

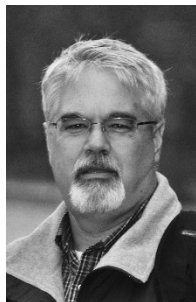
## **Theology of the Cross and the Mission of Christ's Church**

**A sermon by Phillip Brandt**

During the days of the shutdown occasioned by the recent pandemic, I found myself gathered with a handful of people in a local cemetery on a cold and wet day. We were properly admonished to stand appropriately distant from one another. There would be no embraces that day with anyone outside immediate family “bubbles.” The gathering was small. Because of pandemic restrictions, we did not have a larger gathering at church, so this committal service would be all that the family really had as a formal moment to remember, grieve, and hear the words of our Lord, His promise of resurrection.

She had been a long-time, dare we say “long-suffering” member of this parish, almost from its inception. She had been there when its vast nave had been built and then filled, so full they needed three services to accommodate them all. In the last months of her life, she had been denied the opportunity to worship with the couple score of members who now showed up, scattered around a room which would accommodate ten times their number. Until the pandemic kept her away, she had come, faithfully and joyfully.

Christ spoke to us that day, words of eternal comfort, beauty, and truth. He is the resurrection of the dead, the eternal life which we lost in that garden long ago. Her death was a personal manifestation of sin's consequence. This gathering, however, was an occasion to speak the greater truth, to call things what they are. Christ has taken death to Himself, her death, my death, our deaths. He has paid the price of our sins, her sins, my sins, all of them. He is her and my Way, Truth, and Life. These are the things which are true. We shared a few memories, laughed at a few things she had said



*Pastor Phillip L. Brandt, PhD serves St. Michael's Lutheran Church in Portland, Oregon and is Campus Pastor to the students, faculty, and staff of the ABSN (accelerated nursing) program operated by Concordia University, St. Paul which is located in Portland. He served as the chair of the theology department of Concordia University, Portland and holds a PhD in Classics from the University of Kent, UK. He publishes weekly sermon notes on Sunday-Sermon.com a resource for preachers who are using the LSB lectionary. He is married to Stephanie and has three adult children.*

and done. We stood nearby as her casket was lowered into the ground, and we wept at the bitterness of death.

I begin with the story above to focus on the question, "How does a theology of the cross shape our thinking about faithfulness in mission?" In his excellent treatment of Luther's Heidelberg Disputation of 1518, Gerhard Forde observes that a theologian of the cross does not so much talk about the theology of the cross, but he does it.<sup>1</sup> I will also consider how the theology of the cross changes the way we think about success. To be a true theologian of the cross, it seems that one must *do it*, engage in the very act of forgiving and being forgiven, speaking words of comfort to grieving children at their mother's grave, confronting sinners, and being confronted in one's own sin. It

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requires a humble vulnerability on the part of the one engaged in mission. I am another beggar like you,<sup>2</sup> tipping you off about where you might get a hot meal.

More than 30 years ago I was called into my first parish, a small place nestled in the northern suburbs of Salt Lake City. I had grown up in a town that (my siblings and I joked) contained far more Lutherans than people. The parish our father served regularly saw an attendance which exceeded the hamlet's population. Now I was serving in a community which was 92% LDS (Latter Day Saints, Mormons). It was in many respects the exact opposite of what I knew. I was now labelled a gentile, an outsider.

My time spent in that parish was my happiest service. I simply showed up. I led Bible studies, preached sermons, taught confirmation, and did not fly into rages or leave after nine months. It was a low bar for success. But we did succeed, measurably. How should we think about those days when my little parish doubled in size? We started some new ministries. Hungry people were fed, children welcomed, and we even got the aluminum cross atop our building reilluminated after many years of darkness.

Since then, I have served a larger parish and seen conflict. I have been called to a university faculty, been elevated to leadership positions, been nominated for more CUS presidencies than there are currently institutions in the system, and mercifully was chosen for none of them. My own institution has collapsed and closed around me, and now I find myself again, Sunday in and Sunday out, preaching to a group of folks the same size as that small clutch of Lutherans in that community north of Salt Lake City. How should we think about such things? I would let Scripture answer those and other questions.

We go to the words of Paul's second letter to the Corinthians. I consider the first seven chapters of that book to be thoroughgoing explication of the theology of the cross. In the first letter that he has that wonderful statement about the cross and the apostle's own devotion to its preaching and its power (1 Cor 1:18-25). But it is in the second of those letters that he *does it*.

Titus has returned with good news after much conflict and consternation (2 Cor 7:6). The Corinthian congregation, after a painful visit by Paul and a difficult letter (2 Cor 2:1-4), has heard the Law, been crushed by it, and now seeks the forgiveness which Paul can speak to them. Those first seven chapters of that wonderful letter are pure gold. For they are the wide-open heart (2 Cor 6:11-13) of the apostle as he seeks to do what they so desperately need: forgive them. He needs them to hear it, to believe, to take this to themselves and know that it is real. He has forgiven them. He begs them to believe that he is the ambassador of God, commissioned to bring this very news to them (2 Cor 5:20). He knows how hard it is for the sinner to believe that this forgiveness is *for me* after *I* have sinned. Paul himself had needed the inspired laying on of Ananias' hands to open his own eyes (Acts 9:17-19). He needed the blinding light of Christ to be brought to baptismal repentance and the fellowship of those fellow believers in Damascus and beyond (Acts 9:3-4).

Now, in 2 Corinthians he looks upon his penitent flock and he fears that their remorse shall lead to despair, to a denial of the very forgiveness which they have sought. Thus, he pleads with them for seven eloquent chapters that they would believe him and hear what he says. He begs them not receive the grace of God in vain. Now is the day of salvation and not another day, but this day, when they hear these words (2 Cor 6:1-2). He wants to open the floodgates of love which accompany such forgiveness, putting no obstacle before anyone. He suffers all so that they may hear and believe not some abstraction of forgiveness which applies to someone else, but to them, to the very people who have hurt him and now repent (2 Cor 6:3-10).

The love of Christ controls Paul now (2 Cor 5:14). (Is that "of Christ" an objective or a subjective genitive? Does it matter? I rather think it could be both.) He has concluded this one thing: Christ has died for all. That fact has changed everything. For Paul that means he no longer lives for himself but for the one who for his sake died and was raised (2 Cor 5:15). It also means that he no longer sees anyone as he did before. They are a new creation in Christ. The old has passed away. The new has come. (Note the tense!) All this is thanks to Christ, not Paul, not the Corinthians, not you, not me. It is all Christ. For God made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us (2 Cor 5:16-21). Paul is reaching the crescendo of his appeal right here. In the very next verses, he will exclaim that now is the day of salvation. He begs in the next chapter; will they please open their heart to him (2 Cor 6:12-13).

Paul is the theologian of the cross. These are words about forgiveness spoken to real sinners whose hearts are accusing them. Forgiveness is always a first- and second-person conversation, with God or with one another.

Which brings me back to that damp, cold afternoon in the cemetery. The theologian of the cross must look into the overflowing eyes of the 20-something granddaughter and speak the promise to her. He must *do it*. Yes, in that instance with words, but it is a doing all the same. It is no good to talk about resurrection in the abstract, you have to say, “She will rise again.” Just as Paul wrote in this letter and did the act of forgiveness to those wretches in Corinth so long ago.

Now consider faithfulness in mission in light of this theology of the cross. How should we measure and assess such faithfulness? What does it mean to entrust ourselves to God and to trust God? The theologian of the cross cannot just write papers about the resurrection, he cannot simply teach classes about law and gospel. The true theologian of the cross must look into those grieving eyes and speak it to that human being. Written papers are at best a secondary theology, a blessing in service to that primary sort of theology which happens at gravesides, hospital rooms, fonts, and rails.

We have run afoul of Heidelberg’s 21<sup>st</sup> thesis, “A theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theologian of the cross calls the thing what it actually is.”<sup>3</sup> We turned this upside down, imagining the scholar as the primary theologian and imagining that the one who discerns law and gospel in the lives of the flock of God as the secondary theologian. And this speaks also to my own experience as a young seminary graduate looking toward a higher calling as a professor of theology—perhaps viewing my parish service as a necessary step toward greater glory.

Return again to that letter of Paul, his second to the Corinthians. We have already mentioned that passage in chapter six in which Paul says that his heart is wide open to the Corinthians, begging them to return that blessing to him. Reading on, we hear what at first sounds like a strange interlude from Paul (2 Cor 6:14–16a). He suddenly urges them to reject idolatry and to refuse to be unequally yoked with unbelievers. Some have thought that this is an insertion, not original to the letter, but I disagree. I think this is the very point of Paul’s letter. Believers can and should be yoked together in Christ, reunited in forgiveness. Paul’s very next words, a citation from the Old Testament, is about the presence of God in our midst (2 Cor 6:16b–18).

Then in chapter seven Paul returns to the language of an open heart. Paul is walking tenderly here. He does not want to condemn them; he reminds them that he is proud of them, overflowing with comfort and joy despite all that has happened (2 Cor 7:2–4). He had gone to Macedonia, but Paul had no rest among the Philippians and Thessalonians, where he experienced “fighting without and fear within” (2 Cor 7:5). What was the source of this angst and inner conflict? It was this very conflict with the Corinthians. The resolution was the arrival of Titus with good news. Not only had Paul been comforted by his arrival, but “he told us of your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me, so that I rejoiced still more” (2 Cor 7:7).

Here we really must return to the opening words of this amazing letter, as Paul is here echoing the language of his opening prayer.

For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened

beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. (2 Cor 1:8–9)

I know that many see this deadly peril as some spasm of persecution or the like. But I think Paul really means the deadly sorrow of his broken relationship with the Corinthians. I think this situation with the congregation in Corinth was just about killing him. The whole letter is the resolution of that deadly peril.

This brings me to the final thing to say about the theologian of the cross and the mark of such a ministry. The theologian of the cross is vulnerable, even broken, and able to love people so much that, in Paul's words, it almost does kill him when things go off the rails. The theologian of the cross is a theologian through whom God's love flows deeply into the messiness of life. He must speak those words he says at gravesides to himself. If he does not need to hear them at times for himself, he really should not be there. If he would be a theologian of the cross, he needs to look into those overflowing eyes of that granddaughter and see his own grief and his own frailty in the face of death.

The theologian of the cross is a theologian through whom God's love flows deeply into the messiness of life.

In my first parish was another woman at whose funeral I presided. As one of the only non-Mormon churches in town, we collected people from many traditions. It was an eclectic group. At its core was Kay. She was in many respects a better theologian than I was. She had developed a rock-solid faith through the much more efficient school of hard knocks. She knew what it was to be vulnerable. Her husband had left her and their three developmentally disabled children. But right around the time that I arrived, something good happened to Kay. David had come into her life. He accepted her rather odd children and loved her wholly.

Then Kay got sick, really sick. We all dreaded the next part. She had metastasized breast cancer. It had spread throughout her body. There were the agonizing next weeks, watching her catch her breath as she crested the few steps into the church, her grey pallor, the weariness. She soon died. It was an unmitigated gut punch for this preacher. I had no idea how much I relied upon her presence, her wisdom, and her grace.

I treasure this letter from Paul. He got to see the resolution of his deadly peril.

For even if I made you grieve with my letter, I do not regret it—though I did regret it, for I see that that letter grieved you, though only for a while. As it is, I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because you were grieved into repenting. For you felt a godly grief, so that you suffered no loss through us. For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death. (2 Cor 7:8–10)

*200 Theology of the Cross and the Mission of Christ's Church*

I too shall see the resolution of my deadly grief for Kay and others. I am confident. My grief is of the godly sort, not the worldly sort which only produces death. In the meantime, I can join Paul in that prayer which begins this letter:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. (2 Cor 1:3–4)

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Gerhard O. Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther's Heidelberg Disputation, 1518*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), xii.

<sup>2</sup> Luther's last written words were, "We are all beggars."

<sup>3</sup> Martin Luther, "Heidelberg Disputation" in Luther's *Works*, Vol. 31: Career of the Reformer I, eds. Jaroslav J. Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999), 40.