

A Wiser Foolishness

I Corinthians 1:18-31

Eleven days ago, I was in southern Mexico in Chiapas, more specifically, the small Mayan village of Acteal. You might recognize the name since a few of us from the church have visited there in the past. I was there this time as part of a group of mainly Baptists from Mexico, Puerto Rico, El Salvador, Brazil, Cuba, and the United States, gathered in San Cristobal de las Casas for a conference devoted to strengthening the witness of churches for peacemaking. We went to Acteal to join with the survivors and supporters who conduct a memorial service on the 22nd day of each month.

Why, you might ask. On December 22, 1997, paramilitaries stormed into the hamlet of Acteal and shot to death 45 Tzotzil Mayans, most of whom were women and children--all of whom were in their small primitive, shed-like chapel for their daily prayers. It was a tragedy beyond comprehension for three primary reasons. First, the victims were part of the "Las Abejas" community, who are Catholic and intentionally committed to nonviolence, so without armed resistance, they were like lambs led to their slaughter. Second, the perpetrators were Protestants, whose weapons had been blessed and prayed over in a Presbyterian church before the gunmen set out for the village for their merciless killing. Third, most of the victims and murderers were directly or indirectly related, as is the custom in Mayan villages.

Ever since that tragic day, survivors have conducted a monthly memorial to commemorate the lives, to remember their losses, and to maintain a public memory for the massacre as their nonviolent

witness. It's not only for themselves, but also for those who supported the paramilitaries and the perpetrators, who were released from jail after only spending a few years behind bars for this horrific crime—including the leader, who actually chose to return to Acteal and make his home just up the hill from the site of the massacre. The purpose motivating this worship is to keep the memory alive until, by the influence and grace of God, the offenders seek repentance and receive the forgiveness of the community they have deeply harmed. It's a profound and moving ceremony of faith and hope.

The service each time is conducted in Spanish and Tzotzil, set on a hillside platform over the graves and surrounded by Mayan crosses marking the life of each of the martyrs, with a large additional one located in front of the altar. The cross serves not only as a symbol of their Christian faith, but equally (if not more so) for their Mayan identity.

The Mayan cross, as you may recall, predates the arrival of Christianity and represents in their ancient mythology the intersection of heaven and earth, between what is divine and what is mortal. This Mayan symbol is based on the ceiba tree, the largest in the Chiapas landscape which rises up vertically toward the sky until its branches grow outwardly in horizontal fashion, creating the image of a cross. The ancient Mayan cross was created with this in mind.

The cross, in Mayan mythology, represents the four corners of the earth with the sacred space at the center. The ancients believed that the First God propped up the sky with large ceiba trees at the four corners of the world, with the heart of heaven and earth at the center, with four roads running outward toward the four corners.

Each road symbolized one of the four elements of life for the Maya: water, air, earth, and fire. In some of the crosses, circles are carved representing the cycle of life with the four-petaled flowers in each circle reflecting the ceiba flower itself, signifying beauty and life (gifts from God). For the early Franciscan missionaries, encountering this ancient cross in the Mayan culture was in stark contrast to their own understanding of the Crucifix, a Christian symbol that had become so closely associated with the domination and oppression of the Spanish conquest.

As I sat there, pondering all of the various meanings associated with this symbol, I thought to myself, what a remarkable way to mark the passage of time and the unfulfilled hopes the people of Acteal have for a spirit of repentance among the perpetrators and for reconciliation to occur between the murderers and the survivors of the victims. Cynics would dismiss the likelihood of this ever occurring. What are the chances the violators will accept responsibility for what they've done and seek to make amends, especially since there is little support for accountability outside of the people of Acteal? Who, but God, really cares what happens now, sixteen years later? Conventional wisdom would tell them to just accept this terrible tragedy for what it was and move on with their lives. Why express hope for justice and reconciliation when the perpetrators and the government (and most of the world) have no interest in dredging up this sorry episode every 22nd day of the month? Like the Conquistadors, theirs is a cross of violence and suffering, with victims and perpetrators. That's the way of the world. Accept that and go on. Yet, the members of "Las Abejas" cannot let

go of the cross; why, because it won't let go of them, as Christians or as Mayans.

I must admit, on many days, I prefer to embrace the meaning behind the Mayan cross rather than the Christian interpretation. It's not surprising, I suppose, since most people prefer to focus on life and beauty instead of violence and death. Skeptics as far back as the earliest days of Christianity thought it odd, if not offensive, that a marginal group of Jews chose to embrace this gruesome representation of capital punishment as one of the emblems of their faith. This was by no means universal, since primitive Christians adopted many signs to represent their allegiance to Christ, including the Greek letters, Chi-Rho, the fish, the Good Shepherd, among others. Nor did the cross only refer to the Roman punishment. In Egyptian mythology and lore, it was commonly perceived as a sign of life. It's believed that some of the earliest Coptic communities in Egypt appropriated the cross from their mythology as a symbol for their Christian faith, offering a measure of meaning to Jesus' own death on the cross, i.e., the cross representing both the manner of his death as well as a sign of life in his resurrection.

Still, the crucifixion of Jesus was a significant public relations challenge for the early church to address, especially within and around the Roman Empire. Not everyone was as bold or convinced as the Apostle Paul, who proclaimed the atoning sacrifice of Christ as the centerpiece of his Gospel message, as we can see from today's text. You can understand why. Raising up the instrument of Roman crucifixion as some sort of redemptive symbol had to have been viewed as rather absurd, if not offensive—no different than if you and

I were to hang syringes or a gallows' rope or guillotine or an electrocution chair or some other instrument of torture and death around our necks or at the front of our sanctuaries. It's bizarre, when you think about it! No other religion, to my knowledge, venerates such a gruesome image.

As one of the leading New Testament scholars of our time, N.T. Wright, puts it:

I have often reflected on the strangeness of the task to which Paul devoted his life: telling pagans that there was a single creator God rather than a multiplicity of gods was bad enough, but adding that this God had made himself known in a crucified Jew, who had then been raised from the dead, was bound to cause hoots of derision, and, if Acts is to be believed, sometimes did. Yet Paul found that when he told this story, when he proclaimed that this Jesus was indeed the world's true Lord, people (to their great surprise, no doubt) found this announcement making itself at home in their minds and hearts, generating the belief that it was true, and transforming their lives with a stranger new presence and power.¹

How I would view it is similar, but more along these lines: the crucifixion of Jesus helps us to recognize and acknowledge the suffering and pain of life—even to the best people on earth—even to those we would consider completely undeserving of it—in order to move us through the harshest realities we face until we can regain hope for the future. It's not a sign of domination, but an image of solidarity and understanding. That's how I believe it functions for many of us. Every time you and I embrace the cross, we acknowledge suffering and death as terrible, frightening realities of life—that we are mortal beings, we are vulnerable to a range of conditions, diseases, injustice, pain, suffering, violence, etc.—all the worst that life can throw at us.

¹ N.T. Wright, *Paul, in Fresh Perspective*, Fortress, 2005, pg. 100.

The cross does more than that. It points us toward the painful judgments people make about us or others, their abuse, their callousness, their cruelty, their shame and mockery—all the things by which we might be victimized, no different than Jesus. Likewise, the cross leads us to those we have victimized, or mistreated, or neglected, or avoided—the people we have crucified in some way and at some point in life.

The cross shouts out all of this violence, the brutality, the hatred, the bigotry, the demonization, and all that's wrong with this world—not hiding or dismissing it, but making these things evident and plain and present to us every time we look at it, every moment we bow before it, every opportunity we have to meditate on it. It hangs there front and center over the baptistery in this sanctuary to remind us of all the worse things on earth and in life that happen to people to render them godforsaken and miserable!

The Christian cross is intended to be an awful, horrible symbol—offensive to every ounce of decency we humans have within us! But we embrace it because once we acknowledge life at its worst without passing judgment on its victims, then we can begin the work of the Gospel to help reclaim and redeem them and us. The Christian cross reminds us that there is no real mercy if we cannot acknowledge how merciless life can be.

Explicitly acknowledging and embracing the worst that life has to throw at us seems like lunacy to so many who would rather avoid dealing with all the ugliness and drama. They would prefer a religion of pure light-hearted optimism, instead of one that delivers a spirit of hope out of suffering; they would opt for a faith that provides divine

merit for those deserving of it, rather than a generous grace shown toward those who don't; they would try to make Christianity more about common decency and honoring basic values than being a faith that lifts up a scornful cross front and center as a symbol of shame, judgment, and failure. The faith of the Christian cross seems like foolishness, doesn't it? But then, which faith is truer to life and offers more hope—one that embraces human suffering or one that ignores it?

For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, ...for God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

As I sat there in Acteal listening to a language I could not speak or easily comprehend, I found myself understanding and being deeply moved by the reality of the cross and the meaning of redemption and hope. I was able to enter into the heart of their suffering—to ponder the crosses they bear—and into the spirit of a worship where I, as a Protestant leader, a Baptist pastor, was invited to receive the sacrament of the Eucharist from the hands of indigenous Mayan Catholics who viewed this meaningful act as sharing the true presence of Christ with another. That act of hospitality broke the customary rules of Catholicism (and probably a few in Protestantism), but it was one of the most gracious expressions of love that I had ever received in such a setting where people suffered so. I felt like kindred hearts in their pain and sorrow.

Then, quite remarkably, they encouraged us to do something I never would have imagined in such a sober and somber setting: they invited us to dance with them around the Mayan cross and on a

platform over the graves of those they had lost. The Christian cross had given voice to their suffering, while the Mayan cross was now bringing healing and hope. That moved me deeply, for after what had happened to this community, who was I to dance on the graves of these martyrs? What did that mean to me and what did it mean to them?

Honestly, I knew what they were doing. Dancing was their ancient way of proclaiming a spirit of resurrection over death and suffering which, for mortal human beings, redeems the pain of loss felt on each 22nd day of the month in Acteal and in every other day of our lives. To dance around the cross meant we were celebrating life, both in the present and beyond, dancing around a symbol of the intersecting spirits of God and humanity. This ceremony of sorrow was transformed into one of profound hope and healing—that in the face of death and daily threats, they knew it always ended with the promise and joy of resurrection, for all that is wrong with this world is not the last word on life. As people of faith, once we embrace the cross and all that it represents, then God invites us to dance around it!

Yes, the perpetrators of the violence likely view this ceremony as nonsense and dismiss the monthly overture for forgiveness from the community of “Las Abejas”; but that’s their choice to make. If others as well consider all this religious fanfare delusional and foolish, and ultimately meaningless, so be it. That’s how a callous and heartless world assesses things, but it’s not how it’s viewed from the hearts which have been needlessly broken in Acteal and all the “Acteals” on earth. For those of us dancing around the cross that day,

it was something more—something quite special. It was nothing less than experiencing the startling and redemptive grace of God!

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