



Sermon Transcript September 26, 2021

An Appeal for U.N.I.T.Y. “N” - Never Leave the Cross 1 Corinthians 1:18 - 2:5

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on September 26, 2021 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio and video version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at www.wethefc.com

Sermon Text

1 Corinthians 1:18 - 2:5

1:18 For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

19 For it is written,
I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,
and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.

20 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? **21** For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. **22** For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, **23** but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, **24** but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. **25** For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

26 For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. **27** But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; **28** God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, **29** so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. **30** And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, **31** so that, as it is written, Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.

2:1 And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. **2** For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. **3** And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, **4** and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, **5** that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.

Introduction

If I were to ask you to identify the symbol that best represents Christianity, I think most of you would readily point to the symbol hanging behind me this morning. You would point to the cross. The cross is the symbol of our Christian faith. While that has long been the case, from as early as the second century, it wasn't the earliest symbol for the Christian faith. In the catacombs, the underground burial places where persecuted Christians would often hide for safety, other symbols were etched into the walls to covertly identify themselves to each other. Perhaps the most familiar of these covert symbols to us would be the fish, often found now on the back of cars, most likely identifying the driver as someone who espouses faith in Jesus. The word for fish in Greek, *ichthys*, was an acronym for Jesus: *Iesus Christos Theou Huios Soter*—"Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior."

It didn't take long, though, for every other symbol for Christianity to take a back seat to the symbol of the cross. But I wonder, as 2000 years of church history has past, if the impact of this sacred symbol of our faith has been somewhat lost to us. We look at this cross hanging behind me and it is carefully crafted, artfully appealing, smooth to the touch—it is not a very "old rugged cross." And that is just it, isn't it? What has become somewhat sanitized was once considered a symbol of horror. John Stott said, "The Christian's choice of a cross as the symbol of their faith is more surprising when we remember the horror with which crucifixion was regarded in the ancient world."¹

The cross was a form of execution. It was invented by the "barbarians" and the Romans perfected it. It was an execution reserved only for the criminal convicted of murder, rebellion or armed robbery—provided that they were a slave, a foreigner, or . . . a nobody. It was so heinous a death, no Roman citizen, except in extreme cases of treason, could be put to death by execution on a cross. Writing a generation prior to the time of Christ, the Roman historian Cicero said of crucifixion, "There is no fitting word that can possibly describe so horrible a death."² And yet, this symbol of death is the symbol of our faith . . . a symbol of execution, a cross. Could you imagine following a religion that had a noose used for lynching as its symbol? Or imagine a religion that adopted a symbol associated with torture to represent their faith . . . It is hard to come up with a contemporary equivalent to the cross. But as we wince at such a notion, perhaps we can have some understanding as to why Paul says in verse 23 of our passage, that the cross was *a stumbling block to the Jews and folly to the Gentiles*.

And yet, Paul reminds us this morning that the cross is the symbol of our faith because

the cross occupies the center of our faith. He opens our passage by saying in verse 18, “*For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.*” He adds in verse 23 that “*we preach Christ crucified*” and he testifies in 1 Corinthians 2:2, “*For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.*” The cross is at the center of Paul’s message and it is not just a message for the beginning of your faith journey. The cross forms and shapes the life of the follower of Jesus and the life of the church. We live out our faith as saints together, the church, one body, under the shadow of the cross.

Gordon Fee said that this was part of the problem with those causing disunity in the church. They felt some of the “humiliation” associated with the horror of the cross and so they sought to “move on” to “higher” things than the cross; *wisdom*, they called it. And Paul’s message to them is simply this: “to move beyond the cross is not to ‘move on’ at all, but it is to abandon Christ altogether.”³ So perhaps as the symbol of the cross has become a somewhat sanitized version of what the cross really resembled in the first century, perhaps we have also lost sight of what it means to keep the cross front and center to our faith and what it means to be formed and shaped by the cross as we live out our lives as *saints together* in the church, the body of Christ.

As we continue working our way through 1 Corinthians 1-4 we are looking at what Paul has to say about unity in the church. He had received a report from Chloe’s people that they were divided and they were quarreling with each other. And so he says to them “*I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ . . . be united.*” In making his appeal for unity in the first four chapters of 1 Corinthians, Paul gives us five methods to help us live in unity with one another. We are using the acronym U.N.I.T.Y. to spell out these five methods to living out our unity.

Last week we saw the first method to maintaining our unity, beginning with the letter “U”. “U” stands for Unceasing Gratitude. As we give thanks for the church—people belonging to God, gifted by God and sustained by God—our hearts are drawn to each other. This morning we look at the second method that helps foster our unity. The letter “N” stands for “Never Leave the Cross.” This morning I want you to see how **the word of the cross and the way of the cross shapes our unity.**

The Word of the Cross

Paul refers to *the word of the cross* in verse 18. What is *the word of the cross*? Or another way to say it, “what is the message of the cross?” And how does this message

of the cross speak to the issue of division in the church? What message or what *word* do we get from the cross that addresses the problem of division in the church?

If you recall, Paul characterized the division of the church in Corinth as revolving around personalities and competing factions. He described it this way in verse 12, “*What I mean is that each of you says, ‘I follow Paul’ or ‘I follow Apollos,’ or ‘I follow Cephas,’ or ‘I follow Christ.’*” I mentioned a couple weeks ago that we are not really sure what was behind their division and how tightly formed these factions actually were. But here is what we do know, which is common when division rears its head in any church. The prominent and repeated word in describing the division in the church at Corinth is the word “*I*”. “*I follow Paul,*” “*I*” . . . “*I*” . . . “*I*.” They were exalting themselves and their “wisdom” over some of their renowned teachers. It is pride. It is boasting.

St. Augustine divided people into one of two camps. He called them “cities.” You either live in the “city of man” or the “city of God.” What is the difference between the two? One main difference is found in what you love. He said, “Worldly society has flowered from a selfish love which dared to despise even God, whereas the communion of saints is rooted in a love of God that is ready to trample on self . . . One lifts up its head in its own boasting; the other says to God: ‘Thou art my glory.’”⁴ Or Tim Keller puts these two options this way. We are either governed by *self-sacrifice* or we are governed by *self-assertion*. One finds himself through self-giving to something outside of himself and the other through self-expression of something inside himself.⁵ It is my contention—and perhaps my testimony—that it is not natural for me to be “ready to trample on self” and it is not natural for me to live a life of “self-sacrifice.” I may belong to the “city of the God,” but the “city of man” can easily rear its influence in my life. As a church, we may represent the “city of God” but the “city of man” can have its destructive way among us.

What do we have to empower us to “be ready to trample on self”? What do we have at our disposal that can take our natural bent towards self-assertion and move us to self-sacrifice? What do we have that will take us from exalting in ourselves to doing what Paul says we should do at the end of 1 Corinthians - “*Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.*” Do you know what we have? We have *the word of the cross*. Craig Blomberg says that the *word of the cross* “provides the necessary antidote (vaccine) to the self-centered factions of the Corinthians.”⁶ Paul said that the *word of the cross* is the power of God for those who are *being saved*. We don’t graduate from the cross. We don’t move on from the cross. Instead, the *word of the cross* casts its shadow over us.

What is the *word of the cross*? What is the message that comes from the cross? The

answer to that question could be multiple sermons. But for the sake of this sermon, the *word of the cross* is the word “humility.” I think of what Paul said of the cross in Philippians 2. Speaking of Jesus, the divine Son of God, “*though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself . . . he humbled himself.*” How? “*By becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on the cross.*” There it is, the cross! And why does Paul tell us this? So that we would be *of the same mind* . . . So that we would *look not only to our own interests but to the interests of others.*” The word of the cross is a word of humility that casts a shadow over our lives and forms a certain humility in us. Blomberg said of this church in Corinth that they “needed to embrace more of the humility of the cross.”⁷ We can never go wrong with that. Never leave the cross.

And yet, it is easy for us to want more than the cross. It is easy for us to be attracted to other things, to feel the need to move on to “higher” and more “lofty” things than the cross. Paul said that the Jews found the cross to be a *stumbling block* because they were looking for *signs* . . . miracles that proved Jesus was the Son of God. John, in the Gospel of John, referred to the miracles of Jesus as signs. Let's face it, miracles sound more appealing, exciting and perhaps more confirming to us that God is present and active. And yet, one has to wonder how many “signs” did Jesus have to perform for people to believe? Just to name a few miracles; He walked on water . . . He gave sight to the blind . . . He cast out demons . . . He raised the dead. He did all of this in public. And yet the people who saw this public display of the power of Jesus were the very ones who cried “*Crucify him!*” In fact, when the Jews ask Jesus for a sign to demonstrate that he is indeed the promised Messiah, he said that the only sign that will be given them is the sign of Jonah. “*For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.*” In other words, the sign that has the power to save is the cross.

To Jewish ears, this was a *stumbling block*. The origin of this word *stumbling block* comes out of Leviticus 19 where the law warned against putting an obstacle in front of a blind person that would cause the person to trip. The Jews tripped over the cross because they could not see, they could not fathom, God's Messiah dying on a cross. The Old Testament law said this about those who hung from a tree, “*anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse.*” The Jews found it incredulous to think that their Messiah would suffer such a death and come under this kind of curse. And yet, that is exactly what happened. Paul says in Galatians 3, “*Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law—our guilt for sin—by becoming a curse for us.*”

That is indeed the power of the cross. Christ is the power of God to save. Because he hung on that tree and became a curse for sin, we can be forgiven. I heard the story this week of an Iranian student, a devout Muslim. He faithfully read his Qu'ran, said his prayers five times a day and sought to lead a good life. A religious man, he was. But no matter how hard he strived to do these things, his sin haunted him. Some Christian friends brought him to church, encouraged him to read his Bible and he learned about the cross, how Jesus died on the cross for his sins. He said this, "For me the offer was irresistible and heaven-sent," and he cried to God to have mercy on him through Christ. Almost immediately, he said, "the burden of my past life was lifted. I felt as if a huge weight had gone. With the relief and sense of lightness came incredible joy. At last it had happened. I was free of my past. I knew that God had forgiven me, and I felt clean. I wanted to shout and tell everybody." That is the power of the cross. The character of God's love and mercy towards us is clearly displayed at the cross.

Paul goes on to say that the Greeks had a problem with the cross as well. They thought it was *folly*. They thought it was *folly* because it exalted weakness over strength. The German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche captured the heart and mind of the repulsion the Greeks had toward the cross. He wrote in the book *The Anti-Christ* that good is "the will to power" and that bad is "all that proceeds from weakness." And so he said that the decadence of Christianity is that it takes the side of everything weak which thwarts the very essence of evolution—the survival of the fittest. And so with great contempt he referred to the absurd notion of Christianity, which is God on the cross. He considered Christianity to be "intellectually contemptible and morally outrageous."⁸

Before we point the finger at those outside the church, I don't think we are too far from the Greeks in thinking that the humility of the cross is not enough. Whether it is our quest for success or our attraction of the celebrity or putting our trust in having access to power in the halls of Washington D.C. (lets not lose sight of the fact that the word "evangelical" has more to do today with politics than it does with the cross) and so we unwittingly convey that the cross is folly. It is not enough. We sell out to the "wisdom" of this world—to power, to access, to success, to significance and this leads to our boasting and our pride. That is what destroys our unity.

I remember reading a book a long time ago about a journalist who was given permission and access to spend a semester living at a Christian college among all these Christian students. He went into the semester with his preconceived notions about Christians, and at the end of the semester he found many of those notions challenged. He grew to like these students and admire them for their way of life. But at the end of

the book he was asked whether or not it changed his mind about Christianity. In spite of his appreciation for these students, he stood could not get over the “folly” of the cross. He said that at the end of the day, “Christianity is an ancient slaughter house religion.” He thought it was nothing but a religion out of touch with the wisdom gleaned through the ages. It was out of touch with common sense and decency. And yet Paul says, nothing could be further from the truth. Christ and the cross is the very wisdom of God.

How so? In Romans 1-11, we have eleven chapters that meticulously unfold the message of the gospel, the power of God for salvation. Do you now how Paul ends that section that articulates the gospel. *“Oh the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God.”* What is the wisdom of the cross? It is the place where God justice is satisfied and at the same time, his love and mercy are extended to us. Stott said of the cross is that it is the wisdom of God to “devise such a costly plan that both meets our needs and also satisfies God’s character.”⁹ And so Paul is saying here that man cannot come to know God by their own wisdom, there own reasoning. Instead, we come to know God by what is revealed to us by God and what is revealed to us at the cross. God’s justice is satisfied through the death of Jesus on the cross. God’s love and mercy is on full display through Christ dying in our place . . . And now we can know God.

So what is this “word of the cross?” It is the humility of Christ. It is the power of Christ to set us free from our sin. It is the wisdom of Christ—the place where God’s wrath and mercy meet and the place where we come to know God. Never leave the cross. Instead, may the shadow of the cross loom larger over us than it has ever done so before.

The Way of the Cross

The rest of the passage sets us up for next week when we look at the letter “I.” “I” stands for “imitate.” We are to imitate this wisdom that comes from the cross. To lead us in that direction, Paul illustrates how the pattern of the cross, namely the pattern of humility can be illustrated in their life as a church and in his life as an apostle. Last week, I was on the men’s retreat but I had to come home early because I had to be here on Sunday. I missed the last two sessions. And so I asked some of the guys to summarize for me what the pastor said in the sessions I missed. One of the guys summarized one of the sessions with one phrase. “The pastor reminded us that “you are not all that.” That is what Paul says to the Corinthians. “When it comes down to it, “you are not all that.” But then he says the same thing of himself.

Do you see the pattern? He said to them starting in verse 26, *“not many of you were*

wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that, as it is written, Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.” In other words, “you are not all that!” But, “Christ is all that!” He is the wisdom from God. He is our righteousness, our sanctification, our redemption. That is why Paul cries out at the end of Romans 11, *“For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen!”*

Paul said the same thing about himself. Starting in 1 Corinthians 2 he said, *“And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.”* The power of the Spirit was on display when Paul got out of the way and pointed them to the cross. Lives were changed.

Conclusion

“N” - Never leave the cross. This symbol of the humility of Christ . . . the wisdom of Christ . . . the power of Christ must never lose it's place among us.

What was once a picture of horror—execution, has become to us a “cherished” cross, something to cling to . . . “I will cling to the old rugged cross” the hymns says. What is so attractive about the cross? It allows us to come in our weakness. This is true personally. We come to the cross as those in need of forgiveness and we come with cry, “God have mercy on me, a sinner.” It is the power of God that delivers us from our sin.

But the same is true for us as a church, as the shadow of the cross looms over us. We proclaim Jesus in our own human weakness, and the power of the Holy Spirit takes that and God encounters people and changes their lives. Under the shadow of the cross, we take a humble posture and we love, we forgive, we serve, we worship, we pray in unity . . . and in our weakness we are held together by the cross and our humble church family is used by God for the sake of eternity and for the glory of God.

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- ¹John Stott *The Cross of Christ: Stott Centennial Edition* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2020) 29
- ²Accounts given by Josephus in *Antiquities* 17.10.10 and *Jewish War* 5.11.1
- ³Gordon Fee *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014) 71
- ⁴Augustine *City of God* 14.16 (p. 295)
- ⁵Tim Keller *Making Sense of God* (New York: Penguin, 2016) 120
- ⁶Craig Blomberg *1 Corinthians: The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994) 52
- ⁷*Ibid.*, 55
- ⁸Friedrich Nietzsche *The Anti-Christ* (1895, reprint, London: Penguin, 1968) 115-118
- ⁹Stott, 219

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COMMUNITY GROUPS



Getting To Know Me Questions

1. Now that the Fall season is here, what are you looking forward to about this season?
2. Which of these emotions are you feeling and why?
Sad Angry Scared Happy Excited Tender



Diving Into The Word

3. Read 1 Corinthians 1:18-25.
Why do you think the cross is the central message of our faith?
Why do you think people think the cross is “folly”?
What does the cross tell us about the wisdom of God and the power of God?
4. Read 1 Corinthians 1:26-2:5
God chose what is foolish, weak, low and despised . . . Why? To what end?
How is this an encouragement to you personally?
How is our weakness as a church made strong through the cross?
5. How does the “word of the cross” help us choose a life of “self-sacrifice” over a life of “self-assertion?”
6. How does the “work of the cross” help us live a life of unity in the church? How does living under the shadow of the cross help us to love and serve one another?



Taking It Home

7. What is one thing you are taking from your study?
8. Read Romans 11:33-36 and let it guide your time of prayer.