

Isaiah 9:1-4
Psalm 27:1, 4-9

1 Corinthians 1:18-31
Matthew 5:1-12

A young woman went into a jewelry store looking for a nice cross necklace. The young jeweler showed her the various crosses he had. One of them was a crucifix, which is a cross seen in the Roman Catholic Church, a cross with a representation of Jesus himself on the cross. When the jeweler pulled out crucifix to show to the young woman, he said, "Here's a cross with a little man on it!" As we become more and more an unchurched society, that story does not surprise me. However, I do wonder if we truly understand the radical nature of the cross. I contend that we have domesticated the cross, even made it into a beautiful work of art, rather than a symbol of how we are to live as followers of the cross.

As followers of the cross, we do not live as people of domination, but as people of God's dominion. By the world's standards, this is foolishness. Paul wrote about the foolishness of the cross in his letter to the Corinthians. So what was foolish about the cross? In order for us to understand that, we need to understand the role of the cross in Jesus day. The cross was a Roman method of execution. The Romans did not invent crucifixion, but they did utilize it, and they utilized it extensively. It was a terrible way to die, slow and extremely painful. Sometimes it took days to die. Sometimes, the legs of the victims would be broken, to hasten the death.

Crucifixion had a political purpose. Crucifixion was more of a deterrence, than it was retribution. As one person of that time wrote, "Whenever we crucify the condemned, the most crowded roads were chosen, where the most people can see and be moved by this terror. For penalties relate not so much to retribution as to their exemplary effect." Crucifixion was not much a form of punishment, but a form of

violence to keep people subjected. The cross was used for slaves. Crucifixions would take place on the side of busy highways, near the city gates, or on hilltops. Crucifixion was a way to intimidate the citizenship, to keep them in subjection. It was a public display of what happens if you threaten the authorities, if you threaten the status quo. It was an icon of Roman domination. The cross represented the Roman oppressors, their domination over those governed by Rome.

Crucifixion was meant to demean and shame the victim. It was a shameful way to die. Indeed, it may have been embarrassing to the early Christians that their Lord had met his fate by crucifixion. This unlikely means of salvation, in which the Son of God suffers and dies an ignominious death for the redemption of humankind, is not something that conventional spiritual wisdom or philosophical reflection could have anticipated. This is what Paul means when he refers to the foolishness of the cross.

Why would God submit God's Son to such a shameful death? Why not a show of power? Many of the ancient Israelites anticipated the Messiah to be the a political or military leader who would lead the people in a revolution against the Roman overlords, who would defeat the powerful Romans, free the Israelites from their subjection, and lead Israel to greatness and power. It would be a time when Israel would display God's power. Instead of a show of power and domination, the Messiah submits to the Roman oppressors, and is crucified by the Romans. Instead of using power and violence, Jesus submits to the power and violence.

The cross reveals that the way of God is not the way of domination, violence and power. This Messiah threatened the status quo of Rome. It is important to recognize that the New Testament does not sever the political meaning of the cross from its

theological significance. Instead of defeating the Roman domination, Jesus, God's son, subjects himself to the Roman domination.

The cross reveals that God's way is not the way of violence and domination. The world from the very beginning has been a world of domination. Wars. In World War II, both Germany and Japan sought to dominate the world. Violence. In many areas of the world, death, torture, even genocide is used against anyone questioning the status quo. Jim Crow laws were state and local laws that enforced racial segregation. Violence was used in the South in the Jim Crow days and during the civil Rights movement to keep African Americans in their place, subjected, to maintain the status quo of segregation. Laws are made to keep people in subjection. The increasing political deadlock in Washington is the result of both parties wanting domination. It is all about who has the power, who gets their way and not about seeking the common good. We see domination by the corporate world. The domination of the powerful and rich corporations to wield their influence by buying the votes of our political leaders, made possible by the Supreme Court's 2010 ruling *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*.

God's way is not the way of domination, but God's dominion. God rules in a different way. James and John, two of Jesus's disciples, asked to sit at the right hand and left hand of Jesus. Jesus told them they did not know what they were asking for, because it would mean the cross. Then Jesus went on to define greatness: "Whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave." When we go to banquets and feasts, don't sit at the head table, in the honored places, but sit with the ordinary people. When we are to invite people to our banquets and feasts, we are not to invite the rich, the powerful, the upper

class, the one percent, but to invite the poor, maimed, blind, and lame. We are to work with God in God's preferential option or treatment of the poor. This does not mean that God does not care about those who are well off. What it means is that God has a special concern for the poor and the vulnerable, not the rich and powerful. The rich and powerful can take care of themselves! The great judgment told in Matthew 25 divides the people between those who fed the poor, clothe the naked, gave water to the thirsty, welcomed the stranger, and visited the sick and those in prison. These all illustrate characteristics of God's dominion versus the world's way of domination. We are to seek the common good of all people, particularly the poor and the vulnerable.

Henri Nouwen, was a Dutch Catholic priest. He wrote, "What makes the temptation of power so seemingly irresistible? Maybe it is that power offers an easy substitute for the hard task of love. It seems easier to be God than to love God, easier to control people than to love people, easier to own life than to love life. Jesus asks, "Do you love me?" We ask, "Can we sit at your right hand and your left hand in your kingdom?" ... We have been tempted to replace love with power." That is the radical nature of the cross. We have domesticated the cross, and made it in a work of art, of beauty.

We are people of God's dominion, not domination. As God's people, we are to live by God's dominion. You may remember the comic strip Kudzu. After being zapped by a bolt from heaven, the Preacher in the comic strip comments, "Never greet the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob with 'You Da Bomb.'"

Praise the Lord!
Happy are those who delight in God's word. Amen.