***AT A CROSSROAD***

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Text: 1 Corinthians 1:10-25

*Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,*

*And sorry I could not travel both…*

So begins Robert Frost’s classic poem *The Road Not Taken*. Finding himself at a fork in the road, he is forced to choose one or the other. Yogi Berra’s sage advice – *when you get to a fork in the road, take it* – is of no help to him. He must choose one road or the other; he does, and the poem ends with the memorable words:

*Two roads diverged in a wood, and I –*

*I took the one less traveled by.*

*And that has made all the difference.*

Such moments of decision are often described as being at a crossroad. They demand a choice that will have consequences – some trivial and some far more significant, for some of those decisions will make “*all the difference*.”

I was at such a crossroad in deciding whether to remain a lawyer or go to seminary, and thankfully God made that decision clear for me. Perhaps you have been at such a crossroad with a decision about a job change or retirement, a college choice or a move or a course of treatment, a marriage or a divorce. Such decisions are often life-changing – they can make *all the difference*.

Writing to the church in Corinth, Paul suggests that a decision about the cross is the kind of crossroad decision that makes *all the difference*. It is a decision that many outside the Chrisitan family made easily – finding the concept of power in the crucifixion of Jesus to be total poppycock – mere foolishness in Paul’s words. For the Jews it was ridiculous to imagine that the messiah would die such an ignominious death. They expected something far more impressive, some grand sign of the power of God at work through him. The messiah was expected to enter with a host of angels in tow to establish God’s reign on earth, not die in shame on a cross erected by Roman soldiers. For them, the cross was no sign of the messiah; it was a sign of defeat, not victory; a sign of weakness, not strength. Their Greek neighbors reached the same conclusion from a different perspective. For them the cross as a sign of salvation simply made no sense. They looked for a reasoned argument for how an instrument of cruel, shameful execution could be salvific, how Jesus’ death on the cross could save the world, and they found no rational basis for believing it. They could not reason their way to faith in God through the cross, and so they too concluded that it was foolish to believe that the cross had any power for anyone but Rome.

In the 1st century the cross carried the same grave weight that a noose bore in the Wild West, the guillotine at the time of the French Revolution, or the image of an electric chair might carry today. They are all symbols of the power of ruling authorities to take away life, and in the case of the cross, to do so in a slow and agonizing fashion that would serve as a deterrent to all who might challenge the power of Rome. But for Christians the power of the cross was grounded in the knowledge that Jesus had died there for all people, and the cross had been powerless to stop him and the coming of God’s kingdom. The Romans and the Jewish establishment hoped to end the Jesus movement as it had messianic movements before him, by putting Jesus to death and scattering his followers. But in rising from the dead, Jesus proved himself to be more powerful than Rome,

more powerful than death,

more powerful than the cross.

Perhaps the empty tomb would have been a better symbol of the resurrection hope that Christians held, but an empty tomb is hard to draw or represent; it tends to look like a half-eaten doughnut. More importantly the choice of the cross over the tomb as the dominant Christian symbol recalled Jesus’ sacrifice for the world and claimed God’s triumph over sin, death and the empire that put Jesus to death. Two thousand years later that cross is still front and center for us – literally and figuratively as we recall Jesus’ sacrifice and bear witness to God’s triumph by worshiping each week in front of the cross while high above us atop the steeple a cross proclaims to the world that this is a community of the risen Christ.

In Charlottesville there is a church whose sanctuary was at one time laid out like this one with the pulpit in front, the choir hiding in a loft in the back, and a tall cross standing against the front wall. When the sanctuary was renovated, the space was reoriented; the pulpit was moved to the side wall and the pews were turned ninety degrees to face the pulpit. They intended to move the cross to the wall behind the pulpit, but when they tried to move it they found that it was bolted fast to the wall and wouldn’t budge. After several attempts, they decided to leave the cross there on what is now the side wall. They put up another cross on the wall behind the new pulpit so that two crosses now stand in that sanctuary – one in front and the other, solidly and immovably on the side.

Paul would argue that is how it should be; the cross should not be moved – figuratively if not literally. It stands tall in our midst through all the changes in the church across the centuries. The cross marked those early church gatherings of disciples meeting secretly in individual homes, and it now marks those gatherings of Christians meeting in cathedrals, catacombs, and country churches around the world. The cross is not moved to the periphery of our faith but continues to stand tall in our midst, reminding us of Jesus’ sacrifice and God’s triumph over sin and death, reminding us of the One who binds us together as brothers and sisters in faith. The cross that was intended to divide and conquer the Jesus movement is instead that symbol around which we gather as disciples of the risen Lord.

But I wonder: do you even notice it anymore? The cross has become so ubiquitous across our Christian culture that it sometimes seems little more than an adornment, a decoration, a piece of jewelry. Some of you have art in your homes that depicts the cross in some way, and some of you have bumper stickers on your car with some symbol of the cross, and some of you wear a cross around your neck. But does it mean anything to you?

The cross is intended to mark us as followers of Jesus. Our fundamental identity as persons and as Christians is our common calling to be disciples of the risen Christ. We are kinfolk, one family united not by blood but by the blood of Christ shed for us on the cross around which we gather. That identity is greater than all other identities which we claim, transcending differences of geography and language, ethnicity and race, gender and sexual orientation, age and economic circumstance, denomination and political affiliation. The cross marks our identity; it is for us a symbol of hope, love, and the saving power of God.

The ultimate sign of death and suffering in the 1st century has become for us the sign of life and sacrificial love as God turns the world upside down. What seems foolish to the world is wise in God’s eyes, and what is wise in the world’s eyes often turns out to be foolish. We live in a world that proclaims a lot of foolish wisdom:

a world that declares wealth to be the measure of human value,

a world that sees violence and pornography as forms of entertainment,

a world that protects guns more zealously than it does their victims,

a world that declares meekness to be weakness,

a world that exalts beauty that is transient and only skin deep,

a world that declares “God helps them who help themselves” and denies any responsibility for one’s neighbor,

a world that spends more for weapons it will never use than for food for those who have nothing to eat,

a world that calls the way of Jesus unrealistic and foolish.

Not much has changed in two thousand years! In the first century Jesus was taunted as “King of the Jews.” He was declared weak and was mocked on the cross as powerless. Yet here we are, two thousand years later, listening to his words and recalling his sacrifice and proclaiming his resurrection half a world away from where it happened! We still struggle to accept what he teaches as wisdom to guide our lives. When Jesus ticks off his list of those who are blessed –

The poor in spirit

Those who mourn

The meek

Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness

The merciful

The pure in heart

The peacemakers

Those persecuted for righteousness’ sake

Those reviled falsely on account of Jesus -

it hardly sounds like a blessed group. It is not a list we want to join, but perhaps we should, for they ***are*** blessed, Jesus says. The beatitudes are words we struggle to live into. Those who try are often called naïve or foolish; they are those Jesus calls disciples. Blessed are you when the world calls you foolish, says Jesus. Rejoice and be glad, for blessed are you – foolishly, faithfully blessed!

Two roads diverge at the cross, and I – I took the one less traveled by, the one regarded as foolish by the world, and that has made all the difference. You too stand at that crossroad, and the question for you is not: which road should you take, nor which road do you say you will take, but which road ***do*** you take? For, that indeed, my friends, will make all the difference! Amen