

Willow River Parish: Clear Lake, Deer Park, and Faith Family

Title: The Cross

Lesson: 1 Corinthians 1:18

18 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.

Once, there was a college student. He loved God and his church deeply. As the exam period approached, he began attending church even more fervently, praying, "God, help me do well on my exams." Despite his fervent prayers, he neglected to study. He thought, "God will give me wisdom so I can get a good grade on the exam." On the day of the exam, he received the test paper and read it over and over, but he couldn't figure out any of the answers. As a last resort, he wrote on his exam paper, "God knows everything," and submitted it before leaving the classroom. Later, the exam results came out. On the student's graded exam paper, it said: "God gets an A+, but you get an F."

If we confess with our lips that we believe in God, but our lives do not bear the weight of the cross and follow God, then we will not be much different from the student who received an F in the test.

We are currently in the midst of the Lenten journey. Already, we have passed halfway through the 40 days. Lent provides us with a valuable opportunity to contemplate the significance of the cross. If someone were to ask us what the symbol of Christianity is, most of us would probably answer: the cross. What does the cross mean to you?

(Slide 1) For us today, the cross holds many meanings, including love, faith, and hope. However, the significance of the cross in the time of Jesus was very different from what it means to us today.

In that time, the cross symbolized death, specifically execution for criminals or insurgents. Crucifixion was the most brutal and humiliating form of punishment. Prisoners condemned to crucifixion had already endured torture and were forced to carry a heavy cross, weighing about 300 pounds, to Golgotha, a distance of about 900 yards,

while enduring mockery from many people.

The prisoners, if they stumbled, would face jeers and stones from the crowd. Upon reaching the execution site, they'd be nailed to the cross, enduring excruciating pain until death, helpless against the piercing agony. This was the brutal reality of the cross in ancient times.

However, the meaning of the cross changed completely when Jesus, the Son of God without sin, was crucified on it and rose from the dead three days later, appearing to his disciples. Before experiencing Jesus' resurrection, the disciples, like others, feared the cross and feared death. However, by meeting the risen Jesus, hearing his voice, and having meals with him, they realized that death is not the end of life. They fully believed in and accepted the resurrected Jesus as their Messiah.

And with the ascension of Jesus, the history of the early church began. For them, the cross no longer symbolized death or fear, but rather a new life filled with forgiveness for all our sins and the new possibilities and hope brought forth by Christ.

Over time, the meaning of the cross has undergone some distortion. While there are Christians who understand its significance and carry their own crosses in life, it has often been misused and abused. Today, the cross isn't just a symbol confined to the church; it's popular in the jewelry and clothing we wear. Some even flaunt their wealth by wearing gold cross necklaces.

With the misuse of the cross's meaning, the way people perceive the church and worship today seems quite different from the early church's intention of gathering in Christ's love, breaking bread together, and fostering unity. For some, the fellowship aspect draws them to church. While fellowship is crucial within ministry, it shouldn't overshadow everything else. Without the cross, without Christ, a church centered solely on fellowship would resemble little more than a community center.

Many people distinguish between large and small churches based on

external factors such as the size of the church building, membership, attendance, and financial status. However, even if a church building is large, has many members, high attendance, and financial prosperity, if there are no people in the church who carry the cross in their lives and follow Jesus, that church is a small church. In fact, it may not even be a church at all.

On the other hand, even if a church is small in appearance, even with only 5 people or even 1 person, if they truly believe in, follow, and love Jesus, and live their lives carrying the cross, that church is a church that God rejoices in.

Returning to the original question, what does the cross mean to you?

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus says to his disciples: “²⁴ “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ²⁵ For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. ²⁶ What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?”

The cross that Jesus carried is an invitation for all of us to carry our own crosses and follow him. While attending church services on Sunday mornings is important, it is also essential to set aside time in our lives to read the Bible, pray, and apply God's word to our lives.

(Slide 2) Last Wednesday, during our Lenten Bible study, we had the opportunity to discuss Wesley's way of salvation. Briefly, the first step is prevenient grace. God's grace is unconditional, and it is a gift that we receive from God before we are even born, before we know God. This is why we baptize infants and welcome them into the body of Christ. Through prevenient grace, we also share the sacrament of Holy Communion with those who are not members of our church. However, prevenient grace itself is not salvation.

With the help of the Holy Spirit, we must realize that we are recipients of God's grace, which we can never repay. We must also believe and

accept that we have become children of God through Christ. The final step of salvation is sanctification. I do not like using difficult terms, but this is a fundamental concept in Methodist theology that we should become familiar with through repeated exposure.

In the stage of sanctification, we continually experience the process of confession and absolution. However, this is about personal sanctification. At the same time as personal sanctification, we must also strive for social sanctification. This is what it means to follow Christ and carry our cross.

The cross of Jesus is an invitation for us to follow his life. The cross of Jesus has meaning for us because he was crucified for us and rose again for us. Therefore, the cross that we carry takes on true meaning when we share our time and our lives with others, just as Christ did.

Living a life of carrying the cross and following Jesus is a very difficult life, a life that others are reluctant to live. However, Jesus promises us that in this life there is salvation, joy, happiness, and eternal life.

I hope that during this Lenten season, we will reflect on what the cross has meant to us in the past and consider what kind of cross God wants us to carry. And I hope that we will all live lives that please God. Amen.