

Lenten Sermon Series: A Time to Repent
Part II: God's Cross-cultural Cross
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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. For it is written:

*“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise;
the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.”*

Where is the wise person? Where is the teacher of the law? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength. – 1 Corinthians 1:18-25, NIV

If you were here two weeks ago, you may remember that we began a new series of messages during the season of Lent leading up to Easter. We're looking at one of the lectionary passages from our Bible each week and we're focusing on the theme, “A Time to Repent.” We said that the Greek word for “repent” means “to change one's mind or way of thinking” in a way that leads to a change in how we act. Repentance is always about getting us back on the pathway to get closer to God and to live our lives the way God wants us to live them.

In the words we have just read from Paul's letter to the church at Corinth, he focuses on things associated with how we think. He uses words like wisdom, wise person, philosopher, and teacher. But if there is one word that is the focal point of this passage from Paul it is the word “cross.” For Paul, and for all of us who are Christ followers, the cross and what happens to Jesus on the cross is central to everything!

You may remember Clarence Jordan, the author of the “Cotton Patch” New Testament paraphrase and founder of the interracial Koinonia farm in Americus, Georgia. Once he was getting a red-carpet tour of another minister's church. With pride, the minister pointed to the rich, imported pews and luxurious decorations. As they stepped outside, darkness was falling, and a spotlight shone on a huge cross atop the steeple. The minister said with a satisfied smile, “That cross alone cost us ten thousand dollars.” Clarence Jordan responded, “You got cheated. Times were when Christians could get them for free.” (Michael Jenkins, Itasca, Texas. *Leadership*, Vol. 5, no. 3.) So, why is the cross such a big part of our identity as Christians? I think Paul's words can help us with that.

As we've talked about before, the church in Corinth to which Paul is writing this letter had a lot of problems and issues which Paul addresses. If you look in your Bible right before the passage

we just read, you will see that Paul is talking about divisions in that early church. Some scholars believe this church was not that big -- perhaps no more than 50 people. Corinth was near the sea, but it had been settled by the Romans and it contained a cross section of humanity -- people from many different cultures, including some Jews who had left Jerusalem during difficult times.

Now, there are a number of reasons for their divisions, but they seem to be particularly divided over whom they followed. These new Christians apparently were saying that they followed not only Christ, but Apollos, Paul, and Cephas, who is Peter. We are not sure why they are following different leaders, but divisions like these feel strangely familiar in our day and time, don't they? So, what does Paul focus on immediately after he brings up these divisions? He focuses on the cross and how it might speak to those who are divided into different groups.

Now, I feel the need to stop and issue something of a warning before we go farther. I feel a little like the pilot of an airliner who calls back to the passengers on board over the intercom and says something like, "We've got a little turbulence up ahead, so I just wanted to let you know that we are turning on the seatbelt light and we need you to get in your seat and put on your seat belt." As we move into this passage and talk about what it means to repent, these words will open us up to the pathway of repentance which may lead us to places we might normally choose to go on our own. But hang in there. As the pilot of this sermon, I want to assure you that we will make it through, and we will eventually land this plane safely!

Paul begins by telling us that "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." New Testament scholar N. T. Wright, in his wonderful biography of Paul, which I encourage you all to read if you have the time, highlights that Paul was uniquely qualified to be the one who spread the good news of Jesus. Paul was steeped not only in Jewish thought as a Pharisee, but also as someone who knew Greek philosophy. So, when Paul talks about the cross and what it means to both Jews and Greeks or Gentiles, Paul knows what he's talking about.

In Paul's world there was division along racial and ethnic lines -- which may sound familiar to many of us today. Traditionally, many of the Jews thought of themselves not only as the chosen people of God, but that everyone else was not chosen -- and that "everyone else" meant Greeks or Gentiles. Now I have to add a side note here by saying that "being chosen" according to our Old Testament is not only about being saved by God. Israel is also chosen by God to be "a light to the nations." So, there's a tension there with different understandings about what it means to be "chosen by God." But there were a lot of Jews who did not see the worth or the value and those who were not like them -- the Greeks or the Gentiles.

These Greeks or Gentiles were steeped in Greek philosophy, which often led to the worship of many different gods and idols. Paul says that what happened to Jesus on a cross, the Messiah and Son of God who was crucified and died, was a problem for both the Jews and the Greeks -- but for different reasons. Most Jews believed that the Messiah would be sent by God not only to save God's people but would come as a political leader to restore Israel on earth -- which for some implied the end of oppression by nations like Rome. But that Messiah would come in power and would never be crucified. For many Jews, a crucified Messiah was an oxymoron.

For those steeped in Greek philosophy, one approach would be those who believed God was beyond being changed or affected by human beings. Our word “apathy” comes from the Greek word *apatheia* for this divine characteristic of a total inability to feel. If God could be affected by showing care or concern in response to human beings, then Greeks thought that put God beneath human beings. So, God was viewed as distant, unchangeable, and uncaring for humanity. Therefore, a God who sent Jesus to die on a cross out of love to save the world was nonsense or foolishness to them.

But Paul insists that the cross and Christ crucified is the power of God and the wisdom of God. And this foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength. Paul believes this is good news for both the Jews and the Greeks. In fact, it is good news for everyone! God doesn't limit God's saving grace to any one group of people, nor does God exclude God's saving grace from any one group of people. We could go as far as to say that *the cross transcends culture*. It is a cross-cultural cross – *God's* cross-cultural cross!

I was sharing with the Bible study I teach Tuesday as we looked at this passage this past week, that one of the reasons I believe scripture is the word of God is because we can keep going back to it again and again. And the power of the Holy Spirit, which not only inspired the writing of these words, but it continues to inspire our reading, hearing, and understanding of these words. The result is that we can see things that I do not believe we are making up but are being revealed to us by God's Holy Spirit. Sometimes we see them because we have changed. Maybe we are at a different stage in life and see things we never saw when we were younger. Sometimes we have a conversation or read a book that *changes the way we think* – which, we may remember, is one definition of the word “repent.”

As I've shared with some of you, I've just finished reading the book which *Christianity Today* magazine named as its “2020 Book of the Year” called *Reading While Black* by Esau McCaulley. I recommend it to all of you. McCaulley is an African-American Anglican priest who grew up in Alabama and now teaches New Testament at Wheaton College. He is able to write in a way that I believe most of us can hear. He writes out of his own experience and Christian faith. It is biblical, honest, insightful, and challenging. If you read it, it will make you think. It may even make you change your mind and think differently - which as we have said is what the Greek word for repent means. So, during this season of Lent I am encouraging, asking, and challenging you to read this book. It also has a study guide in the back and would be a great book for any of our small groups to read and discuss.

I bring this up because when I looked at this passage from Paul's letter to the church at Corinth, one that I have studied many times, the cross-cultural aspect of what Paul is talking about here never occurred to me. When Paul talks about both Jews and Greeks, I only saw them as representative of different ways of not understanding the good news of the gospel and the meaning of the cross. But it never occurred to me that not only was Paul saying that the good news is for everyone no matter what their group, and that perhaps Paul was saying that there was something about the cross that not only started us on the process of being saved and becoming more like Christ. But maybe, as Paul says in other letters, the cross can make us all one in Christ. (Galatians 3:23, NIV) And maybe, when God's grace falls on our lives it goes beneath the surface -- like rainwater that not only soaks the surface of the ground, but goes deeper and deeper

to those underground streams, where the living water flows, and where real change can take place in the very core of our being. Maybe that's why Paul refers to us as those who are "being saved" -- because this aspect of salvation is an ongoing, life-long, and cross-cultural process. Maybe, just maybe, God's cross is cross-cultural -- and if we pay attention, it can change how we think and how we live. But that awareness may come from places and persons we may not expect if we are not paying attention and listening for the still, small voice of God.

A while back I shared a true story which I want to share with you once more. When I was pastoring another church, early one Sunday morning I was getting ready for the early service. As I looked out the front door, I saw a young man walking up the walkway to the church. I went out and introduced myself and asked him if I could help him. He asked if there was a church service here. I told him there was, but it did not start for forty-five minutes -- however he was welcome to have some coffee and doughnuts while he waited. He told me in his African accent that his name was "Joel," and that he had just moved to the apartments down the street. He did not have a car, but he was a Christian and wanted to go to church, so he walked here, and this was the first church he came to. I found out that he had recently come from Africa. He said that in his country, he had heard of Presbyterians. So, Joel stayed for worship. Al, our head usher at the early service, spent time talking with him.

When I came into the chapel for worship, Joel already was in the second pew on the right. But he was turned around facing the pew, kneeling in prayer before the service. Now, that was not the normal practice in that Presbyterian church, but that really didn't seem to matter to Joel as he prayed. Joel sat through the whole service. He sang out in a voice that was louder than anyone else and often off-key. But he sang with gusto!

At the close of the service, he came through the line, and as he was shaking my hand, he asked about Sunday school. I told him that I was teaching a class on C. S. Lewis and Sigmund Freud and he was welcome to come. So, Joel came. When it came time for questions and comments, Joel joined right in. After that class, he stayed for the second worship service -- and heard the same sermon again. That day, there was church-wide luncheon, and someone invited Joel to be their guest for that, so he stayed for that, too. There were also church committee meetings that day and someone invited Joel to attend the Welcoming Committee (which is like our Connecting Ministry Team.) Joel stayed for that meeting and participated in it as well!

From that first Sunday, Joel came almost every week. Folks began to look for him each week. They even noticed when he was not there and asked, "Where's Joel?" Joel also told us he was looking for work. He thought he could work in a warehouse. One of the members of the church worked for Coke and found him a job. Also, Joel did not have a car, but he got up at four o'clock every morning and rode the bus to his job. And later, someone in that church actually gave Joel their car!

A few months later, there was a church-wide retreat, and someone invited Joel to come as their guest. One of the activities during the retreat involved getting into smaller groups, reading a Psalm, telling your own faith story, and then writing a psalm together as a group. When Joel told his story about how his parents in Africa had both died when he was young and he was raised by a white, Pentecostal, female pastor -- folks were amazed. He shared how he sang in a gospel

choir of blacks and whites, but the President of his country told them they could not do this and mix the races. Joel spoke out about this and he then was thrown in prison for a year! One day, he was then taken out of prison and was told by his guards that they were supposed to take him to the border and kill him. But, for some reason they instead told him to leave the country and never come back, or he would be killed. So, he made his way across Africa to the coast where he caught a ship to South America. There he came in contact with a ministry of the Lutheran church that helped political refugees find a home in the U.S. They brought him to this country and rented him an apartment -- and from there he found his way up the street to our church.

Joel believed deeply that God had protected him in his journey. And when that small group at the retreat got together as a group and wrote their Psalm, they called it "Joel's Psalm" because it told his story of giving thanks to God. When they shared it with the rest of the folks on the retreat, there was not a dry eye! (As told in *My Life Is a Miracle of God* by Joel Summer and Ben Johnson)

When Joel first came to that church, most of probably would not have thought we had much to offer Joel, and that he would have even less, if anything, to offer us. But over time, I came to believe that God sent Joel halfway around the world to teach us something we had never seen before. Joel helped us not only to see him and the world differently, but he also taught us to think differently simply by being himself.

So, today I want to invite us to be open, to pay attention to our lives and those places, those encounters in which God may be trying to open our eyes to see things differently. When it comes to encountering those from other cultures or ethnic groups, how is God calling each of us to think in a new way, to live in a new way, and to love in a new way – which is God's way and the way of the cross!

In the strong name of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.