

Rev. Dr. Charley Reeb:

Amen. Amen. Thank you, you may be seated. You'll see in your bulletin as you open it up in the middle, under the sermon notes section, our offerings this week for Holy Week, our services, and we encourage you to attend all of them. As we all know, it's a very sacred and holy week, the most important week of our faith. And so, we have a Monday, Thursday service at 7:00 PM here in the sanctuary, which we will follow that, a feet washing ceremony. And then Good Friday, we'll have a service here, of course. And then on Easter morning, we are offering three services. We'll have two identical ones, contemporary, 8:30 and 9:45, and then 11:00 in the sanctuary. Bring your friends, bring your family. It'll be a great day of celebration of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, and His resurrection.

I do have a text of scripture I want to read for you this morning. It comes from 1st Corinthians. It's the Apostle Paul writing this letter to the Christians at Corinth. It's not typically a text that you'll often hear on Palm Sunday, but I think you'll find it is extremely appropriate. It's Paul talking about the message of the cross. I begin reading at verse 18 of chapter one, through verse 31, and then verses one through five of chapter two. "For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing. But to us, who are being saved, it is the power of God. For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart. 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? For since in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided through the foolishness of our proclamation to save those who believe.

For Jews demand signs and Greek's desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified a stumbling block to Jews and a foolishness to Gentiles. But to those who are the call, both Jews and Greeks, Christ, the power of God and the wisdom of God, for God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom and God's weakness is stronger than human strength. Consider your own call, brothers and sisters. Not many of you were wise by human 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 despise in the world, things that are not, to reduce things that are so that no one might boast in the presence of God.

He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness, and sanctification and redemption. And order that as it is written, let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord. When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom, for I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. And I came to you in weakness and in fear, and in much trembling. My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the spirit and of power so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom, but on the power of God." May the Lord add His blessing upon this reading of his holy word. Help us to hear it, and understand it, and believe it, and live in response to it. Let us be in an attitude of prayer together.

Eternal God, we thank you for this powerful word, a strong word, a hard word, but your word nonetheless. And now, Lord, you have given me the amazing privilege and responsibility, humbling responsibility of interpreting that word and preaching this word today. We all come together, Lord, today, yearning for a word from you that'll make all the difference. So, Lord, speak to me and through me in such a way that all of us do receive a word from you that will make a difference to our lives. It's in Christ's name we pray. Amen. Well, if we're honest and we're in church, so we're honest, right? If there is one week we would rather skip, it is Holy Week. Just go straight to Easter, right? I mean, it'd be much easier just to show up on Sunday on Easter and forget all this stuff about an awful cross.

And many people actually do that if you're going to believe it. I have a skeptic friend that likes to joke like this. "Good Friday? I don't think Jesus saw it that way." We love the story of Jesus, especially His

resurrection, but we also love the stories of His kindness, and His compassion and his care. We love how He tried to reach the least and the last and the lost. Oh, we love that and we love to reflect on that. But as Fred Craddock says, "Eventually someone is going to ask us this question, if that is all true, then why in the heck was Jesus arrested, and beaten, and crucified? Why?" It's true, we can't deny it. It's historical fact. Around the age of 33, Jesus of Nazareth was executed by the Roman government. They saw Him as an agitator, a threat to their way of life, and so they thought it was easier just to get rid of Him.

And the way they did it was not pleasant. They didn't electrocute Him or they didn't shoot Him or inject Him with something. They nailed Him on a stick and left Him to die. And it's that part of the story that we really don't care for quite honestly. Anne Lamott, that great writer describes this when she writes about Good Friday. She says, "Honestly, I don't have the personality or the mind for Good Friday or the crucifixion." She said, "I'd rather just skip to Easter." In fact, she said, "I'd rather just skip to the vision of Easter that a Sunday school kid drew on a piece of paper, where the Easter bunny was outside the tomb with a basket of chocolates. Everlasting life and a bunch of chocolates, now you're talking, baby."

Yeah, so why can't we do that? Why can't we just skip over this blood and gore, and this awful cross, and just focus on the things we like about Jesus' story? Why can't we just put together all these passages of scripture that we enjoy, that are kind, and warm, and loving, and may put them together in a greatest of Jesus and call it wisdom for winners? Wouldn't that be great? That would sell tons of copies, just leave out that part about a bloody cross. Did you know one of the fastest growing churches in the world is called Winners Church? It's true, you can look it up. Winners Church, it's in over 32 countries and it's growing like crazy. And the leaders of that church said that they based the slogan of their church on American religious life. And here's their slogan, "Be happy, be successful. Join the winners."

Oh, everybody loves a winner, don't they? Everybody likes to be a winner. So, it's no doubt that people are flocking to that church, but they're forgetting one important thing. More power to them, but they are forgetting very important thing, and that is Jesus was not treated like a winner. He was treated like a pathetic loser. They didn't hand Him a trophy, they handed Him a beating. They didn't celebrate Him, they crucified Him, and that's at the center of our faith. Imagine a church with this slogan. "Deny yourself, take up a cross and follow me." That would've been closer to the slogan of the Apostle Paul and the passage I read to you earlier. Paul was adamant about keeping the cross front and center, and He would say with great conviction, "I desire to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified." And many of you biblical scholars out there know that Paul paid dearly for his convictions about the cross.

In fact, you may have noticed earlier in the text when I read it, that Paul talked about coming to the churches at Corinth with fear and trembling and weakness. What was he talking about? He was talking about the fact that he came to Corinth from Athens, Greece, the sinner of philosophy and truth. And he tried to preach the cross to these philosophers and the sinners of truth, and they laughed him out of town. They thought he was an idiot, thought he was silly, thought it was senseless. But for Paul, the cross was no joke. I desire to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. In His death, it does seem senseless, doesn't it? I mean it does. I mean, didn't Jesus know, and maybe we think this in our more human moments, didn't He know what was about to come?

I mean, didn't He know when His disciples just started to run off in fear, to get a clue and to run off Himself? Didn't He know what was about to happen? But instead on this day, we remember that Jesus Christ got on that donkey and the choir just sang about it. He wrote on into the belly of the beast knowing exactly what was about to happen. For many people, it seems senseless. In fact, to some critics of religion, it not only seems senseless, but it's just downright offensive. Some time ago, I was serving another church and I preached a message about the cross, and I don't remember if it was good Friday or Palm Sunday, but I remember laying it on thick. When don't I, right? But I laid it on real thick.

A few days later, I got an email from a prominent member of the church, a very successful member of the church who made a lot of money in marketing. It was this marketing guru, a head of this marketing firm, and basically his email went like this, "Charlie, you've got to stop preaching messages about the cross. People want to be uplifted, they don't want to be convicted. People don't want to hear about all that stuff. You can't grow a church," he said, "by preaching messages like that." He was right. I mean, the guy knew what he was talking about. I mean, after all, he was a marketer. He knows what people want.

An architect some years ago just started to build all these megachurches. I mean, he was the go-to guy for a while and all these churches wanted to build these big, big, big megachurches. And it was interesting, when he was interviewed one time, he said he often heard the same thing from pastors and church leaders of these mammoth churches. They would say to him, "Listen, we don't want to cross on the outside of the church or on the inside of the church, because a cross represents weakness, and failure, and people are not attracted to weakness and failure."

A pastor in San Francisco did something similar. He got up to preach his sermon and he said in his sermon, "For too long we've accepted the cross as an acceptance of pain and suffering and sacrifice, but we can't take it anymore and we won't stand it." He finished a sermon, he climbed up into the chancel, tore down that cross and threw it on the floor. "No more pain, no more suffering, no more agony." Yet Paul would be adamant and say, "I must preach the cross. I must." Now, why was Paul so stubborn about it? I mean, really, we have so many wonderful things about our faith. Why focus on that? Why was Paul so adamant about preaching about the cross? Well, I think one reason is the cross often reminds us of the reality that there is evil, and violence, and sin in the world.

We got a stark reminder this week, didn't we? When a young lady entered the Covenant School in Nashville and opened fire, and killed six people, some of them children. It being the 19th shooting, school shooting where at least one person was wounded in this year alone. The cross reminds us that we are not insulated. No matter where we live, no matter how affluent we are, we are not immune to that kind of violence. And it also reminds us that anybody is capable of that, no matter where they come from. And the National Cathedral in Washington, maybe you've been in that sacred space, but they have flags representing all the states in the union inside. And not only do they represent the states, but they represent significant people from those states.

Georgia has three. One is obvious, of course, it represents Martin Luther King Jr. The second one represents Woodrow Wilson, who started his law career in Georgia and actually married a woman from Rome, Georgia. But there's a third one, maybe you haven't heard of him. His name is Robert Alston. Robert was a very successful man in Atlanta, was part of the Georgia legislature. He owned that land that is now East Lake Golf and Country Club. And he was sick and tired of the corruption he found in the legislature. One issue in particular really got to him. You see, back in those days it was common for wealthy people to use state prisoners to build their buildings and mansions. And they didn't have to provide housing, they didn't have to provide insurance, they didn't have to pay them. All they had to do was offer a meager lunch, that was it.

And Alston thought that was inhumane. He called it slavery. Well, he mentioned it to the legislature and it fell on deaf ears. I mean, after all, they were comfortable. What's wrong with this? Well, then Alston decided he would introduce a bill calling that practice illegal. So, he got up one day to introduce the bill and a man, another man representing a very affluent Atlanta family, came up to him and said, "Are you really going to do this?" He said, "Yes." The man pulled out a gun and shot Alston dead on the spot. The cross reminds us that sometimes that's how the world works. And the cross reminds us that sometimes there is a price to be paid for following Jesus Christ. If you truly desire to follow Jesus Christ, don't expect everyone to rise up and call you blessed.

Yes, Jesus is wonderful in many ways, but sometimes he's offensive and sometimes people don't like His message. So, don't believe the TV preachers and radio preachers who say, "Just come to the faith and you will prosper." It is baloney. In fact, sometimes your troubles don't start until you begin following Jesus Christ. Yes, sometimes people, they follow their faith and they end up slaying giants and become heroes, and they're winners, and they hold the Bible and triumph. But many of us know that many people have sacrificed much because of their faith. They've sacrificed their livelihood, their families, their very lives. You see, and get this good, following Jesus Christ is not a formula for success. Following Jesus Christ is reflecting the love of Almighty God, no matter the cost.

I desire to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucify. But you want to know what I think is for me the most compelling reason, I believe the Apostle Paul was so adamant, was so stubborn about this cross business, and some of us need to hear this today, is because the cross reflects the very heart of God and the profound depth of His love. The cross reflects the fact that God refuses for us to suffer alone. God deliberately took on our suffering, and cries our tears, and feels our pain. God stooped down to our mess, to our suffering. And once we realize this, great healing can occur for many of us. Some years ago, there was a movie that came out, some of you may remember it called The Last Temptation of Christ. Originally it was a novel, but then it was turned into a movie. And Christians everywhere, it was really controversial, they protested it.

Many Christians who never read the book and never saw the movie protested it and called it the work of the devil, which is sad because there is a profound message in that movie. You see, the whole point is this, the last temptation of Christ was for Him to run away from the cross and not do it and have a normal life, to have a family, to get married and have a family and to enjoy life. And so, He is dreaming about all this on the cross. He's dreaming about a life when He refused the cross, and He is dreaming and dreaming, and then He wakes up and He realizes He really decided to do it, to get on that cross so we would know beyond a shadow of a doubt the depth and breadth of God's love.

Fred Craddock talks about the cross with profound simplicity, and He talks about a common human occurrence that every parent in here knows about. When a child runs, and falls down, and skins their knee or their elbow, and what do they do? They come running to mommy or daddy, come running. And what does mommy or daddy say? I've said this a million times. "You want me to kiss it and make it feel better?" When the child gets on mommy's lap and holds the child, and all is well, was it the kiss that made it feel better? No. It was the time on mommy's lap. "Mommy, why are you crying?" "Well, because you hurt, sweetheart. And when you hurt, I hurt." That does more for the child than all the bandages and the medicines in the world.

Craddock says, "You want to know what the cross really is? For many of us, it's getting on the lap of God who hurts because you hurt." In the Middle Ages, there was a monk who announced to the village that he was going to preach a sermon that evening on the cross. And so, a bunch of people gathered in the cathedral around sunset, and there was no sign of the monk. And they got darker, and darker, and darker, then the sun set. And then in that cathedral, it was pitch black. And all of a sudden, the monk showed up. He lit a candle, and without saying a word he walked over to a statue of Christ on the cross and he put the candle next to the wounds on His feet, then the wounds on His hands, then the wound on His side, and finally to the crown of thorns on His head, and then blew out the candle.

And those people sat there in the darkness, weeping, being at the center of the most profound mystery in the world, the love of God, God in Christ, doing something for us that we can never do for ourselves. God in Christ, paying the ultimate price. Why? Because He loves us and it changed the world. I desired to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. Let us pray. Oh, Lord, the heaviness of this week, reflecting the heaviness of that cross that you've carried. Oh, Lord, we just sit right now in

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that mystery, that ultimate sacrifice, a love, so amazing, so divine. Lord, it's hard to fathom that you did it, but you did. It's in Christ's name we pray. Amen.