

A Church for the Sake of Others is a Church that Follows the Crucified – Adam Back
FUMC, April 15, 2018

This morning's sermon is the first of five sermons Lydia and I will be giving on mission and the identity of the church. I hope you've read the mission blogs we put out earlier this year. If you haven't, they're all pinned up downstairs in the basement on the bulletin board, or you can find them all on the website. Or you can talk to me and I'll get them to you. But those short essays on what mission is are foundational for understanding what these next five sermons are focused on. If you haven't read them, that's okay! You'll still be able to follow along with us, but they do fill out more robustly the picture we are trying to paint over the next several weeks.

All of the sermons take as their starting point this phrase: *A Church for the Sake of Others*. Each sermon will take off from that idea. So this morning's sermon is titled *A Church for the Sake of Others is a Church of the Crucified*. You can see the list of the other sermons to come in the bulletin.

A Church for the Sake of Others is a lot more than just the topics we've picked, but we wanted to highlight what we saw as crucial for us here. Thinking of ourselves as a church for the sake of others is what is behind how the vision committee has been thinking of the name change.

Turning to Paul, I think his primary concern for the churches he planted and knew was their faithfulness, a concern for the integrity of their witness. Integrity of witness to the Gospel and faithfulness to the Lord Jesus are front and centre throughout Paul's letters.

That's the case for us as well. The integrity of our witness to the Gospel and our faithfulness to Jesus as Lord simply have to be front and centre, before any other considerations. Lydia and I think that starting to think of ourselves here as *A Church for the Sake of Others* is a helpful way to keep us aimed in the right directions, particularly when it comes to revitalizing and renewing our sense of mission. Seeing ourselves as a church for the sake of others is a way of holding together the integrity of our witness and our faithfulness to Jesus as Lord.

What do we mean by *A Church for the Sake of Others*? Well, this morning, I want us to imagine, with some help from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, what A Church for the Sake of Others means and looks like in light of the crucified Lord.

This morning's focus is Jesus, the Crucified Lord. A Church for the Sake of Other's is a Church of the Crucified. In Jesus the Crucified Lord, we come to know both the identity of the church, as well as our own identities, who we are.

Which is why, this morning, I want us to look at Paul's letter to the Corinthians, particularly chapter two verse two, "For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified." To do that and help us see a bit more clearly—hopefully—and in order to relate it to our own time, I want to spend some time describing Corinth as a city.

Maybe you know that Paul's letters to the Corinthians are nuts. The church in Corinth is nuts and falling off the wagon. The goings-on in the Corinthian church makes for good tabloid news. The headlines you read for guilty pleasure while you're in the checkout line at Safeway.

But to get a sense of just how important and profound Paul's statement is, some historical and cultural background is really helpful. The city of Corinth is sort of its own character in the letters. The city plays a role in what is happening in Corinth. Corinth existed in a brutal, hierarchical Greco-Roman world, where power, supposed wisdom, and the attainment of status were the measures of greatness. These desires for prestige and greatness had deeply affected the Corinthian church that Paul writes to. Corinth was also a pluralistic city. There were any number of little gods you could choose from.

In it's day, Corinth was a Rome away from Rome. A little Rome, modeling itself after the capitol city of the Empire. It had huge amounts of wealth pouring in, endless natural resources. The economy was expanding, leading to a healthy job market for qualified individuals. Tons of trade. Shipping. Lots of immigrants. Corinth was described by one ancient historian of the day as "wealthy Corinth."

You know those reports that come out every few years about which cities in the world are the best to live in? If they had those studies back in the first century, Corinth would be, if not the top of the list, very near the top. The economic prospects were thriving. You could make a name for yourself there. Corinth was a "cosmopolitan" city; a multicultural, multiracial, international mover and shaker of the day. It was cultured, sophisticated, glamorous and fashionable. Corinthian culture was a culture of self-satisfaction, self-promotion. A culture of brand-managing and image manipulation to maintain your power and prestige in society. A culture of success, competition, and consumerism.

Deeply competitive, cut-throat, entrepreneurial, self-sufficient. Ambition to succeed no matter the cost to yourself or anyone else. There was an infatuation with looking sophisticated and wise to the ways of the world, of being thought of highly. You saved face at the expense of others.

Sound like anywhere you know? As I spent time this week reading about the historical aspects of Corinthian culture, I couldn't help but make comparisons to Vancouver today. A love of appearing sophisticated and wise to the world. Cosmopolitan. Pluralistic in its beliefs. Huge amounts of wealth pouring in, vast quantities of natural resources. Having the right look and maintaining it on Instagram and Twitter.

Boosting one's status is a major concern for people in Corinth, and that concern seems to have crept into the Corinthian church. The make-up of the Corinthian church had begun to reflect the

cosmopolitan character of the city. To be great, to be thought of as wise and powerful, was everything in that city. Social status was everything.

It didn't even really matter if you were actually wise and powerful. You just had to convince everyone below you and above you that you were wise and powerful. Everyone in the city wanted to be one of the elites, wanted everyone in the city to know that they were one of the elites.

One of the more important aspects for understanding what is going on in Corinth and Paul's response has to do with public speaking. There were people in that day who trained to be the very best of public speakers. And these folks could be hired out by the elites and social-climbers of the day in order to win increasing amounts of admiration for their patrons, the people paying them.

These speakers were paid to make people look better. The social media hucksters of the day. And it was all aimed at pleasing the audience. They were showy. They were shiny and well-trained in the art of rhetorical flourishes. And truth was sacrificed at the alter of power. Kind of like today, with all second-hand smoke of political spin we have to breathe in. Truth sacrificed for what the audience wanted to hear.

The obsessive concern over status climbing, self-promotion, and recognition in Corinth went hand-in-hand with the speaking skills of these spokespeople. This was all a kind of speech concerned with winning, rather than with truth. Hollow speech aimed at status advancement, political gain, and showmanship. Truth separated from power.

In Corinth, you were held in higher esteem if you could pay for one of these traveling spokesmen. And in part, it was your ability to pay for one or two of them that gained you more prestige.

So, if winning and prestige and self-promotion, gaining higher status no matter the cost, were part and parcel of the air the Corinthian church was breathing in its culture, what do you think they made of Paul? Ever wonder why Paul worked as a tent-maker, specifically in Corinth?

Because if Paul allowed them to foot the bill for his needs, he knew they would try and use that to hold sway over him. They would hold their money and support over his head, attempt to push their own agenda, attempt to decide on the message he preached. He wouldn't allow them to think of him as one of these speakers.

Paul won't sacrifice the truth of the Gospel so that the Corinthian Church can hear what they want to hear. He won't sacrifice the truth of the Gospel so that the Corinthian Church can pursue its desire for greater status.

And Paul would have none of it. He knew that if the Corinthian church were allowed to, they would tamper with the message of the crucified Lord. They would distort that message, pull the gospel out of shape, contort it into something profitable for their own ends, their own status measured by the culture they were in.

The gospel is the message of the crucified and risen Jesus, a Jew, a nobody from nowhere, and Paul views it as the foundation of Christian identity. That is, the church knew who they were because of who Jesus is. Get that wrong, and you will find your identity somewhere else and you won't look like Jesus, the very thing Paul was trying to impress upon them.

The Corinthians either had already started to redefine the gospel or were in danger of doing so, distorting the message, or conveniently forgetting it, so that the gospel could be used as another means of grabbing status.

But Paul throws the gauntlet down in front of the Corinthians for attempting to redefine the gospel in terms that appealed to their self-interest, that furthered their self-promotion.

See, the Corinthians are *embarrassed* over Paul. Scandalized by him. Because he too is a Jewish nobody from some dusty corner of the empire. He is, in their appraisal, weak and fearful. His proclamation of Jesus the Crucified Lord wasn't at all on their terms.

It didn't at all fit within their categories of what mattered and what didn't matter. On the contrary, the gospel that Paul proclaimed caused a nuclear meltdown of their values, turning their world upside down.

The Corinthians are embarrassed over Paul because Paul looks like Jesus, which means he doesn't look powerful. He doesn't look like one of the elites that they want to be like. It's really inconvenient for them that Paul looks like Jesus. They're trying to gain power and prestige, climb the social status ladder. And they can't press him into service for that goal.

But the problem that the Corinthian church runs up against is that their entire way of seeing the world doesn't fit with the proclamation of a crucified God. The Corinthian church maintains the cultural status quo. "These things that you're moaning on about Paul, they're just a part of our culture! They're what we've always done!"

The Gospel Paul preaches takes apart everything they have taken for granted. He has to get them thinking in terms of a crucified God, otherwise, they will continue on their path of redefining the gospel in ways they can use it for gaining power and prestige. You can't do that with the Gospel.

The story of a crucified Jew whose followers came to believe that he was the living God in flesh flies in the face of social climbing, flies in the face of any semblance of elitism. In the face of Jesus, we learn who God is and what God is like. The crucified Lord becomes the basis for understanding what greatness actually is.

The English theologian, Anthony Thiselton, clarifies what is at stake here. He argues that “To treat the gospel of Christ as a vehicle for promoting self-esteem, self-fulfillment, and self-assertion turns it upside down and ‘empties’ it of all that it offers and demands.”¹

So all of this stuff about the culture and background of the city helps us make sense of what was going on in the church at Corinth, *why* it's going on. And it's into that culture, into that church, that Paul writes, “I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified.”

What does he mean here? With an eye toward the wider context of the letter, Paul has in mind the permanent significance of the crucifixion of Christ and its abiding effects. Regarding Paul's statement, Thiselton notes that Paul's “settled resolve [...] was that he would do only what served the gospel of Christ crucified, regardless of people's expectations [regardless of] seductive shortcuts to success, most of all the seduction of self-advertisement.”²

Paul didn't make some kind of vow that excluded knowing anything else, as though he could dump all the contents of his brain out, as though growth in knowledge and understanding were simply off the table now.

The whole contrast in chapter one and chapter two is between wisdom and folly, between a false wisdom used by the Corinthians to make much of themselves, a false wisdom separated from truth and truthfulness, used for the purposes of social climbing in the culture, and God's “folly” that ends up on a cross.

All true growth in wisdom and knowledge are, for Paul, tied to the cross. But not in the sense that it narrows or diminishes wisdom and knowledge or education.

¹ Anthony Thiselton. *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 145-46.

² Thiselton, *Ibid*, 212.

In fact, it sets it on its proper course, giving it its proper character and posture because it places the “other” first in our considerations. The crucifixion of Jesus is now the beginning and end of true wisdom and knowledge, because it reorients wisdom and knowledge and constrains them by love.

So if we look like morons and fools in the eyes of the world because we are allowing the character of our lives to be shaped by the crucified Christ, well, for Paul at least, that seems to be part of what the Gospel does. Scandalize people with its foolishness.

Wisdom and knowledge in the light of the cross are properly characterized by cruciform love. Is say that with reference to chapter 13 in first Corinthians where Paul says, “if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.”

The crucifixion of Jesus is the core of Paul’s proclamation. It is the core of his life. And the Corinthians are beginning to twist the core of the gospel out of shape, accommodating it so that it fits within the culture of their time (which is ridiculously similar to the culture we find ourselves in). For Paul, the crucifixion is everything. The crucifixion is the centre of everything. The crucifixion shapes how we see reality.

The crucifixion of Jesus for Paul is the rebar in his concrete, the yeast in his dough, the thread of his quilt, the hops in his beer, the pulp in his orange juice, and the caffeine in his coffee.

Christianity is not really Christianity apart from the crucified. Christianity is not *Christian*, the church is not the *church*—or at least, the church is not faithful to its calling if in its practices and character it is not continually seeking to conform to Jesus Christ and him crucified.

It is Jesus’ own faithfulness, his obedience even to the point of death on a cross, as Paul puts it in Philippians, that most clearly and most fully shows us what he is like, shows us what God is like. Jesus willingly and faithfully going to the cross, the willingness to take on suffering and vulnerability and humiliation for the sake of others, for us, displays what true greatness is.

We see the wisdom of *God* on display on the cross, which, from the Corinthians’ perspective shaped as it was by their values and priorities of self-promotion and preservation, success at whatever the cost, looks like sheer folly and stupidity. Paul writes in 1:18, that “*the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.*”

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The Greek word for *foolishness* there is ‘mōria’, where we get the English word ‘moron’ or ‘moronic’ from. So here is God hung on a cross, willing to look like a moron in the face of the world for the sake of the world, for the sake of others.

And you can hear the Corinthian church totally scandalized by this, totally incensed by the story of a crucified God. “This is *not* how you win Paul! This is *not* how you come out on top! This is *not* how you become great! You can’t climb the social status ladder in Corinth by clinging to a crucified man!”

And of course, you can’t climb it in Vancouver either without compromising the central place of Christ crucified. Social climbing and crucifixion don’t mix.

This story of God crucified is for Paul what is supposed to rule our lives. This is who we confess as Lord—a Jewish peasant crucified as criminal by the empire on an instrument of torture. This crucified Jesus is the paradigm, the example, the model, for our lives. This is at the core of our faithfulness and it constitutes the integrity of our witness.

All our choices and decisions, who we talk with and how we talk with them, who we eat with, what we do or don’t do with our bodies and with the bodies of others. The crucifixion doesn’t make room for us to throw our weight around in the world or in the church. The choice to play social games for gaining power is simply not available to us if we follow the crucified.

Our daily lives find their shape and practice in relation to Jesus the crucified Lord. Our daily lives, how we go about practicing life, are to conform to the character of the crucified Lord Jesus. This is at the heart of what we mean by thinking of ourselves as “a church for the sake of others.” We are aiming at a cross-shaped life, a cross-shaped church.

So, circling back around to where we began, what do we mean by *A Church for the Sake of Others*? A Church that exists for the Sake of Others is a church that follows the Crucified Lord. A Church for the Sake of Others worships a crucified Jewish peasant as the Lord of Creation.

A Church for the Sake of Others finds its identity first and foremost in Jesus Christ, over and above anything else, because anything else too easily becomes an idolatry. So, before we find our identity in say, our commitment to social justice and caring for the poor, we find it in Jesus.

Before we find our identity in the security of our culture, our heritage, our denomination, our family, our ethnicity, we find it in Jesus Christ. Otherwise, those aspects of our lives become idols and distort our identity in Christ. We are drawn away from conforming to the crucified, allowing ourselves to be primarily conformed to something else.

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A Church for the Sake of Others faces towards the world and its neighbours because Jesus's face is towards the world. A church for the sake of others turns us outwards, keeps us from curving in on ourselves in the name of self-preservation. In other words, *A Church for the Sake of Others* builds bridges and makes bigger tables. It does not build walls and barriers, or cliques of the "right-kind of people." The Gospel is not for "the right kind of people" because the right kind of people are, well, all the wrong kinds of people.

The Gospel is for all those kinds of people any of us start thinking shouldn't be a part of the church. A church for the sake of other is a church for all the wrong kinds of people. The church is *for* the sake of others because God is a God *for* the sake of others. He faces the world in the face of the crucified Christ. In Christ we learn that God for the poor, the broken, the weak, those of us who are losing our friends and loved ones. Those of us who might be losing ourselves. But we ourselves are not lost.

A church for the sake of others is a church for people that the church has conveniently left out because the Gospel is for people that have been left out and forgotten. The Gospel is for all those sinners out there. And, because the Gospel is for all those dirty sinners out there, so too should the church be for all those dirty sinners.

Because, hey, we're all dirty sinners in here too, right? The Gospel is for all those sinners out there because God in Jesus Christ is for all those sinners out there.

What does it mean to follow the Crucified Lord? What does it look like to follow the Crucified Lord? That's what is behind this image of being a church for the sake of others. And that means that we might have to do things for the sake of others that doesn't line up with our preference. It means that as a church community we might intentionally choose things that don't fit with what we like and prefer because what we like and prefer is not what is most important.

Being a church for the sake of others, as I said earlier, turns us outwards towards others, rather than doing things and preserving ways of being that curve us in on ourselves. Self-preservation is not in keeping with following the crucified Lord. It means choosing things that change us which we all know is difficult, but it means the choices are made for those who are not part of us.

Following the crucified Lord means that we pattern the character of our own lives on the character of Jesus. It means that the shape of our lives is cross-shaped. It means that the orientation of our lives is Jesus Christ, the crucified Lord. It means that we take our bearings from, our sense of direction, from Jesus and him crucified. That is revitalization. That is what renews our sense of mission.

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It means that our disposition towards others takes on the character of our crucified Lord. Or, in other words, it means that this church and our own lives are lives that get lived for the sake of others, just as Jesus' life was and is a life for the sake of others.