

Sermon prepared by Crystal Hall
for Preaching and Worship 101
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Text: Romans 3:9-31

This is a heavy text. It is weighted with centuries of interpretation. It is weighted with centuries of theologizing at its expense. It is weighted by our own exegetical frustrations: our tears, our late nights, our anger. It is a text that seemingly refuses to give us a blessing when we wrestle with it. This text is also heavily weighted by a Roman cross, a cross that casts a long shadow.

This is a difficult text for a Lutheran to preach. Alongside Romans 1:16-17, this text looms large in the Lutheran tradition that claims me. The legend goes, the one I heard in confirmation class, that one day Luther was studying alone in a tower of his cloister in Wittenberg. As was his habit, he was feeling the immense weight of his sin and guilt, agonizing over the meaning his faith. Knowing that he could never perfectly follow God's commandments, and therefore be worthy of God's love, Luther poured over the Bible. He was searching for some answer, some relief. In a moment of utter despair, suddenly a light broke through his tower window. The light fell upon this text. In a moment of realization, Luther read, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, 'The one who is righteous will live by faith.'"¹

The story goes that Luther took inspiration from this text to articulate a doctrine of justification by grace through faith. To develop a theology that would later change the course of church history by inspiring the Protestant Reformation. Some say the inspirational text was Romans 1. Some say it was Romans 3. It could have been either one, as they touch on very similar themes. The point is, for Lutherans there is a lot of weight pressed into this text.

We have to get underneath the immensity of Luther and the Protestant history of interpretation to find Paul. Let us take a moment to examine the underside of history. We arrive at a moment when Jesus' message had become too controversial. He had undermined the power of the religious authorities, and so they plotted his death. Jesus had broken too many rules, and created too much a stir. He proclaimed not the Roman Empire, but God's Empire, was at hand. Or in the words of the late Krister Stendhal, at our very fingertips. God's Empire was not safely in the pages of ancient history or written into the stone of Roman temples, but was breaking into the thick of things. It was just too much. Jesus had to be crucified to maintain order.

Jesus' death, in many ways, was not unique. Jesus' death would not have made the front page of the newspapers in Rome, or even in Jerusalem. Jesus was one of thousands, perhaps tens of thousands, killed on the Roman cross. The cross was a method of execution meant to shame, to instill fear. It was a torturous death by suffocation meant for rebels, meant for anyone who dared to challenge the Roman Empire. The flip side of the glorious *Pax Romana* of the history books,

¹ Romans 1:16-17, NRSV

alongside so many military campaigns, was the deaths of thousands on crosses. Thousands, often at random, were sacrificed under the eagle-emblazoned banner of an all-encompassing world power. Although the word “cross” never appears in our text, we feel its weight.

How Jesus lived and died was foundational to the identity of the early communities of Jesus followers. In its own time Jesus’ death may have looked to his disciples like an ultimate failure. The Jesus movement ended in death. There was no revolution. Rome was not overthrown. The Jewish people would not re-establish a kingdom that a son of David would rule. Instead the disciples were left fearful, shattered, traumatized, without a leader. And yet, through Jesus’ willingness to suffer the humiliation of crucifixion, new communities of Jesus followers were born out of that trauma. These communities placed ultimate trust in what looked like failure.

How do we make sense of this?

One of the ways Christian doctrine makes sense of Jesus’ death through atonement theory. The logic goes something like this: Humanity is sinful. (Luther would surely agree.) The compensation that God requires for these sins is the sacrifice of an animal. Jesus’ death was the animal sacrifice that God required. And because Jesus was such a good person, perhaps even perfect, he was an acceptable sacrifice for the sins of humanity. Makes perfect sense right? Perhaps this is still not entirely satisfying.

Let us try on a different type of logic, one that is not based in cause and effect but explains why things are the way they are. It goes something like this: Jesus was a good person, perhaps even perfect. Because Jesus died for his followers, because he died to save them, out of Jesus’ death a new community was born. Jesus’ humiliating and shameful death made this new community particularly open to the humiliated and shamed. It was a transgressive community that crossed social boundaries to include both Jews and Gentiles. In Jewish discourse, Gentiles were the equivalent of sinners and outsiders. Those Gentiles were just too much to stand until the trauma Jesus’ death made a new understanding possible.

Let us consider another historical moment that looked like an absolute failure. A different Martin Luther.

Martin Luther King, Jr. has been causing too much trouble, asking too many questions about what was possible in American society. In the last years of his life, years not written about in the history books, King’s vision shifted from civil rights to human rights. He realized that President Lyndon B. Johnson’s War on Poverty and the Civil Rights Act were not addressing the realities of racism and exploitation experienced by both blacks and whites. He asked, what good is it to integrate a lunch counter if you can’t afford a hamburger? In December of 1967, King announced a Poor People’s Campaign that would demand an Economic Bill of Human Rights. This was a challenge to the way America structured its economy. It was too much of a threat to those in power. King had to be eliminated to maintain order.

A few short months later, King was assassinated on April 4th, 1968. A federal trial conducted decades later would reveal that King’s death was not the random act of a hateful racist. It was an act of state, involving every level of government, from the local police to the FBI. The

American empire's crosses, though perhaps not in plain sight, continue to execute for daring to challenge power.

In the midst of a period of national mourning after his assassination, King's lieutenants continued organizing the Poor People's Campaign. Three thousand people from across the United States – among them blacks, whites, Native Americans, and Latinos – formed nine caravans that converged on Washington, D.C. These poor built a shantytown named Resurrection City on the National Mall and organized massive public demonstrations. Like the communities of early Jesus followers, it was a transgressive community that crossed social and racial boundaries to create something new. But without their visionary leader, the Poor People's Campaign soon lost momentum and collapsed. It was seemingly a failure. But the Poor People's Campaign can provide the strategic vision for building a poor people's movement in this country today. A new vision was born the midst trauma and supposed failure.

How do we do make sense of this?

The cross carries an immense weight that breaks into this text. For many today and throughout history, the cross is a matter of life and death. It is a place Jesus meets us in our experiences of trauma, pain, suffering and loss. The cross is a sign of where God is, that God meets us in our deepest suffering. The cross is a place where God is especially present. A place where in death, we find new community, new vision, and perhaps even new life.