

Enemies of the Cross

Jim Benedict – Union Bridge Church of the Brethren
Sermon for Sunday, February 21, 2010, Philippians 3:17-4:1

I know I must be getting old because I find myself so often thinking about the good old days. Every time I get aggravated at some new fad or piece of technology, I find myself longing for the past, when life was simpler. For instance, it aggravates me that we have three remotes for our tv, and I don't know which one does which. And to top it off, when I give up and just want to change the channel manually, this new flat screen monstrosity doesn't have a knob to turn. The little buttons are made to blend in, so I can't find them. Aarrgh!

But I'm not so old that I can't remember that the good old days weren't always so good. I'm rather fond of indoor plumbing. I don't see too many people trading in their washing machine for an old fashioned washboard and lye soap. And antibiotics are real life-savers; at least ten percent of those of us who are here this morning would probably be dead if it weren't for them.

But at least in one small way, the old days were 'if not better, at least simpler: you knew who the bad guys were, in the movies anyhow. In westerns, they wore black hats. In other movies, it was equally obvious. Certain actors just had 'the look' and were repeatedly cast in the role of the villain. Today, it is harder to tell 'both in the movies and in real life' who the bad guys are.

I found myself thinking about that as I read this morning's text from Paul's letter to the Philippians. Paul speaks harshly of people he calls 'enemies of the cross.' But who exactly did he have in mind? The Philippians knew, so Paul didn't have to be explicit. Unfortunately, that leaves the rest of us in the dark. Who were these bad guys?

Scholars have tried out various possibilities. One would be the pagans who were none too pleased with the development of Christianity. Pagans on the whole were quite tolerant. They were used to lots of different religions coexisting. But Christianity (and Judaism) caused problems by denying the legitimacy of every faith but their own. Pagans believed that the various gods protected and provided for them, and human security depended on people making the proper sacrifices at the proper times in the proper way. If you didn't make the sacrifices, everything from famine to infertility to failure in war could result. So when Christians refused to participate in the sacrifices, the pagans felt that the Christians were endangering everybody. So pagans make good candidates for who these 'enemies of the cross' might have been.

Good, but not good enough. Pagans would have been enemies of Christians generally, perhaps, but not specifically enemies of the cross. As Paul wrote elsewhere, the cross was just foolish in their eyes, not something heinous.

Okay then, maybe the 'enemies of the cross' were non-believing Jews. It is pretty obvious in the New Testament that traditional Jews and Christians had their differences and a

few run-ins. Part of the reason for the animosity was theological: Jews considered Christians (many of who were Jewish by birth) to be heretics, people who had corrupted the 'true' faith. Another part of the reason Jews weren't especially fond of Christians was because when the Christians got the pagans riled up by not participating in the sacrifices, the pagan anger often spilled over onto the Jews as well. So, like the pagans, the non-believing Jews make good candidates for who the 'enemies of the cross' might have been.

Good, but again not good enough. Some traditional Jews (like Paul before he embraced Christianity) had a big problem with Christians. But the cross was to them merely 'a stumbling block,' not the focus of their ire.

Ironically, perhaps, the best candidates for the designation 'enemies of the cross' is probably other Christians, or at least people who thought of themselves as Christians. If we study the text closely, it becomes obvious Paul was concerned with people who were promoting a version of Christianity carried a very different message than his own.

For Paul, the cross was central to Christianity. It wasn't just the means by which Jesus was put to death. It was a symbol of faithfulness, and something to remind Christians of how to live. Earlier in the letter to the Philippians, Paul talks of how Jesus, though he had equality with God, was willing to empty himself and become a servant, even to the point of death on the cross. For Paul, the willingness to empty one's self, to suffer, to engage in self-denial and to make sacrifices for the sake of God and the progress of the gospel was what faith in Jesus was all about.

There were others, however, who thought of the cross as simply something that happened to Jesus, not something that symbolized the way of life to which believers were called. For these folks, the resurrection was what mattered. And the resurrection was about abundant life, success and happiness in this world. The gospel was not about a call to be part of what God was doing to rescue creation, but about finding happiness and satisfying all one's desires here and now. It was a formula for personal success and well-being. Indeed, you might call this the 'pagan' version of Christianity. As in pagan religion, the idea was that if you do all the right ritual things, the deity will respond by making you healthy, wealthy and happy.

One important clue that we are on the right track in identifying these 'Jesus died to make my life easy' folks as the 'enemies of the cross' comes in verse 19 where we read, 'Their end is their destruction; their god is their belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things.' That last little bit should sound familiar. Back in Mark's gospel, when Jesus first intimates that his future includes being rejected and crucified, Peter objects. And Jesus says to Peter, 'Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.' The people Paul was concerned about were people passing off a bogus version of Christianity, one that rejected the cross as a symbol of how God's people must be willing to suffer and sacrifice for the sake of what God is doing in the world.

Folks like that are still around, of course. We recognize them in their most outrageous forms. One of my favorites was Reverend Ike. At the height of his fame, Reverend Ike could

be heard on over 1,000 radio stations each week. And he pulled no punches. His ministry was about getting ahead, here and now. He said, "It is the lack of money that is the root of all evil. The best thing you can do for the poor is not to be one of them.' And according to Reverend Ike the way to get rich just happened to be to send him money. When he died just last year, he left behind mansions, multi-millions, sixteen Rolls Royce automobiles and several imitators.

But pinning the name 'enemies of the cross' on outlandish figures like Reverend Ike is too easy. The same message is sent, albeit much more subtly, in countless mainline and evangelical churches: 'If you're miserable, come to Jesus and he'll make you happy. If you are struggling financially, give your problems over to Jesus and he will improve your net worth and cash flow. If you are weighed down by guilt over things you've done, just ask Jesus for forgiveness and all those bad guilt feelings will disappear.'

What distinguishes this kind of religion from authentic Christianity is actually quite simple. 'Enemies of the cross' love Jesus, but they love Jesus for all the wrong reasons. They love Jesus because he is useful and not too much of a bother. He makes us feel better and helps us get the things we want. He's kind of like a rich uncle who worked really hard to get where he is and now likes to spoil us, so long as we remember to visit and call from time to time.

The Jesus of authentic Christianity, however, is not like that at all. The Jesus of authentic Christianity is risen from the grave, but he still bears his wounds, so we won't forget the cross. Jesus doesn't want us to forget the cross because it symbolizes the kind of suffering and sacrifice that may be required of us if we are sincere about continuing his work in the world.

It also symbolizes the rejection we can expect. Jesus was rejected. One of the reasons Paul was so angry in our text is likely because these 'enemies of the cross' were much more popular than he. More people went to their church than to Paul's church. Lots of people liked the more user-friendly version of the gospel.

This past Wednesday, the season of Lent began, and over the coming several Sundays, we are going to be concentrating on the cross. We'll hear sermons about the crown of thorns, about the nails that held Jesus to the cross, and about the 30 silver coins Judas accepted in return for betraying Jesus.

We will be recalling these things, not just for the sake of refreshing our memories, or for the sake of wallowing in the agony as some sort of morbid spiritual exercise. Rather, we will be recalling these things to remind ourselves that we are blessed to be included among those who understand that there are some things worth suffering and sacrificing for, and that Jesus showed us what those things were: overcoming hate with love, overcoming violence with mercy, and overcoming fear with faith and faithfulness.

Amen.