Sermon for March 4, 2012  
Reading: I Corinthians 1:10-25  
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Christ Crucified, the Wisdom & Power of God

When I was on Sabbatical almost six years ago, one of my objectives was to see the work of art called The Isenheim Altarpiece. It was constructed and painted by Matthias Grunewald in 1515 to sit on the altar of the Monastery of St. Anthony, in Isenheim, Germany.

This monastery functioned as a medieval hospice by taking in and caring for people with rye ergotism – St. Anthony’s Fire – a disease which was often fatal in the Middle Ages, & which manifested with pustules, boils and bleeding eruptions from all over the body.

The altarpiece has several panels. The Crucifixion panel is the most gruesome crucifixion portrayal I have ever seen. The gaunt, suffering Christ is not only a clear victim of torture, he has sores all over his body, the way people of that time w/ plague, or St. Anthony’s Fire, would look.

People being brought to the monastery with those dread diseases could easily identify with the suffering Christ on the altar – and could understand that Christ identified with them in their suffering.

On a different table, in another part of the room in the Unterlinden Museum – where the whole altarpiece is taken apart and displayed – is the Resurrection panel. It could not be more different.

In this panel, Christ is ascending from the tomb, as the soldiers guarding it fall to the ground. He has a look of peace on his face, and he seems to be looking over all humanity. His head & upper body are bathed in a heavenly, yellow light. His hands are raised as if to bless all humankind.

To stand under that panel – for its base is about five feet off the ground – is to stand under the blessing of Christ.

He has been healed of the lash-wounds on body and head. His contorted, suffering face now forms a beatific smile. But on his hands and feet are the blood-marks of the nails, and in his side is the spear-wound – which, after the Resurrection, he offered to Thomas the Doubter, to touch and believe.

Standing under those panels – for parts of four of the six days we were in Colmar – helped me understand more deeply Paul’s words: *We proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God & the wisdom of God.

For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.*

Christ Crucified – Foolishness to the Gentiles. To Paul, the Gentiles included everyone in the world except the Jews. And when Paul thought of the rest of the world, he thought of Greek civilization and religion. And nothing could be more opposed to Greek religion than a Crucified savior-deity.

The Greek Gods were the ancient and prototype versions of our modern day, comic-book superheroes. Zeus struck down humans at will, and had relations with beautiful women by changing himself into all sorts of mortal shapes.
The Gods ate and drank, dueled and preened, and used human mortals as mere playthings. They were capricious, proud and powerful, to be evaded when possible and “fawned over” when not.

To seek the favor of one likely incurred the displeasure of another. They were best worshipped from a distance and avoided at other times.

This was the cultural and religious milieu of the world surrounding ancient Israel. Nothing could be more opposed to a crucified savior – one who went to his death without a struggle. Is it any wonder Paul said Christ crucified was foolishness to Gentiles of this world view?

Christ Crucified – A stumbling block to the Jews.
The Jewish people were expecting a Messiah. He would be a King, in David’s ancestral line. He would rid the land of the Roman oppressors. His reign would bring peace, healing, justice.

Jesus stood for peace and healing and justice. But he said to love the Roman-oppressor-enemy. He did not lead a military to victory, but died alone on a cross.

People – crowds sometimes – had followed him, listened, been healed, and learned. But he did not restore the old nation to power; instead, he called them to repentance, and to be a new people. They hoped for military victory and political restoration. He offered love of enemies and a new direction.

It is any wonder that Paul said Christ Crucified was a stumbling block to the Jews?

Let me tell you what I think this all means in general. You can supply the specific situations.

It means not to defend yourself from attack, but to be open and vulnerable, continually offering the best of oneself.

Not to argue your opponent into submission, but to out-love that person.

Not to use physical, mental, or emotional strength to overwhelm and win, but to use exposed and open love … to heal, persuade and transform.

Not to be proud of reaching toward the top, but to be humble and willing to learn from even the meekest and weakest.

To give and give again, in love, as the first response and continuing action of our lives.

If I were sitting in the pews listening to this sermon, I would be constructing in my mind all the reasons these ideas and actions would not work – in my vocation, my relations, in this world and in my life.

If that’s what you are doing, I’m with you: because I wrote this sermon and thought about it before you heard it. I went through those reactions. To the wisdom of the world, the cross is foolishness. To the power of the world, the cross is weak.

But it is the foolishness of love, which – as Martin Luther King said – is the only power which can change an enemy into a friend. It is the weakness of unarmed truth and unconditional love, which will have the final word. Right, temporarily defeated, is stronger than evil, temporarily triumphant.

There are these lines from James Russell Lowell’s poem, “The Present Crisis.”

Truth forever on the scaffold, Wrong forever on the throne, - Yet that scaffold sways the future, and, behind the dim unknown, Standeth God within the shadow, keeping watch above God’s own.

The vulnerable and sacrificial love of Jesus Christ on the cross may not win any immediate battles. According to any human standard, it did not win for Christ; and it may not win for us every day. But it is still the way of God in our world.
The great Anabaptist theologian, John Howard Yoder, said this:

*People who bear crosses are working with the grain of the universe.*

That’s why we sing: “In the Cross of Christ I Glory.”

**The Cross of Jesus Christ is the way of God in our world.** It is the salvation of our world, and of each one of us; and will be the way to justice, reconciliation, and peace.

The sacrificial, self-giving love of God in Jesus Christ is our pathway, our journey as Christians, and as a church of Jesus Christ. As he said to his disciples: *Take up your cross and follow me.*

There is a verse in our next hymn which says: *Bane and blessing, pain and pleasure, by the cross are sanctified.* **Peace is there that knows no measure; joys that through all time abide.**

May the peace and joy of life in Christ guide and comfort us, as we take up the cross and follow.

Amen.