

“Enemies of the Cross”
Philippians 3:17 – 4:1

I have sat in this sanctuary now for 8 Sundays, and each time I admire and study these beautiful windows. They fascinate me, for I see symbols within them that speak to Christ’s journey through the cross and our subsequent citizenship in heaven. Mind you, this is strictly my interpretation, but I see in the red at the bottom Christ’s journey to the cross, as seen there, and above is what appears to be a heart crowned by seven panels – Christ’s passion for the Church (7 is the number for the church). Then as we ascend upwards, at the very top is one round panel along with something like 3 pistils of a flower: one God in three expressions – the Holy Trinity. But one thing is clear: the symbol of a cross is central to the window – the colored glass sphere in its center draws the eye. So, for me, these windows are a picture of Christ’s journey through the cross to his glory – the same glory Paul says will transform our lives.

Lent is the time when the Church calls us to follow Christ through his passion. We follow him in prayer and suffering. We follow him to a cross where his love was written in red to seal our citizenship in heaven where he reigns in glory. It is his road we are called to walk, not anyone else’s. And it goes through the cross. Even so, some would prefer to sidestep the cross, to avoid it, because it is morbid and ugly. They would much prefer another path to reach the lovely lilies of Easter.

So distaste for the cross persists today as it did in Paul’s day. A newspaper ran a story about a group of cotton farmers who were sitting around a potbelly stove discussing religion. The discussion quickly turned to a debate which in turn became an argument. They turned to the eldest among them who had remained quiet up to this point and asked him what he thought.

“Well,” said the old man, “you know there are 3 ways to get over to the cotton gin from here. You can go right over the hill. It’s shorter, but a powerful climb. You can go around the east side. That’s not too far, but the road is rougher than tarnation. You can go around the west side of the hill, which is the long way but the easiest. But you know...when you get there the gin man doesn’t ask you how you came. He just asks, ‘How is your cotton?’”

People like that story. It works well for a pluralistic and tolerant world. It suggests that there are many paths one can choose to God or that a religious symbol such as a cross may not be a critical landmark along the way. It could even imply that salvation will ultimately depend on what you offer rather than on God’s loving grace as exemplified in Christ and his apostles. However, Christian doctrine believes that we must get our bearings for the journey from an ugly, bloodstained cross; otherwise we lose our way.

One Christian author expresses it this way: *The question is not whether a doctrine is beautiful, but whether it is true. When we wish to go to a place, we do not ask whether the road leads through a pretty country, but whether it is the right road.*

However, we live in a culture where, to use Paul's words, many live as "enemies of the cross... whose minds are set on earthly things." The path to God is defined not by right choice, but by our right to choice; to indulge ourselves with as many choices as we can have and then think it right. Take for example this woman who wrote to Dear Abby: *I would like to meet a man...who enjoys going to church. I belong to the First Methodist Church, Blessed Angels Catholic Church, and the Mount Zion Jewish Temple. I also attend the Christian Science Church regularly, but I do take aspirin occasionally. Can you please help me find a man of good character who is interested in marriage and belongs to any of the above-mentioned places of worship? A moderate cigarette smoker is OK, but please, no beer drinkers.* Signed, Victoria.

I think Victoria exemplifies the kinds of mixed messages that confuse people about religion. The apostle was dealing with a similar problem. Many believed they could indulge in earthly things because only their spiritual cotton mattered, not how they get there. They thought they could claim heaven without the cross, without dealing seriously with the physical suffering of the world, without confessing the humiliation that leads to glory.

But as a theologian put it: *Failing to keep the cross at the center of salvation and the death of Jesus at the center of the cross, Christians and the Christian point will continue to pass each other in the night.*

And what is the point? It's what I see in these windows pointing us heavenward. The only way to get the

point of Easter is to embrace the cross that leads there, lifting it high for all the world to see.

*Come, Christians, follow where our Savior trod,
The Lamb victorious, Christ, the Son of God.
Lift high the cross, the love of Christ proclaim
Till all the world adore His sacred name.*

Amen.