

This transcript was developed using an AI-based speech to text generator. We apologize for any typos or other errors.

. . . . .

"The Cross" The Rev. Aaron M. G. Zimmerman (03/03/2024, The Third Sunday in Lent)

. . . . .

Let us pray.

Almighty God made the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be always acceptable in thy sight.

O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

Amen.

A reading from 1 Corinthians chapter one,

where is the one who is wise?

Where is the scholar?

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, oh, goodness.

Look at all these things.

Have you noticed how common product placement has become?

You can't watch a TV show or a movie

without seeing some sort of brand displayed,

you know, there's the person, you know,

taking the drink or brushing their teeth

or whatever it may be and you're getting this message

that if you buy these things and use them,

you will be like these successful famous people on TV.

The really absolute worst of all this is modern family.

Great show, but towards the end,

there was one episode that the entire thing

was a ad for Apple.

It was the whole episode was an ongoing face time conversation

between multiple family members using iPhones and iPads

and MacBooks and all of it.

Just going back and forth, people jumping on,

and bug going off, it was hellish, I can tell you.

Just like in real life.

So at the end, I was like, okay guys, I get it.

When I bought an iPad.

So we, this thing though that you see all the time, this product placement, it is something that advertisers didn't invent, they didn't come up with this.

This idea that if you put something in front of someone a lot, it will begin to get into their thoughts and into under their skin.

I won't be able to escape it.

You just put it in front of them all the time.

That's what billboards are for and advertisements are for.

But again, none of this was invented by Madison Avenue or the people in marketing.

We Christians are pretty good at putting images around to get a point across.

To get a point across.

That's arm on level punning right there, I know, yes.

I counted.

I thought I had the right number.

I thought there were 21 crosses in this space, the building in which you now sit, but actually there's more like 35.

I keep seeing more of them.

So there's the cross, obviously above the altar.

There's the crosses on the altar,

but not just the middle one, but the Cairo has a cross and the fish with the Tau cross, the tea that's more of them.

There are crosses, there's one on the back of the banner.

There's one on the lector and there's one on the pulpit.

There's the processional cross.

There's the one on the baptismal font,

the stained glass window over here has a cross on it.

There's one in the narthex on the counter

and they're just everywhere.

There's also two on the outside bronze doors.

There's one on the top of the building on that side,

one on the top on this side.

There's one outside in the courtyard at the columnarium.

There's one on the end to the nursery.

There's one on the top of the welcome center.

There's one on the top of the parish hall.

You get over there, there's two outside,

one 16 feet tall on stone that lights up at night.

There's two inside, three, actually,

if you can't get the children's cross,

then if you go into the average center,

there's a metal cross in the outside of the building, also lights up at night.

I'd like to do a water feature,

like Bellagio type jets, we'll see.

But then there's also two inside.

I mean, there's just, so I think,  
and then I noticed on the pavement candles,  
the tall wooden pavement candles,  
there are four crosses on those as well on each,  
so that's eight more.  
I think right now, we're up at about 38 to 40 crosses  
just around here.  
Talk about your product placement.  
We really don't want you guys to miss it.  
And it really is the central symbol of Christianity.  
It could have been anything, you know?  
We could have majors on top of our buildings  
or something like that.  
Something significant from the birth of Christ.  
But no, we have this cross,  
and it's not just in the church.  
I mean, this image really has caught on  
in a lot of places with a lot of people.  
You remember in 87, you two's song,  
I still haven't found what I'm looking for,  
where the singer sings to Jesus.  
You carried the cross, and all my shame,  
this was on top 40 radio.  
The black crow's did it in 1993 years later.  
Do you know the song she talks to angels?  
It hit big, were you alive?  
Anyways, it was a huge hit.  
And it's a song about a woman going through a mental health  
and substance use crisis, and the singer, Chris Robinson,  
sings, she's got a cross around her neck.  
And the cross is someone she has not met, not yet.  
So whether it's in music or in churches,  
this cross seems to be a big thing.  
And you may say Zimmerman, those two references  
are just from the 80s and 90s, get out of here with that.  
But, 2017, Kesha, put out a single,  
and I love early Kesha, I mean,  
who doesn't love someone that rhymes the word Budweiser  
with Tiger?  
I mean, that's poetry right there.  
But, in the song, Praying,  
which is a deeply spiritual and religious song,  
in the music video, the first thing you see is a cross,  
and in the music video, the last thing you see is a cross.  
The first one is neon red lit up.  
The second one is this giant sculpture  
outside framed against the sky.  
I mean, it's just so obvious,  
when people are talking about spiritual matters,  
talking about God, especially in our church,

the cross is just this central thing.  
It's everywhere.  
And that's what Paul is talking about  
in the reading this morning from 1 Corinthians chapter one.  
He's talking about the cross.  
It was a big deal for him.  
He was a pastor, a church planner, a missionary.  
He started all these churches and then wrote letters to them  
because he would start a church and then move on  
and start a church and then move on.  
So he kept up a pretty robust correspondence  
and a lot of those emails are now in the New Testament.  
And 1 Corinthians one, he talks about the cross  
because there was something going on then  
which still happens today, which is preacher wars.  
I think Bravo's coming out with that next year.  
But sort of a thing where if there are multiple preachers  
and a congregation, people kind of have their favorites  
and I'm like, for this guy.  
So they were like, I follow Paul and I was like,  
well, I am a more of a Peter guy.  
Then there was the guy that everybody doesn't like  
back in the corner who just tries to be holder  
than everyone, well, I follow Jesus.  
Like these are the wars that are going on  
in the Corinthian church and Paul is seeing it  
and Paul the church apart.  
So he writes them and he says, look, you guys have missed the point.  
It's not the messenger that matters ultimately.  
It is the message.  
And the message is be nice to everyone, just kidding.  
Right? That's not the message.  
That's not the central message.  
That's not a new idea in Christianity.  
Many people think that is the message.  
Just be nice to everyone.  
That's not what church is about.  
You already know that.  
That's not a new idea.  
The message, the crazy thing is this cross.  
The idea that God would take on human flesh and die.  
And it's a message of foolishness as verse 23 says.  
It's this foolish thing.  
I mean, if anyone were starting a religion  
and you wanted to succeed, I mean, go back to 20 BC  
and like I'm gonna start a religion,  
it'll dominate the world.  
I think the founder should be a charismatic leader  
that does miracles and teaches these brilliant sermons  
and then dies in a humiliating way

and everybody leaves him and he's a total failure.  
That should do the trick.  
And people would have laughed at you if you said  
your idea was to have a religious starter by guy.  
That gets crucified.  
In the first century, you didn't even talk  
about crucifixion and polite company.  
Just like today, you wouldn't have people  
over for a cocktail part of being like,  
so, lethal injection or electro-chair, what do you guys think?  
Like, you don't talk about this stuff.  
It's so brutal.  
It's awful.  
And only the worst criminals were crucified  
because it was such a horrific punishment.  
You didn't talk about it at all.  
We ourselves don't like to talk about brutal  
public humiliation.  
We like winners, not losers.  
If you go to the new foster pavilion,  
the jersey that gets retired up there,  
that's Brittany Griner, a winner.  
You don't put up like Nancy  
who never hit a three pointer in her life.  
When you build a stadium,  
you don't put up the banners that are like,  
1998, oh, and 10.  
I don't know if that really was what happened in 1998.  
I'm just picking numbers at random here.  
You know, 82, field goal was this close.  
You don't put that on the banner.  
You put the victories.  
We like to win and we like to remember those wins.  
We proclaim our wins loudly, but not our failures.  
And yet, this building has 40 failures,  
40 crosses around it.  
We want to clearly remember,  
and Paul says, this is the message you proclaim,  
this foolishness.  
We are like the people that Paul talks about in this passage.  
You remember he said something about Jews and Greeks  
and you were like, that sounds racist.  
But in the time that Paul was there,  
this was, that was a joke.  
Nobody laughed, it gets still too early.  
Those were nationalities and cultural identities  
that had some characteristics about them  
that Paul was speaking in shorthand.  
And you don't need to worry about the specific cultural  
identifiers then.

But he talks about two people, two kinds of people  
that reject the cross.  
And he says they do it for two reasons.  
One, rejects because they want wisdom and knowledge.  
One, rejects it because they want signs.  
Now, what does that mean?  
Well, the people who want wisdom and knowledge,  
those are folks that are like, no, I don't want a failure.  
I don't want a cross, I don't want that.  
I want religion to give me wisdom.  
I want hacks, I want tips and tricks, I want the cheat codes,  
I want the secret knowledge that I can use  
to have a successful life in my relationships  
in my career.  
Give me a motivational speaker.  
Tell me the words to use, the things to say,  
to get promoted, to get the romance I want,  
to have my children turn up perfectly.  
Give me the knowledge, Jesus.  
Teach me in this magic Bible book,  
which things I can memorize and say out loud  
that make my life turn out the way I want.  
That's knowledge, that's wisdom, people that want that.  
And there's also people that want signs.  
He says, show us, do some pyrotechnics,  
do some miracles, do some magic tricks.  
When I pray, I want things to happen exactly the way I want.  
This is the kind of divine magic that I'm looking for.  
Give me signs, prove it that you're real.  
So, whether you want wisdom, whether you want signs,  
Paul says to both groups, God says,  
you don't get either, you get God dead on a cross.  
This is the central idea of Christianity.  
And it means lots of things and people talk about it  
in lots of different ways, but it is central.  
You don't get Christianity with just be nice to people.  
Because if that's where all it was,  
Jesus would have beamed up to heaven  
right after he finished his last sermon.  
But he sticks around intentionally.  
There's this moment, we'll get to it in Monty Thursday,  
right after he goes up to the Garden of Gethsemane  
to pray after the last supper.  
He is not been arrested yet.  
He's in the dark.  
There's no artificial lighting in the Garden of Gethsemane  
in 2000 years ago.  
He was free and clear.  
He could have just left, but he hung around to get arrested  
to make sure that he would die.

And this is what he came to do.  
Why did he want to fail?  
Why did he subject himself to such a horrific,  
public spectacle of a death?  
I don't know if people get nervous.  
Maybe you come from a tradition  
where this was talked about in a way  
that was like kind of overwhelming and gory.  
Or maybe it was talked about in a way that was like,  
you made God mad and so Jesus had to do this  
or something like that, which is awful.  
And it's not at all what this text is about.  
This text is about in the cross,  
God dealing with the two big problems that you cannot solve.  
The first is your death.  
I don't think I have to argue with you  
that you have that problem.  
That will happen to you.  
And I'm letting you know now.  
But that is a big thing that is happening  
and you can't solve that problem on your own.  
And the second thing, people have what I call  
the Acrobat problem, which comes from a line  
from YouTube's album, Octim Baby.  
The song is Acrobat.  
And Bono sings, I must be an Acrobat  
to talk like this and act like that.  
I say, be nice to everyone.  
And yet I lose my temper at the people who I'm closest to.  
I say that you should always be honest.  
And yet, I have a separate bank account  
that my spouse doesn't know about or whatever,  
just a theory, and I'm not saying, that's not you, it's fine.  
We say this, but do the opposite.  
And this thing about human beings,  
these kind of secrets that we want to hide,  
this was shown, I think, powerfully and hilariously  
in a recent sketch on Saturday Night Live,  
where they had a game show hosted by long-term cast member  
Keenan Thompson, and Keenan comes out  
and he's standing in his podium  
and the three contestants come out  
and they're standing, they're introduces them  
and they're like, what is this show?  
We don't know the rules.  
Well, the show is called, why'd you say it?  
And what we do is we will read your comments  
on Instagram posts, and then we'll just ask you,  
why'd you say it?  
And one contestant leaves immediately.

He's like, I don't want to take part in this.  
But that's the thing, like we say things online,  
we would never say in public.  
Maybe we don't even say them online, but we think them.  
How are you doing on the 10th Commandments?  
We read those first today.  
You've been my land.  
Well, I've never worshipped an idol, I'm good,  
and I've never murdered anyone, two at a 10, way to go.  
Well, I hate to break the news to you,  
but if you love something more than God,  
that's what idolatry is.  
If you turn God into a vending machine  
to give you what you want when you put your quarter in,  
that's what an idol is.  
And if you've read the sermon on the Mount,  
Matthew 5, 6, and 7, Jesus' big speech there,  
he says that you've heard it said, yeah, don't murder anyone,  
but I tell you that if you've lost your temper  
listening to the radio and your car,  
at some news report that comes out,  
and you're yelling at a whole group of people  
for being terrible, whether it's AM radio or NPR,  
I don't care, I don't care, I'm offending everyone.  
Whichever one you're listening to,  
if you've had that reaction, that hatred in your heart,  
you're guilty of the same thing.  
You may have read that part about,  
don't covet your neighbor's donkey, you're like sweet.  
My neighbor doesn't even have a donkey.  
I'm good, but then he says at the end,  
or anything else that belongs to your neighbor,  
they're tell you ride, they're travertine countertops,  
that backsplash, whatever it may be.  
So there's this human problem, the acrobat problem,  
we say we believe in these things,  
but we do the opposite, and that little problem of death.  
So the cross is about God in flesh, entering into all of that,  
so profoundly that he can save you from it,  
entering into death, entering into lawbreak,  
and he becomes a lawbreaker, he becomes like a sinful one,  
he becomes the sin of the world, all that evil,  
all that doubt, all that paralysis, all that anxiety,  
all that isolation, all that exploitation, all of it,  
he takes on his shoulders.  
That's the idea, I grew up in the Episcopal Church,  
and I heard the Eucharistic prayers,  
and I heard the readings,  
and I never got this one part, the point of the cross,  
is for all of that mess in the world,



God takes it all into himself.  
The best example I've seen is,  
if that sort of sounds like a theological abstraction,  
is the character John Candy,  
not John Candy, what's his name in the Green Mile,  
which is short story by Stephen John Coffee,  
John Candy is a Canadian, God bless him.  
But John Coffee, John Coffee is his character in prison,  
and through the power of touch,  
he has the ability to take whatever ailment  
the other person has into himself.  
This is what the cross of Christ is about,  
and I can't explain it to you.  
If I could, I wouldn't trust it,  
because that would be something that would be pretty simple.  
This, though, is what God does in the cross,  
is to take all human awfulness into himself,  
to put it away forever, to defeat death,  
to defeat sin, to wipe the slate's clean,  
and to take it all away,  
and to do it in such a way,  
that he didn't die like Socrates,  
like, hmm, hemlock, oh, oh, oh, oh,  
and let me teach until I fade away peacefully, you know.  
He died this horrific way.  
I think there's a way of saying  
that all the worst that the world can throw at me  
in the institutions and systems of the world,  
and the people of the world, all of that.  
There's nothing so bad that I can't handle it.  
I can handle the worst, the stuff that we don't talk about  
in daylight, I can handle all of that.  
Jesus, thanks be to God.  
He's not just an amazing teacher, full of wise sayings.  
He's someone who gets into the muck of humanity  
to draw us out of it.  
There's a hymn from 1707,  
when I survey the wondrous cross,  
and that writer, Isaac Watts,  
who dealt with massive health problems  
and mental health issues his entire life,  
but he said, when I survey the wondrous cross,  
I see a love so amazing, so divine.  
And that's what I want.  
That's all I'm trying to do.  
That when you survey the wondrous cross,  
one of the 40 that surrounds you currently,  
that you would see love so amazing, so divine.  
There's nothing in your past, present, or future  
that God's love can't hold and free you from.

There's no sin that can't be forgiven.  
There's no broken place that can't be healed.  
As we end, I want to note that everything in length  
is purple, purple, stoles, purple on the crosses,  
which of course makes me think one thing,  
which a guy named Mr. Nelson from Minneapolis,  
you know him as Prince, Prince Roger's Nelson.  
Yeah, but you didn't know that.  
Prince always wore purple, so he's the Lenten guy.  
The prince had a song on his album,  
Sign of the Times, called The Cross.  
And I highly encourage you to listen to it.  
It will blow your mind.  
And it's all about the cross.  
It's all about God meeting us in pain and suffering,  
which I don't know anyone who doesn't need that.  
And he says, don't die.  
I mean, it's amazing.  
A song by Prince, he says, don't die without knowing the cross.  
Know that there is a place where all the negativity  
of the world and in your life is assimilated and healed.  
And that's what that's about.  
Let us pray.  
Almighty God, when we survey the wondrous cross,  
help us to see a love so amazing, so divine,  
even for us who pray in Christ's name.  
Amen.