

Crucifer

March 15, 2009

(Lent 3 - Year B)

1 Corinthians 1: 18-25

St. Alban's Episcopal Church, Waco, Texas

Last Thursday, when it was cold and rainy outside, a 30 year old man dropped in to St. Alban's in the afternoon.

This young man had just gotten engaged to be married and he was looking for a place for their wedding.

Such requests do happen occasionally, because we have such a beautiful church building and because the Episcopal marriage liturgy is so meaningful.

I like to use these opportunities to show hospitality and welcome, because we are a family of God that welcomes all people.

So, last Thursday afternoon, I stepped away from whatever I was doing at my desk, and I took this young man inside the church to look around.

Once I turned on the lights in here, he looked around for a full view of this wonderful worship space.

Then, he turned to me and said:

“You know, I was raised in the Episcopal Church.

I used to carry the cross in church.”

I am sure that he was referring to when he was an acolyte.

And just like most things in the Episcopal Church, we never call something by its real name, we have to have a fancy name for everything.

Rather than calling those who carry the cross a “cross carrier,”

Instead, we call them a “crucifer.”

And I think that it is particularly fitting that the people in our church who are the cross carriers, who are the crucifers, are teenagers.

The crucifer leads the procession into worship.

The crucifer leads the priest down the aisle to read the good news.

The crucifer leads us out into the world to proclaim Christ crucified.

Last Thursday, that newly-engaged man looked around our church and said:

“I was raised in the Episcopal Church.
I used to carry the cross.”

This man did *not* say:

In the Episcopal Church, I learned about the virgin birth or about
inspiring music or about “family values.”

Instead, he said:

I carried the cross.

Being a crucifer, being a cross carrier, is the first thing that he recounted
about being an Episcopalian.

And if our church is best remembered for proclaiming the message of
the cross, then we are on the right track.

When the Apostle Paul wrote his letter to the Corinthian church, the
Corinthians were *not* on the right track.

The Greeks proclaimed a message that lifted up wisdom and eloquent
speeches.

The Jews could not believe a message about a God who is the victim of
capital punishment on a cross.

Yet Paul was the bold crucifer who carried the cross down the aisle of
the Corinthian church, writing:

“Jews demand miraculous signs
And Greeks desire wisdom,
But we preach Christ crucified.”¹

We preach Christ crucified.

For me, for Jeff Fisher, this verse is one of the most important passages
in the New Testament.

For the world demands miracles and signs.

Society desires iron-clad arguments and proofs for Christianity.

But we preach Christ crucified.

¹ A conflation of both NRSV and NIV translations

For me, for Jeff Fisher, I am sick and tired of a message of Christianity that is really just self-help tips on how to improve my marriage.
I am sick and tired of a message of Christianity that is just old arguments about creation vs. evolution and about sexuality and about when the second coming will be.

I am sick and tired of a message of Christianity that is anything except taking the cross and carrying it high -
Carrying the cross in the church and in the barrios and in the country club and in the streets.

As for me,
I want to preach Christ crucified.

I want to preach Christ crucified because the cross, to me, is the basic proof that I need for the existence and presence of God.
When I am present at the deathbed of someone, when I experience their cross, then I know, I have experienced, that God is there.
When I quit my job in order to be ordained, when I walked out of my corporate office in a veil of tears, then I know, I have experienced, that God is there.
Whenever I have carried the cross, in church and in the world, God has been uniquely present.

Therefore, I want to shout out to you - and to the world:
The Son of God was murdered on a cross - to show us that there is no place, no place, where God is not present.
There is no place, no place, where God does not love you.

There was a long-time member of this church named Lillian Sauer, who died last December when she was well in her 90s.

Lillian's husband, George Sauer, had been the head football coach at Baylor during the 1950s.

A long time ago, the Sauer family was very active here at St. Alban's.

However, for many, many years, Lillian Sauer lived a life of carrying the cross.

Her husband, George, died the long, slow death of Alzheimer's.

Then, Lillian's son, George Sauer, Jr. was diagnosed with Alzheimer's, when he was only in his mid-50s.

So, Lillian walked the way of the cross, the long road of Alzheimer's, not only with her husband, but then also with her son.

George Jr. had been a highly-acclaimed wide receiver for the New York Jets.

Yet when I met him, he was no longer a famous football player. And he would wander away from home, for days at a time, not remembering where he lived.

A few years ago, just days before Christmas, Lillian asked that I bring her Christmas communion.

While I was visiting with her, George Jr. walked in the door, after having been gone for hours at a time, and he hurried into his bedroom.

I asked Lillian:

“Do you think that George would want to take communion with us?”

She replied:

“Oh, I seriously doubt it - I don't think he has believed in God for years and years.”

After a minute, George emerged from his room to get something from the kitchen.

I called out to him:

“George - would you like to join us for communion?”

He stopped in his tracks and said:

“Yes -- I think I will.”

The 3 of us then sat in the living room and shared the Body and Blood of Christ, each of us, with tears in our eyes.

Lillian later told me it was the best Christmas present she had ever received.

At the end of the service, I packed up my communion kit to go.

George then asked if he could walk me to my car.

Slowly, we walked out into the cold December air.

Once we got to my car door, this former professional football player

looked me in the eyes and said:
“You know -
I used to carry the cross in church.”

What George did not fully comprehend was that he was *still* carrying the cross.

However, the cross he was proclaiming was not the beautiful, brass cross that he carried in this church as a teenager.

Yet, in his life, in the life of his dear, old mother, I saw the cross.

In George’s cross - and in his eyes - I saw all the proof that I need that God is alive and at work in this world, in our sufferings and in our Alzheimer’s and in our sorrows.

For the world demands a life without pain,
And the medical community desires a cure for every disease.
But George Sauer preaches Christ crucified.

Your life, I am sure, preaches Christ crucified.
So, do not be afraid to lift high the cross.
Then carry that cross - into these streets and into your office and into your school and into your neighborhood.
And preach Christ crucified.

Because the world in which you and I live is sick and tired of hearing about a Christianity without the Cross.
So for Christ’s sake, be
A crucifer.

AMEN.

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