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Psalms 27

Philippians 3:17-4:1

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STANDING FIRM

Presbyterian writer Frederick Buechner made the observation that the primary symbols of other major religions, a six-pointed star, a crescent moon, a lotus flower, are on an object of light or beauty. But the cross, the chief symbol of Christianity, is an instrument of death. ¹ If only a public relations firm had been hired by early church leaders to come up with some other option for the central Christian symbol! The PR group might have asked, “Are you sure you, followers of Jesus, want to be represented by an instrument used to inflict a painful and cursed execution?” When focus groups initially were asked for their reaction to the symbol, they responded with these words: morbid, ghastly, depressing, gloomy. I dare say the PR firm would have wanted to explore some other options for a primary symbol that might put a more positive representation out before the public.

We are in the season of Lent. Among the things that draw our spiritual focus during this time heading toward Holy Week, is reflection on the significance of the cross. Regardless of public relations qualms aplenty, this symbol, in a variety of different styles, has been Christianity’s primary visual representation for most of its history. Perhaps it would have been an empty tomb if a graphic representation of one could have been replicated in a recognizable form. But instead, we ended up with a cross.

The Apostle Paul, writing to the Church at Philippi, uses a phrase that catches one’s imagination when he describes some who were a part of the church as “enemies of the cross of Christ.” I doubt he is referring to people who were against using the cross as a major symbol. We know little about these folks other than what Paul also says about them: “their god is the belly;” “their minds are set on earthly things.” Perhaps these were Christians who were not maintaining discipline over their physical appetites for food, intimacy, or things. There are people of faith who respond inappropriately to the generosity of God’s grace, seemingly having a goal of giving God as many sins to forgive as possible. Such a mindset has a capacity to

sow discord in one's life and in the community of faith. That is not consistent with what the cross stands for.

Whatever Paul meant in that setting expressed by, 'enemies of the cross,' it got me to thinking about what it would mean to be a friend of the cross? It stretches us a bit to think of being a friend of an inanimate object. We don't pick up a cross and have conversation with it over dinner or send it a birthday card. But we do hope to be receptive to the message of the cross, open to its ability to inspire and challenge us. The meanings of the cross and of a crucified savior are many, complex, even sometimes, in conflict with each other, but here are some ways in understanding who we are and how we are to live so that we can be friends of the cross.

Difficult news comes through the cross: suffering is a fact of life. At times, such suffering is self-induced, the result of bad decisions, bad lifestyle choices, failure of nerve to step off the wrong path and get on a better one. Sometimes, suffering is the consequence of the apathy or antipathy of people with some power over our lives. Some suffering is utterly unavoidable. God does not protect even the best of us from suffering in life. However, the cross is not a fixation on the negative. We seek to be friends of the cross, because as Canadian theologian Douglas John Hall puts it, "the world is full of pain and God loves the world."²

We have a God who does not stand outside of this daunting thing called human existence. Rather, God gets directly into it. Therefore, among the places we encounter God, is where God is most needed. To be sure, the Lord is with us in high moments of joy and delight, but the Lord also personally knows our sorrows and defeats. The Lord is our light and our salvation, the psalmist tells us. God becomes our light and our salvation by coming into the darkest and most damnable of experiences and transforming them.

We may not always be the best friend of the cross, but it is a friend to us as it shows us that beyond the worst we can do or have done to us is the best that God does including offering eternal love, forgiveness, and life in this world and beyond. The cross helps us understand that what we think may be the end of the story is not. Even in the most tragic situations, God cannot be overcome. The cross shows us that even when we reject God, divine grace finds a way to continue to reach out to us. When we choose the ways of death, God offers new life. When we resort to

ways of violence, the Spirit of God brings the possibilities of reconciliation and peace. When confronted with hatred or indifference, God's love, while never forcing itself upon us, doesn't give up, doesn't go away, doesn't stop.

Being friends of the cross can shape our understanding of who we are and how we are to live as we open ourselves to the courage and purpose of Christ. "Let this cup pass," Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, but then he said, "Not my will but yours, O God, be done." When he dies, he says, "It is finished," not as a sigh of resignation, but as a prayer expressing confidence that the meaning and purpose of his loving and reconciling existence was at that point complete. By God's grace, friends of the cross look for divine direction and pray to meet with courage whatever life offers up, trusting that beneath us always are God's everlasting arms.

At the end of our reading from Paul's letter to the church at Philippi, he urges those who would seek to be friends of the cross to "stand firm." There are times when standing firm can mean being hard-headed, stubborn, resistant to change. But Paul encourages them to "stand firm in the Lord," which takes us in a different direction.

Once again this past week, tragically, someone targeted and shot and killed people gathered for prayer and worship, this time fifty people of the Muslim faith.

Ironically, this expression of hatred took place in what has been a peaceful city named Christchurch, New Zealand. Those who have analyzed the manifesto the alleged shooter released have suggested that he held a white supremacist identity and wanted to help start a race war. As to whether or not he identified as Christian, the analysts said it was complicated.³ Oh, my.

Let me share with you part of the message in response to this event that I emailed to my Muslim friends who are leaders working with the Islamic Cultural Center of Willow Grove.

I reach out to you with great sadness at the horrific killings that took place at two mosques in New Zealand. I can only imagine this must be extraordinarily maddening, depressing, and frightening to all those who see this act and what seems to be a significant number of other people who could actually support such violence against people while they are worshiping. I join with you and your sisters and brothers in mourning this vast loss of life. I mourn the hatred behind this act and the movements that support it. On behalf of the congregation of Abington

Presbyterian Church, I also want you to feel that you have people of good will standing with you, seeking to protect your peaceful right to worship, and also standing in solidarity with you to work against racial and religious hatred/violence.

This is a time we need to stand firm in the Lord in standing against racial and religious bigotry, especially when it turns to violence. I see other ways people are also standing firm in the Lord. I am thankful for people, who as a result of their faith, fight relentlessly against hunger, even when it seems that the tide of the hungry rarely seems to go down. I see those who with little acclaim, dedicate their lives advocating for the rights and needs of those who are disenfranchised. I see people who unyieldingly work for planet sanity in the care for creation. I see others who day by day and night by night care for a seriously ill loved one. From where does the energy and hope come?

For Paul, he could stand firm in the Lord because he had experienced the boldness of God's love for him and for others in the person of Jesus Christ. In him, he had encountered a God who came among humanity gently, lived wonderfully, taught truthfully. In the facing of human resistance, even threatening death, Jesus did not turn back. Yes, he died violently, but he rose triumphantly. As a result, not even death could be a reason to give up hope. Paul was empowered by the same life-giving force that brought about the resurrection of Jesus Christ. In a sense, hope, purpose, and love had been resurrected in Paul, so he stand firm even when discouraging events occurred.

The cross, the central visual representation of Christianity is much more than a symbol. The cross stands as an ongoing invitation to experience in our being and to express in our actions, God's grace, hope, and love. Suffering transformed, faithfulness enabled, love lived out. No public relations firm can even dream of offering as much. Thanks be to God. Amen.

¹ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking, A Seeker's ABC*, HarperOne; Revised, 1993.

² Douglas John Hall, *the Cross in Our Context: Jesus and the Suffering World*, Augsburg Fortress, 2003.

³ <https://news.sky.com/story/new-zealand-mosque-shootings-suspected-killer-is-fascist-who-had-contact-with-breivik-11666136>