

Boasting in the Cross

A sermon preached by the Revd. Theodore S. Atkinson at the Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the seventh Sunday after Pentecost, July 6, 1986. Scripture Lessons: 1 Kings 21:1-3, 17-21; Psalm 5:1-8; *Galatians 6:7-18*; Luke 10:1-12, 17-20.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

One of the most fascinating of all kinds of literature is autobiographies of famous people. We're naturally curious about famous people. We want to know about their goals, their ambitions, their secret motivations, what drives them, what makes them tick. One of the most famous and most influential Christians who ever lived was the apostle Paul and he told us what his goals, ambitions, motivations and drives were. It can all be summed up in one brief statement in Galatians, chapter 6, verse 14: "May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world."

The Greek word translated here *to boast in*, is really impossible to translate into a single English equivalent verb. It means *to glory in, to rejoice in, to trust in, to revel in, to rely on* and many other things besides. What we boast in is what fills our vision, dominates our mind and preoccupies our energy and time. Our boast is our obsession. For Paul this was the cross. "May I never boast", he said, "except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ."

This is really an astonishing statement, especially when you remember that when he wrote it the cross was an object of horror and disgrace. It was the means of execution reserved for the worst criminals in the Roman Empire. This week the execution of Ted Bundy in the electric chair was stayed. Bundy murdered, by some accounts over 30 young women, solely for the thrill of it. Our society reserves the electric chair for people like that. It would be astonishing to hear anybody, even those who support

capital punishment, say, "May I never boast except in the electric chair." That's how astonishing it is to hear Paul speak of boasting in the cross.

The word *cross* wasn't mentioned in polite society. Cicero, the great Roman orator, statesman, and author, said in one of his speeches, "It's not only having to endure such a fate that's intolerable for a Roman citizen and free man, so too is the manner of it, the anticipation of it, and the very mention of it." "Again," he said, "the very name of the cross is absent not only ^{from} ~~on~~ the lips of Roman citizens, but from their minds, from their eyes, and from their ears." The anti-Christian pagan, Celsus, scathingly described Christians as actually worshipping a dead man. Archaeologists have found graffiti written on an ancient wall excavated in Rome. Someone has scrawled a cross on the wall and on the cross is a man with the head of a donkey. Underneath the crude drawing are written the mocking words, "Alexamenos worships his God." The cross was an object of disgrace and of disgust. And yet this object of shame has become for Christians an object of boasting, and the very symbol of our Christian faith.

Think of that! The *cross* is the symbol of our faith. The symbol of the Christian faith isn't *the crib or manger* in which the baby Jesus was placed. It isn't *the boat* from which he taught the people on the Sea of Galilee. It isn't *the tomb* in which his dead body was laid and from which he arose. It isn't *the throne* from which he reigns over the universe today, nor is it *the dove or the wind or the fire* which are pictures of the Holy Spirit he sent from heaven. The symbol of our faith is the cross of Jesus Christ. That symbol is centrally located on the Communion Table. It used to be that a cross was placed over the grave of a Christian. We give a cross on a necklace to all those young people who are confirmed.

It isn't an accident that a cross is the symbol of Christianity. It's safe to say that where there's no cross, there's no Christianity. If the cross of Jesus doesn't stand at the center of our Christian life, then whatever may be the Christianity we profess, it isn't the Christianity of Jesus and the Apostles.

So the question before us this morning is *what's it mean to boast in the cross of Christ?* What is this cross-centered Christianity? There are two particular examples that Paul gives us here in our epistle lesson. *First, to "boast in the cross" is to see the cross as the only way of acceptance with God.* The most important question that anybody can ever ask is, *How can I, knowing what I know about myself, ever stand before a just and holy God and look into God's face?* The living God of the biblical revelation is a God of infinite perfection in holiness. His eyes are of greater purity than that they should behold evil. He dwells in unimaginable light. So how can I, in my self-centeredness and sin, ever stand before the dazzling grandeur and majesty of almighty God?

One thing's certain. I can't approach God by myself in my own supposed righteousness because ~~they're~~^{it's} like filthy rags in his sight. There's only one way to enter into the dazzling light of God's holiness and that's by way of the cross of Christ. Why is that? Paul told us earlier in Galatians 3:10, "All who rely on the works of the law"-- who are trusting for salvation in their own obedience to the moral law-- "are under the curse of that law. Because it's written, 'Cursed is everyone who doesn't continue in all things that are written in the book of the law to do them.'" Then in verse 13, "Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us."

Those words can only mean one thing. They can only mean that the curse of God's broken law, God's judgment that rests upon the law-breaker, was borne by Jesus Christ when he died on the cross. It doesn't mean that God is spiteful or that God is vengeful in any petty or malicious way. It means that the love of God isn't sentimental like our love. It's a holy love, a love that'll never compromise with evil, never come to terms with it.

So God's righteous displeasure, his condemnation or curse, rests upon all of us for our moral disobedience. But God loves us as well and can't bear to see us receive the just dues of our disobedience. So God came after us in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ, and pursued us all the way to the desolate agony of the cross. And on the cross he was made a curse for us. In the God-forsaken darkness he identified himself so completely with our sin and guilt that he bore in his own innocent person the condemnation of our sins.

Paul writes that because "he bore our curse" we can inherit the blessing. The whole passage is a play upon that contrast between the curse and the blessing. He took the curse that we might enter into the blessing-- the blessing that was promised to Abraham 4000 years ago, the blessing of entering into acceptance with God, the blessing of the forgiveness of our sins and the blessing of the Holy Spirit in our lives. But all our blessings are ours only because the curse was his. And he redeemed us from the curse because he was made a curse for us.

This is an incredible wonder if it's true, and as Christians, of course, we believe it's true. God bear's our curse! We inherit God's blessing! The infinite creator of the Milky Way and of distant galaxies stooped so low into that awful darkness on the cross to bear our curse in order that throughout all eternity we might enjoy unimaginable blessings.

Why do so many people resist this good news? We need to come to the cross, not trusting in ourselves that we're righteous, not asking God to receive us by weighing or measuring our merits; but by being up-front with God, by confessing our guilt, confessing our helplessness ever to save ourselves, and calling upon him to deliver us. So, first, to glory in the cross is to see the cross of Christ as the only way of acceptance before God.

But, secondly, the cross is the beginning of a new life. Something else happens when we come to the cross. We don't just lose the burden and the bondage of the curse and receive the blessing of justification. We begin a new life as we die to the old life of self-centeredness and rise again to a new life of love and of being "other-centered".

Listen to our text, "May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world." Notice that there's not only one cross that's mentioned, but three crucifixions. There's the crucifixion of Jesus, and in addition there's the crucifixion of me unto the world, so that the world and I've been crucified to one another. We've died to one another. We've parted company with one another. By the *world* isn't meant the people in the world; we never part company with them. We're sent into that world of people in order to love them, to serve them, to give ourselves to them. *People* aren't what's meant by *the world*.

The world here means *secularism*. It means self-centeredness, materialism, emptiness, meaninglessness, vanity. That's what's meant by *the world*, and *that* world was crucified to me and I to the world through the cross of Christ so that I died to that old life of self-centeredness and

have risen again to a new life of freedom from the old bondage of secularism and self-centeredness.

I feel that so often we trivialise Christian conversion as though it meant simply raising your hand and walking down an aisle and making a decision for Christ at a revival. Or perhaps from our tradition we trivialize conversion as though it comes automatically with baptisms or confirmation. Scratch that kind of professing Christian and under the surface he or she is the same old person. That isn't what's meant by ~~becoming a Christian~~. ^{Conversion} ~~Becoming a Christian~~ ^{Conversion} involves a radical personal transformation so great that it's a death to the old life and a resurrection to something altogether new, something that Paul in the next verse calls a *new creation*. Circumcision and uncircumcision, he says, are nothing. It's not a ceremonial thing, it isn't an external thing; it's a new creation, it's a dying and a rising again with Jesus Christ. Jesus himself taught that. He said, "If anybody wants to follow me, let them deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow me."

What did he mean? His hearers can't possibly have mistaken his meaning. Palestine at that time was occupied by the Romans. When they condemned anybody to death by crucifixion, they compelled him to carry his cross to the scene of execution. If we'd lived in Palestine in those days and seen somebody struggling under the heavy weight of a cross, we wouldn't have to go up to him and say *who are you* and *what in the world are you doing?* We'd have recognized him immediately. "There's a condemned criminal and he's on his way to execution." So when Jesus says to us, "Take up your cross and follow me" he's bidding us to come and die, die to our own life of self-centeredness, of sin, of malice, hostility, idolatry and all the rest, and rise again to a new life of love, service,

freedom and fulfillment through Jesus Christ.

So for Paul the cross was, first of all, the only means through which we gain acceptance with God. And, secondly, it was the way of death to the old life and resurrection to the new life. Let me ask, as I conclude, what you're boasting in? What's your obsession? What is it that engrosses your minds and your energies? What are you living for? Is it for yourself? We boast in our *achievements* in the past. We boast in our *ambitions* in the future. We boast in our *family*, in our *job*, in our *sexual gender* and our *ethnic heritage*. On this Fourth of July weekend it's so easy to boast in our *country*. We can even boast in our religion, proud to be a Presbyterian.

May we never boast in those things. Of course we *can* and *should* be thankful to God for our country, for our family, for our heritage, and for our church. We may be *thankful* for these things, but we may not *boast* in them. They're not the objects of our boasting; they're not the objects of our confidence. Only the cross is a suitable object on which to build our lives and our hopes for time and eternity. The cross is central to human history. It was there on the cross that God's justice and love were revealed in a display infinitely more brilliant than the fireworks display over Ellis Island. It was there on the cross that Jesus purchased the salvation of the world. The cross, then, is for the Christian the source of our *blessings* and our freedom, Christ crucified is our Statue of Liberty; a living statue.

Be thankful for our nation! Be thankful for our freedoms! Be thankful for our national and ethnic heritage! Be thankful for the men and women who helped to build this great nation! Be thankful that we can speak freely about our political and religious beliefs and even be critical! Be thankful

for the place we share among the nations of the world. But may we never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world and all its political systems and nations have been crucified to us, and we to the world. May God enable us, by his grace, to deny our false selves so as to live only for Christ, find liberty in him, and boast through time and eternity in the cross.

Let us pray: We ask your forgiveness, Lord Jesus Christ, that we've often boasted in ourselves, in our nation, in our ethnic heritage, even in our church. We ask your forgiveness for our conceit and the arrogance of power. So humble us at the foot of your cross that throughout our lives and throughout eternity we may glory in nothing else. Grant it, we pray, for the glory of your great and worthy name. Amen.