the tool God used to set people free from sin and ultimately from the sinful, idolatrous forces and systems of this world, which abuse and manipulate and control and lie, enjoying every moment of degradation and pain inflicted. Through the cross, God's Kingdom comes pouring into the world, igniting a revolution: subversive, pervasive; never-ceasing, never tiring; wearing away at injustice, wearing down our complacency toward injustice.

For the Son of God in human flesh died on a cross, absorbing all that he did not deserve so that we might be absolved of all that we do deserve. Through his agony, peace comes to us, and with prayerful reflection great gratitude arises in our hearts that the only person who was ever fully human, fully whole, was broken so that our brokenness might be healed, that we might be, as Jesus was, more truly human: reflecting the image and likeness of God as a light for all who seek mercy and forgiveness, a new start, a fresh life.

That's the power of the cross, or at least part of it, because even with the mystery made known to those who humbly receive the Spirit's wisdom, the sheer dimensions of that cross simultaneously inspires and overwhelms our imaginations, breaking the bonds of conventional wisdom, setting us loose from whatever yoke weighs us down, so that we can envision an alternative Way, following Christ, finding joy.

Sometimes, sensing the awesome energy of the cross, we quietly shrink away from it, or try to tame it, domesticate it. We take something mysterious yet simple and turn it into something obscure and over-complicated. We take what we want from the cross, and politely ignore what it wants from us, and what the cross wants *for* us. We gladly trade clarity for confusion. Our bag of tricks is nearly endless.

We play it small to stay safe instead of taking the risk of sharing the secret of the cross' scandal, lest we become implicated in that scandal and lose our worldly standing. We smother the lamp with the bushel-basket, or keep it simple and just leave that lamp on the shelf unlit, gathering dust. And we are masters of self-distraction and delusion, hungry consumers for whatever sparkle the world offers that can take our eye off of the cross and on to things that amuse and entertain, but are of no great consequence. I do not accuse. I speak from expertise. But we can call it quits.

Being made whole by the cross means that we are given the power to break habits and patterns that tempt us away from the heart of our faith. We can experience transformation. Occasionally it comes as this massive reorientation of head and heart, a major epiphany, but more often it takes hold gradually, step by step.

We quarrel less. We tend toward more charitable thoughts, even toward those, especially toward those, who least deserve them. We increasingly find a fascination for sacred things, bored by all the rest, and become aware that our daydreams have shifted focus, our priorities realigned. We drive by the lottery billboards and instead of wondering, "What if?" we realize that we've already won the only lottery that really matters because, grace.

As we lean into the cross, we catch the scent of the scandal, the sweat and blood, and we're less disgusted or frightened, because we come to realize that it is Christ's cross now. Jesus

didn't put it up, but he certainly brought it down, and turned it inside out. What scandalizes the world becomes our souls' delight, and as that happens, we can finally breathe, which is a little ironic. People killed on a cross usually suffocated, but with the cross of Jesus we can breathe.

It won't iron out all the troubles in life. The cross won't subtract all of our hurt. In fact, Christ crucified can get us into all sorts of trouble, cause us pain, but for a purpose: to welcome those who suffer from injustice, bigotry, ostracism, exploitation, and deception, and say, "Welcome, brother. Welcome, sister. Your healing starts and ends here." Because the cross gives meaning to suffering. It gives true meaning to our entire lives. The cross gives peace. The cross gives mercy. The cross gives the wisdom of God's mystery, pure unconditional love. The cross gives more than we could ever name. Time to take a risk and receive it. Amen.