

“What Else Shall We Preach?” A Homily

Co-Missioners,

Today we pass along a homily—a brief, condensed sermon—that was delivered this very morning at a meeting of ELCA pastors and other rostered leaders in a corner of northeastern Ohio.

Peace and Joy,

The Crossing Community

“What Else Shall We Preach?”

**The Homily at an Anticipatory Observance of Holy
Cross Day**

by Jerome Burce



A 4158

In the name of the Father, and of the +Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Yesterday was the anniversary of the 9/11 attacks with their terrible obliteration of almost 3,000 human beings. Two days from now, on 9/14, the Church is set to celebrate the obliteration of a single human being. That's an odd way of putting it, I know, but there it is. Holy Cross is a feast day, to use the older terminology. That got deflated a while back to "lesser festival," but even this invokes a celebratory spirit. Not that anyone I can think of will be putting on their party hats this Saturday—certainly no Lutherans; and I don't suppose that even the most ardent of Tridentine Catholics will be out there shopping today or tomorrow for their special Holy Cross dinner—leg of lamb would seem somehow fitting, for such a thing, a dash of horseradish on the side, perhaps, to remind one and all of the gall our Savior drank.

But I'm being silly, of course. Such a dinner there is not, nor

will there ever be in these United States, where the cross of Christ is fast becoming as farcical a notion as it was in ancient Corinth. This is happening also in the churches, including, I fear, the ones we call ours. We can sniff our disdain all we want at those prosperity buffoons who have long since turned their buildings into cross-free zones; but then let's ask how true this might also be of the standard ELCA sermon this year. Our rage of late is peace and justice, as if we know what either looks like or how to achieve it; as if any of us are anywhere near ready to pay the price that a modicum of simple fairness would require every American to cough up to even things out in in this obscenely unfair world. Still, when goals so noble and lofty are at stake and the need for both so pressing, a solitary execution in first-century Jerusalem seems a stupid thing to talk about, let alone to make it the alpha and omega of our proclamation, as St. Paul insists on doing. Today's properly progressive preacher will want to write this off as a lame excuse for inaction. "We have a kingdom of God—correction: reign of God— to usher in. Let's get hopping."

Back in the wilderness day, when Moses hoisted that serpent of bronze in the middle of the camp, the cognoscenti watching from their tents must also have ground their teeth about the stupidity of this man, and the God he claimed to serve.

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Which brings us, then, to the perennial issue that plagues God's human creatures and will never go away. It's that nest of vipers brooding within, forever eager to snap at God for God's incompetence as a proper deity.



Photo by [Cristina Glebova](#) on [Unsplash](#)

A proper deity would have dealt with a plague of snakes by frying them from on high with a pinpoint barrage of mini-lightning bolts. Or that, at least, is how a seventh-grade boy would imagine it. His parents would assert that no proper deity would have unleashed the snakes in the first place.

A proper deity would have kept Mohammed Atta and his cabal from getting within a thousand miles of those 9/11 airplane cockpits. With that proper deity in place, last week's hurricane would not have stalled for 48 atrocious hours over those Bahamian islands. It would not have blown up in the first place.

A proper deity would order our current politics to keep the wrong people out of office. He, she, or it would twitch a nose and reorder evil minds.

If God is God and really out there, whose fault is it that the stench of death, or its memory, lies ever so heavy, the world over, in places where children once played? How will this putative God account for Godself in the court of justice, if

there is such a thing? And once the accounts are settled, as if such a thing could happen, from whence is our salvation, as if such a thing could be?

That, I submit, is the mindset of the world that you and I are commissioned to preach to this September. This world does not believe in God, and all our efforts on behalf of peace, justice, or whatever else tomorrow's mantra might be will not come within a hair of changing that.

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"We take the bit in our teeth," Paul says. "We preach Christ crucified, a scandal to the religiously earnest, and, where the rest are concerned, an absurdity."

Here's the thing about proper deity. It insists as it must on doing things God's way, not ours. Else God is not God, we are, in which case we are all most certainly toast—dust and ashes, if that's the image you prefer. Sinners will never love each other with the kind of love that leads to enduring life. We simply cannot. We don't have it in us.

So in steps God with the promise arising from that wondrous absurdity, the Son of God, chosen, beloved, begotten of the Father, yet pinned to his cross against the backdrop of a bleak, abysmal sky. This is *how* God finally loves us, and *how much* God loves us too. It defies imagination, which is part of the point. No person in a right religious mind would ever dream this up. To credit it requires an unearthly trust, the essential precondition of enduring life with God, or with each other, for that matter.

This is the trust that God the Holy Spirit keeps blowing into hearts, a blessed oxygen that slowly poisons the vipers within. Its fruit is a readiness to love not only God but all those

nasty snapping sinners that God in God's merciful madness surrounds us with. There is no life, nor any hint of it, aside from a readiness to love sinners as we ourselves have been loved by God, sinners though we be.

We preach the cross, because what else is there to preach that doesn't lead to bitterness and death. Trying to shove our own conceptions of righteous peace down someone else's throat is the sure way to ruin. It was precisely such a righteous conception that steered planes into buildings in 2001.

We preach the cross, the one and only certain sign of God's enduring promise to do the impossible—setting sins aside, and raising the dead, and making all things new.

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To preach the cross requires looking at the cross and basking in its benefits. Let's do that right now. Here is the body of Christ given for you. Here is the blood of Christ shed for you. This is the love of God for you this very morning in its richest distillation. Eat it. Drink it. Share it. Preach it. At the end of the day, there is nothing else worth talking about, as all of us have learned at the bedsides of the dying.

The peace of God that surpasses all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Thursday Theology: that the benefits of Christ be put to use
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