

DON'T BE AFRAID! CHEER UP! IT'S THE CROSS!

Introduction

Joh. Gerhard in a sermon for the Sunday after Christmas based on the Gospel Lesson, Luke 2:33-40 says this about the blessing of Simeon (“This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.”):

Through his blessing, according to the way of speaking in the Bible, it is to be understood here that Simeon congratulates and wishes every good thing for the parents of this child, and praises them also as blessed because of this child. And although he prophecies about the cross and suffering, everything is nevertheless called a blessing. We must not consider the cross according to our reason, and also not pass judgment about it according to our feelings. Rather we must consider it with illumined eyes of the heart and make judgments about it according to the Spirit; then it will be found that the greater the cross, so much greater the blessing, the greater the suffering, so much more ardent the love of God. And you don't need to go far to see that: Look at Christ, who was the most beloved of God and had nevertheless the greatest suffering.¹

Then a bit later in his sermon on the flight of the Holy Family and then their return to Israel (Matthew 2:19-23), Gerhard notes:

Behold, such alterations God still gives to his own. He lets them experience much and great anxiety, but then he helps them again. And all such things he does for this reason, that we should seek rest for our souls in him, not in outwardly good circumstance. For in this life no good circumstance is permanent. Therefore we should also not depend on it with our heart, nor seek rest for our heart in it. Rather the internal foundation of our soul should purely and only depend on God; then the rest of our heart will not be disturbed by our outward circumstances.²

Gerhard has captured the essence of the *Theology of the Cross*. The Christian's life is a life of one on a roller coaster. Nothing in it is ever durable or permanent. Nothing in it is absolutely reliable. At no time can the Christian finally say: *At last! I've made it! Soul, take thine ease! You have triumphed over all your sins and temptations and won the victory over every temporal fear or need.* No, such is not and this side of the grave never will be the Christian's lot. Nor will it be the lot of the church on earth.

Rather our lot is the cross; it is torture and pain, suffering and death. Those marks of the cross are evident from the very beginning of our life with Christ. That mark was no less at the very beginning of the gospel of our redemption. He, the holy and almighty Son of God, is born to teenage peasant girl in a barn. The angels sing to the shepherds, not to him. The wise men come

¹ Postille, das ist Auslegung und Erklärung der sonntäglichen und vornehmsten Fest-Evangelien ...; erster Theil; Johann Gerhard; herausgegeben von Gustav Schlawitz, Berlin, 1870; S. 122-3.

² S. 144.

and worship, and their worship occasions the slaughter of the Holy Innocents and the refugee flight of the Holy Family. Rising and falling, the cross and rescue accompany every step of his journey until the day of his resurrection. And his history is our history, and that too until the day of our triumphant entrance into heaven. Yes, the closer the disciple follows, the heavier the cross. Ah, but then there is the other side of the coin: the heavier the cross the greater the blessing it brings. Yes, and the greater the blessings, the more necessary the cross. So

Cheer up! It's the cross! And that's a good thing!

Does that sound like a riddle and a mystery? Well, it is! It is a mystery that begins with the first promise of the Savior in Genesis 3, and a riddle not resolved until Easter Sunday, not fully resolved until we get to heaven. For what does God promise in Genesis 3:14-19? He promises redemption through the work of the Seed who will suffer the wounding of his heel. He promises redemption to the man who raised his fist in the face of God and blamed God for all his troubles; but it is a redemption that will not come apart from the sweat of his brow and the suffering of death and the return to the dust from which he was made. He promises redemption to the woman who chose to believe the devil rather than God who made her and gave her every blessing; but it is a redemption through the birth of Son a long way in the future. And what marks the promise of that Seed? The promise of his coming is repeated in the suffering and pain of every mother giving birth and in the cries with which each child enters into the world.

And that's the way that it must be! Down through the ages of the Old Testament, then in the life of Christ and of the apostles and the early church, and finally in these last days before the final rescue of the church by the return of her Bridegroom, that has been the constant: Redemption and rescue, life and salvation as a free and glorious gift of God on account of the merit of Christ. But always the cross of the Redeemer leaves its mark on each believer. As there was no crown for Christ without the cross, so there is no crown for the believer without the sign of the cross.

That message which is at the heart of the life of each Christian and of the church runs counter to every culture, to our reason, to our feelings, to our unregenerate mind and heart and will. It flies in the face of the sinful nature within us that is never converted. The devil and the world would like nothing better than to tear away the theology of the cross, to rid us of it root and branch. But if the devil succeeds to the rejoicing of our own sinful nature, then we will have gone a long way down the road of losing the gospel entirely. It is a sad and tragic fact that there are many churches that only bear the name *Christian*, but have long ago given up the essence of Christianity, the cross of Christ and the necessary cross to be born by the church collectively and by each believer individually. It is therefore important for us to understand this whole matter of the *Theology of the Cross*. It is important for us to understand as well why it is so difficult for us to hang on to it. And it is important for us to understand the joy that this doctrine affords. This paper has as its purpose therefore to further our understanding and hopefully as well to encourage our eager embrace of the cross both as individuals and as a church.

Definition of terms

What do we mean by the *cross*? It is easy enough for us perhaps to understand what we mean by it when we are thinking of the cross of Christ. His cross is everything to us. By all that he did, then by all that he suffered and endured on Good Friday in both his body and his soul he redeemed us. He suffered the torments of the damned that we deserved. He endured the horror that should have been ours for all eternity, the horror of being abandoned by his Father. He

bowed his head to the death that we deserved from the moment of our conception and every moment since down to the second when we breathe our last breath. And he did it all willingly, even eagerly. He did it all prompted alone by his grace, that love which has no cause in us but only in him. He did it in spite of us and what we deserve. He did it because he yearned and longed for us to spend eternity with him in the splendor and the glory of heaven.

Since the completion of his work for us in his life and death and resurrection, he continues to rule over all things in heaven and on earth with exactly that same goal in mind, that we should share in his glory, the glory of eternal life and blessedness with all the saints and angels in heaven. Read Ephesians 1 and see how the inspired apostle bubbles over with joy that Christ has done it all, that Christ now sits enthroned in heaven with all things under his feet and that just so that we should one day be with him there forever. Read all of the epistles and note how many different ways the apostles find to assure us that now and forever we are joined to him with bonds that not death, not hell, not anything in heaven or on earth or under the earth can destroy. We are his mystical body and he is our head (1 Cor. 6:15, Eph. 1:22-23). We are God's own dear children (1 John 3:1). We are living stones in his temple and kings and priest (1 Peter 2:4, 9), heirs of an imperishable and unspeakably great inheritance kept for us in heaven (1 Peter 1:3-9). We are those whom Christ has washed clean in the waters of Baptism so that we should be his very own, his one and only bride ((Eph. 5:26-27). We are those who are fed by the body and blood of our God made flesh for us and for our salvation (1 Cor. 11:23-26), so that in the most intimate way possible we are joined to Christ. We are his as branches to the vine apart from whom we are nothing and can do nothing (John 15:1-17).

Yes so great, so wondrous, so glorious is our status that St. Paul all but gives up trying to describe how it will end for us in heaven. He joins with the prophet Isaiah (64:4) in happy exasperation when he declares, *No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him* (1 Cor. 2:9). And St. John shares in that same exaltation when trying to describe our blessed and happy end: *How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! ... Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is* (1 John 3:1-2). It doesn't get any better than that! *We shall see him as he is!*

Ah, and there's the nub of it! *Then* we shall see him as he is. *Now* we do not fully see him thus. And why not? The cross obscures our view. And here again is the riddle: Because he loves us so much, because he is so eager that we finally attain to that blessed place and state, he permits and sends us the cross. For without the cross, we will never enter into paradise. Without the cross we will lose, yes, we will throw away the fellowship we enjoy with him now through the Word and the sacraments. Without the cross we will chose death over life, hell rather than heaven.

Because of the cross, we do not yet see him as he is. He is always our loving and most kind Savior. He is always the one in charge, ruling over all things just for our benefit and our eternal good (Romans 8). Tears caused by sin and its consequences obscure the heavenly vision we shall one day enjoy. Pain of body and of soul crush and squeeze out the joy which is already our possession but often far removed from our experience. The guilt of sins past and the weakness of temptations present make us cry out with the saints of old, *O Lord, how long?* That experience, that reality, is not just ours alone or ours as individuals. It is as well that of the church collectively.

And so it must be! Jesus promised it. He promised it from his heart that always overflows with love for us. He promised it so that we would not lose the goal and the prize that he won for us all by himself and at so great a cost, at the cost of the cross. He defines it and emphasizes its necessity for us in Mark 8:34-38:

If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels.

There are so many ways of summing up what Jesus says here. *The essence of our cross is the imitation of Christ.* That's how St. Paul sums it up in Phil. 2:5-8, where he points to the whole attitude of Christ as one of a life lived and then a shameful death endured for our benefit, for our salvation. Look at his miracles, look at Lent, look at everything in his earthly life: None of it is done for his own comfort or ease or outward benefit or glory; it is all done for us and that at great, at incalculable expense to himself. Or we could just sum it up this way: *The essence of the cross is self-denial which turns away from all that is just for me; it is a self-denial by which I strive to live instead just for him and those he has given for me to serve.* Or this: *The essence of our cross is obedience to the First Commandment - - and that especially when considered from the vantage point that Luther gives us in the Small Catechism, that we should fear, love, and trust in God above all things.*

How easily the definitions fall from the lips to the floor, bypassing altogether the heart and the soul. Jesus' words require our careful attention. They are words full of frustration, of seeming failure *for us!* For however we define it, the cross hurts. Its heart and core in Mark 8 is saying NO! to self. That is always going to be difficult. It means struggle for the soul that the self would really like to avoid altogether. It entails shame in the world for the sake of the gospel. That's what he promises, and it is therefore guaranteed. Shame is never pleasant. We always look for ways to avoid even modest embarrassment. But the alternative is to be ashamed of him. The alternative is to grab at and clutch pieces of popularity, but to lose him. The alternative is to chuck the cross and live for self now, only to achieve failure forever and eternal disgrace when he comes in his Father's glory with all the holy angels.

Nevertheless that is exactly the exchange that we in our fallen nature want to make. That's what Peter wanted to do too. Just before Jesus spoke these words, he prophesied his own coming cross, his pain, his shame, his rejection by the world and by his own people and his own church. And Peter was so shocked and offended that he did the unthinkable; he took Jesus aside and scolded him for even thinking such a thing! And Jesus response was as harsh and emphatic as it could be: *Get behind me, Satan! You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men* (vs. 33). And then come the words about *our* cross, about its absolute necessity, about its promise of pain and suffering not unlike his. How appalled Peter must have been!

But Peter has done us a favor. By his protest, by a protest that occasioned Jesus' remarks about *our* cross, Jesus provokes us to examine our own souls. We get to observe the sharp and irreconcilable contrast between what we call the *theology of the cross* and the *theology of glory*. Peter wanted a theology of glory for Jesus before the day of Jesus' resurrection. And no doubt he

would have wanted a theology of glory for himself and the rest of us as well. And by nature we want what Peter wanted.

And just what does a theology of glory entail? We get a better handle on what Jesus wants for us when we put it into contrast with what we want, with the theology of glory. This is what Peter wanted for Jesus and what by implication he wants for us, for Jesus' followers:

For Jesus

Jesus is crowned King on Palm Sunday.
Everybody loves Jesus.
His new church grows rapidly.
No one ever contradicts or opposes him.
Everybody wants to get closer to him.

For Us

We triumph over all sins and problems.
Everybody thinks we are wonderful too.
People beat down the doors to get into ours.
Our church never has doctrinal controversy.
Our pastors and teachers are popular as rock stars, idolized by the masses.

Well, isn't that what we want?! What's wrong with that? Don't we want to triumph over our sins and temptations? Don't we want to see the day when we no longer make foolish decisions that get us and our families and our church too into all kinds of trouble? Don't we want to be proud of our church, of our pastors and teachers? Of course that's what we want and that's what we strive for. And strive for them we must. But, and here again is the riddle, were it not for the cross we would never strive for them and never even partially attain them. What a paradox: We strive and must and want to strive for all these things; but the minute we get them, their total loss is on the way! So strive and strive we must, but in gratitude for the cross of frustration that keeps us relying on grace and on the means of grace.

So, yes, those are all things that we want. But we cannot have them even in part apart from the cross. And it is the cross, not the glory, which will be most evident in our own lives and in the life of the church. What then is the cross? ***The cross is everything that I suffer and that the church suffers as a result of its connection and faithfulness to Christ and his Word. At every turn that suffering has at its heart and core the denial of self, yes the struggle against self.***

It's important that we get that definition straight and clear away some false notions first of all about the cross. The cross is not just suffering. It is not simply in and of itself the aches and pains of life that all endure from time to time just by being human. It's not just by itself sickness, financial reverses, disappointment from family and friends. In and of itself it is not even death or the fear of death. It is not in and of itself the reverses that come from storm and fire, plague or flood. All go through these things whether they are Christians or not. All of these things *may become* crosses however. They become a cross, each in their turn, when they tempt me to doubt the love of God. They become a cross when they make it difficult for me to trust the promises of his Word that he will never leave me or forsake me. Let's examine that a little more closely:

The cross in the outward life of the Christian

Jesus says that we should take up our cross and follow him, and that the essence of the cross is self denial. Luther discussed that essence most famously in his treatise on *The Freedom of the Christian*. In the second part of that famous treatise he reminds us that we are slaves to all. That's the cross. I see myself as giving up the exercise of all my rights and privileges just like

Jesus did, so that I can serve the best interests of those around me. I see how that works itself out most simply by making reference to the *Table of Duties* at the end of Luther's *Small Catechism*. What is my station in life?

Am I husband and father? Then I minimize my rights as lord of the manor and head of the house. Or better, I make sure that I exercise those rights chiefly for the benefit and in the interest of my family. As head of my wife, I make sure that all of my decisions serve her best interest. As father I take the trouble, the considerable trouble, to supervise my children's education so that the "one thing needful" will always be seen by them as most important. That may mean I don't always have time for a nap. It will mean that often what I would really like to do with my hobbies or my addiction to sports and television will be set aside so that I can listen to them and spend time with them. It will mean that I want them to see me reading my Bible, leading the family in devotions and prayers, treating their mother like a queen. For that's the model that God give me as father and husband in Ephesians 5: Christ loved the church and gave himself for it; I therefore want to give myself for my bride and for the children God has given me. There is no room for a Prussian field marshal in my house or in my heart.

Am I a wife or mother? Then I see myself as the church sees herself in her relationship with Christ. For again, that is the model that we see in the Scriptures. I submit to my husband's headship. I do it willingly, not because he's perfect and always right, but because that is what my Savior wants from me. And in the raising of our children, again, I want them to see that "the one thing needful" is most important to me and I want that to be most important to them. So I listen to their memory work from the Bible and the Catechism. From their earliest days they will remember the Bible stories I told them and how I taught them to pray. When we came home from church they will recall how at the Sunday table their father and I discussed with appreciation and reverence the service and the sermon. And when it comes to discipline, they will see father and mother in agreement that the discipline should be in imitation of God's own discipline: For sins there are consequences and for repentance there is forgiveness. The shrill cries of: *But everybody is doing that! Everybody wears those kinds of clothes! Everybody watches that program! You don't want me to have any fun at all! I hate you!* will leave you unmoved from your goal of raising your children in accord with the Word of God, no matter what everybody else does. And when the school teaches them things contrary to the Word of God, you will be ever vigilant and ever diligent in taking the considerable time that it requires to correct whatever error was peddled that day in school.

Am I an employee or a manager? I will see my job as a gift of God through which I provide for my family, for the poor and for the work of the church. That may well mean that at times my own hobbies, my own desire for pleasure or for things, may have to be put on hold because the needs of others are more pressing and important to me. In my work I will see myself as serving Christ, not just the boss who is watching - - or when he is watching. Thus nothing but my best will do. To steal from the company by laziness or carelessness just doesn't enter my mind. Or, if I am a manager, I will lead by example, by patience, by consistency for the benefit of both the workers I supervise and the ones who employ us. For those around me should see the honesty and the fairness of one who has been with Jesus. Without beating anyone over the head with it, it should be evident to all by the way I work as well as by my words that he is the most important person in my life and that serving those around me is the way that I prove it. For the Scriptures enjoin these responsibilities, yes, this honor, repeatedly (Colossians 3:22-4:1, 1 Timothy 6:1-2, 1 Peter 2:18-21, et al.).

Am I a citizen? Then it is my concern that I obey the law of the land (Romans 13). That means the speed limit. That means complete honesty in filing my tax return. That means taking seriously my responsibilities as a citizen, examining the position of candidates for office before I vote and voting for those who as far as I can tell will best serve the interests of the state as a whole. It may mean becoming active myself in politics, to the extent that I can do that without parking my Christianity at the court house door, so to speak. In my dealings with fellow citizens, with neighbors, with people in the line at the store, with other drivers on the public roads, always my primary concern will be to serve, to yield. The notions of “get out of my way,” “don’t bother me,” and “I’m too busy/important to care about your needs just now,” will not be part of my make up. Again, I want simply to reflect the selflessness of Christ. That’s what he has called me to do in all of my relationships. And all of that I do with the recognition that I have the honor of representing Christ as I imitate him (1 Peter 2:13-17, 21-25).

Am I a pastor or teacher? What an honor that God should use me to bring the treasures beyond price to those who are desperately poor and perishing without the gospel. What an honor that the saints in my parish and synod work hard to support me, so that I can have as my sole occupation and endeavor studying God’s Word and then proclaiming it to strengthen them in their faith and in their service to him who loved them and gave himself for them. What an honor that I should take their children in my arms and be Jesus for them, washing away their sins in the water of Baptism. What an honor that I should teach his Word and give them the benefit of what I have learned at their expense. What an honor that I should feed them week in and week out with food for the soul, more powerful than anything on their table and sweeter than honey from the honey comb. What an honor that I should even extend to them the body and blood of Christ himself in the Sacrament for their pardon and strengthening. Far be it from me that I would ever think myself better than they are. Far be it from me that I would ever think of them as a bother and myself too busy to listen to them. Far be it from me that even when they do not understand or when they are less than kind in the face of my limitations that I should or would complain against them. Far be it from me that I should refuse to do the little things in the school or in the church “because it’s not in my Call.” For my motto will ever be that of St. John the Baptist: Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world; he must increase and I must decrease!

Well, do you still think that bearing the cross, that self-denial is such an easy thing? Can’t you hear a voice howling deep down inside in protest? *Wait just a minute! I would be the perfect spouse if I had a perfect spouse! I would be the perfect parent if those kids would just listen to me! Besides that, I don’t want them to hate me or laugh at me! And as far as those things about work and traffic and taxes and the neighbors are concerned, well, people will laugh at me; worse yet, they will take advantage of me! What about ME, what about MY needs, what about MY wants? When does it finally become THEIR turn to serve ME? And in church I’m willing to do my share; but others have more than I do; let them carry the load for a while.*

The answer of Jesus in Mark 8 and for that matter throughout the Scriptures is quite plain and simple: *If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me! ... If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this sinful and adulterous generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when comes in his Father’s glory with the holy angels.* He doesn’t ask you to take a pilgrimage to Mecca. He doesn’t ask you to wash in the Ganges. He doesn’t ask you to walk on burning coals, or burn incense, or ring bells, or enter a monastery.

What he asks is much harder. He asks and he insists on it: *Deny yourself, and take up the cross and follow me.* He asks and he insists on it: Be a Christian!

The cross in the inward life of the Christian

The cross does not stop with the attitude and the behavior of the Christian toward family and friends and neighbors and co-workers and the state, and even toward enemies. The cross bores its way deep into the soul. We noted earlier that the afflictions common to all people are not in themselves crosses. But when they happen to a Christian they can *become* crosses. Just ask Job. Just ask Abraham when he was about 100 years old and still had no son (Genesis 15:2-3). Just ask Hezekiah when Isaiah told him that he was about to die (Isaiah 38:1-3). Ask Jeremiah (Jeremiah 12:1-2). Ask Asaph in Psalm 73 when he saw the prosperity of the wicked compared to the suffering of the saints. In all of these instances there is an anguish in the soul, a dread that God had turned his face away and would no longer bless.

Deep down inside the Christian suffers. The suffering may be a direct consequence of his sins or the sins of others. The suffering may be traceable to no obvious cause. He gets sick. There is an accident. A child or a spouse dies way before the time that one would have expected. And the cry, perhaps shared with no one but God, goes up:

Where is the God who says he loves me and watches over me every minute when these things happen to me? How often do I have to feel all alone in a vast uncaring universe? How often must I turn my face to the wall with Hezekiah and weep at the frustration of my impending death before my work is done? How often must I feel afraid of the future, afraid of sickness, reverses and of death itself? Oh I know: I've been in trouble before and somehow survived it. But not this time. This time I see no way out. God has turned against me. Maybe I'm finally getting what I deserve because of what I did back then when ...

And then the cross gets heavier still! There are temptations that I just can't seem to overcome. Or just when I think that I have finally outgrown one temptation, another one even worse stalks me. There is the memory of sins in the past that still torment me. How can God forgive them? I can't. How can God forget them? I never will. There is the dread, the fear that someday everything will come out and I will be left in shame and disgrace. Is it all going to come out on Judgment Day? Will after all is said and done Jesus look at me and say: *Depart from me, you hypocrite!* Where is the peace that is supposed to surround the heart of the Christian? Where is that heroic strength of a David on his good days, of Peter and Paul at their best, the Spirit filled strength to triumph over every obstacle?

Why, why, why!

Remember the definition of the cross. It is everything that I suffer as a result of my connection and faithfulness to Christ and to his Word. At its heart and core it is a denial of self in favor of Christ and his Word. It is clear enough when we are speaking of the cross in the *outward* life of the Christian what the cross is and what self denial entails. My old sinful nature which is never converted, which I carry with me to the grave, rebels against the cross at every turn. It is only willing to put self second when there is the possibility of ultimately coming out ahead in one way or another. Thus the sinful self may be willing to help someone else in the expectation that in due course they will help me. Or the self may put members of the family first because that's the best way to be considered respectable in society. But even in these instances, the taking

of the back seat is done with a measure of reluctance. The reward had better come and come soon!

But what about the anguish of the soul? How is that fear, that dread, a cross? And what does it have to do with self denial? The anguish of the soul in its memory of the past, its struggles of the present, and its fear of the future requires an even more difficult self denial than that required in the outward life of the Christian. It requires the soul to deny its reasoning and its feelings, and instead to hang on for dear life to the promises of God in spite of all the evidence that argues: *He has abandoned you, just as you deserve!* It requires the heroic faith of the three men about to be tossed into the fiery furnace who boldly declared: *If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king. But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up* (Daniel 3:17-18). It requires what seems an insane joy like that expressed by apostles who had just been flogged for persisting in their faith and their confession of it; after being beaten *The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name* (Acts 5:41).

But deep down inside comes still the cry: *I'm not a hero like they were. I'm just a poor miserable man. Why does God call me to a cross that I am much too weak to bear? Why does he require a self denial that strives to obey him when I know how strong and stubborn my will is to do the opposite? Why does he insist that I deny my instincts and cling to his promises when all I can see around me and inside of me is his anger on bad days and what appears to be his indifference to my sighs and prayers? Why doesn't he take the cross away? Yes, why doesn't he give me GLORY NOW! Wouldn't I and everyone around me be better off if I didn't have this wretched self that only wants to serve self? Wouldn't his name and the church be more glorious before the world if in both my soul and my outward life I could shine like one of the angels in heaven? Oh how I would love that! Oh I would be so grateful, so full of devotion, so attentive to his Word and to the needs of my family and fellow man! Oh how I would sing with heart and voice one "Hallelujah!" after another in church on Sunday morning!*

And so why doesn't God do that? He doesn't do it because of his great love for us! He doesn't do it because he knows us so well. He doesn't do it because if he were to take away all of our problems in life and in our own souls, not a one of those *Ohs* would ever happen! Indeed the *Ohs* can only happen under the crushing weight of the cross. He must always be doing what Isaiah calls *his strange work, his alien task* (Isaiah 28:21). Luther never tired of speaking about this *opus alienum, das fremde Werk Gottes*. Before the soul can live, it must die. Before the Christian can rise up, he must be crushed. Before he can sing, he must cry out.

And that work of God in killing us, in crushing us, in bringing us to cry out in despair goes on our entire life because of the way we are. Without it we just get so full of ourselves. Without it we break our arm patting ourselves on the back because of how great and good we are. Without it we forget all about him. That's just the way we are. Conceived and born in sin, we never lose this side of the grave the desire to be God, to get our own way and do our own thing. And we never run out of ways to prove it. It is only in times of suffering that we begin to doubt our own strength and virtue and imagined merit; it is in times of suffering that we remember our sin, our frailty, our constant, total, absolute and desperate need of our Savior. It is interesting to note that even pagans philosophers have often observed that people learn nothing from good days, but only from times of trial, of suffering.

And so God brings us to examine our lives. He makes us see how wretched and poor, how weak and desperate we are. Then and only then will we fall on our face in his house and beating on our breast cry out with the publican, *Oh God, be merciful to me, a sinner! For that's what I am on my best day and in my best work.* Then and only then will we grasp the fundamental truth expressed by Isaiah: *All our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away* (Isaiah 64:6). Then and only then will we come to echo the words of Paul: *I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. ... What a wretched man I am* (Romans 7:18, 20)!

Only after God has done the *opus alienum* will we look up when he begins to do his *proper work*, the work he longs to do and delights in doing. Only then will we really begin to hear the beauty in Jesus' call: *Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest* (Matthew 11:28), and *Whoever comes to me I will never drive away* (John 6:37). For the simple fact of the matter is that *It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners* (Mark 2:17).

The Pharisees to whom these last remarks were addressed were just as sick, in just as desperate a need as anyone else. But their refusal to recognize that need made the grace of the Savior odious to them. To put it another way, they wanted nothing to do with the cross, and therefore wanted nothing to do with the gospel either. They wanted glory now and would settle for nothing less. And that was the greatest sickness of all. For it prevented the Savior from healing the sickness of which they were stubbornly unaware. Even his words that only the sick need a physician did not bring them to the realization that those who would keep the physician away from the sick are even more sin-sick than the obviously sick.

This recognition that the cross is necessary is crucial if we are to rejoice in the one who carries it first for us and then with us. We need to have a clear understanding of this *foreign*, this *strange*, this *alien work of God*, if we are ever going to really grasp and appreciate the peace, the joy, and the power of the gospel. And yes, our understanding of our own need and the Savior's response to that need has profound implications for the way in which we carry out the struggle in our outward lives and in our own souls. It has profound implications for the way that we deal with one another and with strangers to the gospel. Therefore let us examine the contrast between *God's foreign work* and *God's proper work* and when he does each a bit more closely. After that we will consider how the match between his two works applies to our individual lives and then to the life of the church.

God's arrangement of his two works

Search the Scriptures and you will see that there are few who listen to the voice of God when everything is going well on the outside of their lives and in the interior of the soul. Again and again it is those wretched on the outside and in despair on the inside who hear the Word of God, the voice of Jesus, and come to trust it and rejoice in what he says. And if - - and this is an exceedingly important way of saying the same thing - - things are not wretched on the outside and tortured on the inside, at least we always count ourselves as wretched and poor and miserable by nature and in fact when we come into the presence of the God. The alternative is to see ourselves as the Pharisees saw themselves; then we will be indeed more wretched than the worst wretch and sicker than the most miserably guilty sinner.

We do not have the time here to give every example from the Bible. We will just mention a few. The next time you are reading your way through the Bible, examine it from just this one

perspective: When does God do his *proper work*? You will see for yourself that it is only after he has done his *strange, his foreign work*.

Consider the example of Abraham in Genesis 15. By then Abraham seems to have it all. He is rich. He is powerful. All his enemies are in dread of him. He had just won a war against kings with just a few servants. Yes, times are good! Ah, but in his soul Abraham is in anguish. In the middle of the night he is deeply depressed. God anticipates Abraham's prayer and comes to him and says *Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield and your very great reward*. But Abraham is not cheered up by God's assurances. Instead he voices the objection that God had anticipated when he spoke to Abraham in the first place. He reminds God that there is still no son of promise to carry on the promise of the Messiah. Without the son promised how would The Son promised ever be born? And both Abraham and his wife are now well past the time when they could have expected a child.

God could have called Abraham earlier than he did and then given them this son promised 60 years earlier. But he didn't. He waited until all hope was gone. He waited until every natural inclination was to despair. He waited until all reason and sensibility cried out: *The promise is a lie!* In sum, he waited until the cross pressed most heavily. Then Abraham would sigh from the pit of his stomach, from the depths of his tortured soul, *O LORD, what can you give me since I remain childless?*

Then note how God answers this anguished cry of Abraham. He answers it by a promise more outlandish and ridiculous sounding than could be imagined: *Look up at the heavens and count the stars – if indeed you can count them. So shall your offspring be!*

Or consider the example of David (2 Samuel 12). After his great crimes of adultery and murder, he adds to his iniquity by a cover up and a refusal to repent - - really an attempted cover up in his own heart. So many of the psalms speak of the anguish of his soul. He felt his bones drying up. He felt like his soul was drowning as his bed was made wet with tears of despair. Outside of his soul he carried on. He governed. He judged others. He functioned, probably ignorant of the whispering that was going on throughout the land of his disgrace and shame. Does God come to him at once? No, he waits. He lets the full weight of despair press down on David's soul. He lets the cross crush him.³ Then, when God decides the time is best, then he sends David's pastor to deal the final blow that kills: *You are the man!* That finally squeezes out of David the one line that says it all: *I have sinned against the LORD*. Notice that! What's his greatest crime? It's not that he committed adultery and murdered and covered up the mess as best he could before the world, as terrible as all that was. Rather his most monstrous crime is that it was all *against the LORD*, his God, his Savior! It took time for David to come to that realization. During that time, capped off with Nathan's *You are the man!* God was doing his *strange work*.

And then how does God accomplish his *proper work*? Is there a penance prescribed for David so that he can make up for his crimes not only against people but against God? Is there some special work that David must do before God will again receive him? No, none of that. To be sure, there will be outward consequences for David's sin, as Nathan makes clear. There will

³ Notice that here as elsewhere the cross is identified with God's *foreign work*; it is identified with the suffering that God sends to show us our need for his *proper work*, the gospel. Strictly speaking, God's *foreign work* is not the cross; but it is sent in the interest of the cross, to bring us to a realization of our need for God's mercy, which realization points us to where that mercy alone is to be found, i.e., in the cross of Christ.

as well be the inward regrets and sorrows of the soul at the remembrance of sin, a point made eloquently clear in so many of the psalms of David. But the *proper work*, the work that God wanted to get to, the work that the *strange work* aimed at and prepared for, is so short, so simple, so sweet. As the words *You are the man!* killed, so now the words *The LORD has taken away your sin. You are not going to die!* bring David back to life again. As with the example of Abraham however, notice: They are just words that God speaks, just words spoken by a lowly messenger; no flash, no dazzle, no sparklers in the sky; just words.

So then, looking at these examples - - add to them the examples of Job and Hezekiah and Jeremiah referred to above,⁴ and on and on - - what would you say and conclude? Was the anguish of the soul and the weight of suffering such a bad thing? Do you think that any of these saints are complaining about them in heaven? Might they say to us when we are wretched on the outside and in anguish on the inside: *Cheer up! It's the cross! God will come at break of day with - - the promise, with the Savior, and that will make the cross seem a delight!* Might they even in their day have prayed much as Tauler prayed about his crosses: *Come again dear guests; earlier I received you with displeasure; but now you shall be more dear to me!*⁵ We may have occasion often during our lifetime to notice it: Without the suffering that drove us to despair of ourselves we would never have longed for the gospel promises nor rejoiced in them.

Or consider a few examples from the New Testament, from the gospels. Look at the miracles of our Lord. Was there a one of them performed for the benefit of someone who was just sort of in trouble? Did anyone turn to him for help who still held out some hope or expectation that things would ultimately turn out and improve? From the wedding at Cana to the disciples about to drown, to Peter in the waves, to the feeding of the five thousand and the four thousand, to the widow of Nain, to Jairus and his daughter, to the cleansing of the lepers, the giving of sight to the blind and hearing to the deaf, to the casting out of the demons, to Lazarus at the dawn of Holy Week, it is all one and the same: The outward condition is hopeless; all evidence of God's love has vanished. All that's left is hope against hope. All that's left is a clinging to the promise of mercy in the Word when every evidence of it in life has long since disappeared.

And what of that other torment, the torment deep down inside of the soul? Again, for the sake of useful brevity, we will note just a few examples. Consider Peter in the account of the great catch of fish (Luke 5:1-11). How right Peter has it at the beginning of the story. When, contrary to all good fishing practice, Jesus tells Peter and the others to go out into the deep water and let down the nets, Peter responds so perfectly: *Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets.* (Again, even in the outward circumstance, all human hope or expectation of catching anything is gone; Jesus words to them are not just a suggestion about a better fishing method, but words that should be expected to produce absolutely nothing.)

When, contrary to all reasonable expectation, the nets are filled with fish, Peter is anything but ecstatic. Quite the contrary, he is in despair! For now it is made powerfully clear to him: He is in the presence of the holy and almighty God-man, who sees and knows the depths of

⁴ From the example of Jeremiah 12, note especially vs. 14-17.

⁵ *Kommt wieder, liebe Gäste, ich habe euch mit Unwillen vorher aufgenommen, jetzund sollet ihr mir lieber sein.* (As cited by Joh. Gerhard in his sermon for Jubilate in the previously referenced edition of his works, S. 414; for an especially beautiful sermon on the subject, those who have access to Gerhard's works will find his sermon for Cantate particularly engaging.)

his heart, his soul, his conscience. What was on Peter's conscience we do not know. Maybe it was something great, maybe nothing more than the awareness of what we all are by nature. But whatever it was, it must have tortured him for a good while. Else why this spontaneous and wretched cry of despair that pours out of him in an instant: *When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!"* What dread! What horror! And how does Jesus respond? Again, there is no razzle-dazzle. It is all so simple, so straight forward. And it is just words. *Don't be afraid; from now on you will catch men.* Grace, mercy, and forgiveness are not even mentioned; they are most powerfully implied and then some by the *Don't be afraid!* They are doubled by the assurance that Peter has not only been accepted by his Savior, but that his Savior has work for him to do, work that is holy, work that is of eternal significance. How much would those words have meant to Peter and how much would they have accomplished in him, were it not for the dread, for the horror in his soul? How rich and sweet would that honey dropping from the lips of the Savior ever be to one who really felt good about himself? The response of most of the scribes and Pharisees and chief priests should answer the question for us.

Or consider the example of Saul about to become Paul in Acts 9. Saul was in the category of those who felt good about themselves, felt good especially when persecuting the church and making the lives of Christians miserable. He knew a good deal about the message of the apostles. But it did not touch him, until the Savior crushed him. First he is struck blind and all but dead. Only the promise, only the message of the insignificant disciple in Damascus, only the Sacrament of Baptism, that splash of water with the Word brings him back to life again. And then what happens? Then are all his problems forever solved? Does he then go on to a life of one triumph and success after another. Oh no! Just the opposite. And it is the opposite that God promises him from the start: *I will show him how much he must suffer for my name!* The most casual reading of Paul's life and work in the rest of Acts and in his epistles will show how fully God kept that promise! It is a re-run of the promise of God to Isaiah in Isaiah 6. After Isaiah has experienced the mercy of God and the forgiveness from the coals on the altar, Isaiah is eager to share that grace and mercy of God. He only asks: *How long?* And God's answer: *Until everything is ruined and there is nothing left but desolation and - - a stump from the root of Jesse, out of which will come the Savior.*⁶

Paul got the point! He understood the necessity, the constant and recurring necessity of the cross. He even understood that the greater God's blessings, the greater must be the cross (2 Corinthians 12:1-10). From God's *proper work*, from his *alien work*, and from Paul's own experience of the same Paul makes bold to expect us also to rejoice in the cross that goes before and makes us ready to listen to the gospel, and then to cherish both the gospel and the suffering that brought us to long for that gospel - - and that whether we see the cross in its narrow sense or as that *foreign work*; both are intended by a loving God to bring us to long for the mercy of God found only in the gospel. In his great Christian doctrine course, the epistle to the Romans, he doesn't even apologize or blush when he says: *We also rejoice in our sufferings* (Romans 5:3).

And so, to return more directly to the question of *Why?!* and to put it most succinctly: **The cross of suffering on the outside and the consequent anguish on the inside is necessary as a preparation for the hearing of the gospel and for a clinging to the gospel; it is our cross**

⁶ Isaiah 6 is often used as the text for ordinations and installations of pastors; when it is, to be fair to the text, the whole of the chapter should be used.

which drives us again and again to his cross. That's why our Fathers called it *das liebe Kreuz*, the dear cross. And that sums up so much of our life as Christians, so much of our work in the world, so much of the way we worship and the way we do mission work.

Or do we really imagine that the cross and the *foreign work* are not necessary any more, not in our day and age, not in our own lives? Look around. What do you see? The Western world wallows in neo-Baal worship. Most think it no sin "to live in sin." Most consider it no vice to stay married only for so long as we are in love - - and that with the most shallow and fleshly definition of "love." Most do not object to "alternate life styles" that make a mockery of the way God intended men and women to live. Forty-seven million babies have been legally murdered in the last thirty years. Pornography is a \$12 billion a year industry. Check out any evening on television. You won't have to wait long before you see unmarried sex and homosexual relationships favorably presented and vice made to appear as virtue - - the then the ultimate in spin: call it *gay*! Nor do any of these evils leave our own members untouched.

Then there are the more acceptable sins, those of greed and envy, those of assets hidden from the tax return, those of working hours spent not working, those of drunkenness even in those who should be models of sobriety. Few of these things shock anyone. To mention but one example: I remember a parent who bought beer for his kids and their friends to enjoy at his home. When challenged, his answer was simply that he didn't want his kid driving drunk from someone else's house. That kids leaving his house might be driving drunk was not his concern; that was for their own parents to worry about. The parent was a member in good standing of one of our churches and his children attended one of our high schools. Nobody was shocked. Only the parents of those visiting that home were irritated. Then there is the divorce rate in our congregations. It isn't all that different from the divorce rate "in the world." Then there are weddings planned and unplanned by our young people for whom the wedding night will hold no surprises. Then there are the parents of those young people who defend the behavior of their children and are irritated when the pastor dares to say anything about it.

And so the economy is threatened with collapse. Thousands lose everything they have saved, even their homes. Drought stalks one part of the land and floods another. Strange illnesses befall practitioners of strange behavior. And so people suffer and people die. The seas roar and sweep away houses, even cities. Fires rage and ravage homes and landscapes. Earthquakes shake and terrify the otherwise comfortable and confident. And all and sundry wonder why. Often the innocent suffer as much and more than the obviously guilty. And in our own soul whether these afflictions visit us or not, and perhaps even more when they do not, the question rises: *When will it be my turn so to suffer fully the consequences of my sins? Will God abandon me as he seems to have abandoned all these hapless victims of one tragedy after another? Where is the God of power and might, of grace and mercy?*

Is that, namely God's *foreign work*, not the Lord's own pre-evangelism program? It certainly was in all of Old Testament Bible history. Just read the book of Judges and Jeremiah. Each time the people were full of God's blessings both temporal and spiritual, they went off to worship Baal, a god who made their sins acceptable, even respectable. God in mercy, God in love, sent misery to call them back again. Notice in the Book of Judges how each time the people fell, they fell deeper than the last time. Notice that each time God called them back, he did it with suffering more humbling, more painful than the time before. Finally when alterations of goodness and suffering no longer brought the people back, he destroyed the Northern Kingdom and sent Judah into captivity. Yes, and when the ultimate rejection of the ultimate grace occurred

in the rejection of the Savior, he drowned the nation in a sea of blood at the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D.⁷

Well, does it work? Does the Lord always succeed with his pre-evangelism program? The answer is as clear in our own day as it was in the days of the Old Testament and in the days of our Lord and the apostles, indeed in every day and age of history to this point. Those who will be saved will be saved in no other way than through the Lord's gospel heard in one way or another after or in connection with his perpetual pre-evangelism program. But there have always been many who refuse even then to hear. The people of Jerusalem spurned the rebuke of Jeremiah after they had lost everything; they went off into Egypt to escape still worse, but contrary to the Lord's command. They even insisted that everything was better for them when they worshipped their false gods and did exactly as they pleased contrary to the Word of the Lord. And they perished in their rebellion (Jeremiah 44). Jesus wept over Jerusalem and warned of the destruction to come. Most did not listen. Most perished.

So does it work?

For many, often for most, it does not work. That is not the fault of the Lord nor to be laid at the doorstep of his will. He was earnest and sincere in his call. He was, as the prophets so often depict him, a jilted lover. Yes even when his beloved had turned herself into a shameless harlot (cf. Hosea), he nevertheless refused to give up. He was, as the tears of the Savior so dramatically illustrate, always ardent and filled with grace and compassion in his seeking of the lost, even the worst of the lost. Those who perish have only themselves to blame because, as the Lord foretold in Isaiah 6, they have made their ears deaf, their eyes blind, their hearts hard.

But his pre-evangelism does work! That pre-evangelism can be the outward suffering we have been speaking of. And it can as well be the pre and post evangelism that goes in us in one way or another during all of our Christian life. That preparation for the hearing or the re-hearing of the gospel can be outward affliction. It can as well be the quiet inward anguish of the soul. But as noted earlier, whatever our outward circumstance, however troubled or relaxed our soul may be at the moment, when we come into the presence of God it is always under the sign of the cross.

We see that in its most elemental form in the Lord's Prayer. Permit me to phrase it from this context of the Christian praying under the cross that recognizes his natural hopelessness and helplessness, his desperate condition, no matter what the objective circumstances of the moment may be. The Christian in the Lord's Prayer cries out from the totality, the absolute nature of his need:

Father, dear Father, if your name is not proclaimed as holy and if you do not give us your own holiness by virtue of Jesus' sacrifice for us, then all is lost; then we are doomed to an eternal night of suffering, and whatever joy we experience in the moment is but a cruel joke; it will give way in the end to the vile unholiness of the devil and the filth beyond cleansing of his legions in hell. So Father, dear Father, do not forsake us and leave us bereft of your holy name in the gospel of forgiveness by which alone we are declared holy and fit for heaven.

⁷ The old German hymnals often contained as an appendix Josephus' account of the destruction of Jerusalem; it was read on one of the Sundays during the Trinity season and was to serve as warning against a despising of the pure Word of God.

Father, dear Father let your kingdom come, your gracious rule in my heart and life through that Word. For the only alternative and the one to which I am by nature inclined is the rule and kingdom of the devil; even though I know that yielding to him only brings torment and shame even in this life - - not to mention what it brings in eternity! - - still I am so foolish, so perverse in my nature, so weak, that I have even welcomed the devil and his rule; only if you overcome me with your grace and your love and your pardon, only if you triumph in me with the cross of Christ and the kingdom that he established by it, only then will I ever survive to the end and finally inherit what he paid so high a price to win for me.

Father, dear Father may your will be done - - ah that is my heart's one true delight: I know what your will is; you have made it abundantly clear in your Word, on the cross of Christ, in my Baptism, in the Holy Supper: Your will is that I should have you for time and for eternity as my Father, my dear Father. But you must accomplish your will in me through that Word; else I will do my own natural will, and that to my doom, that to my ruin with the devil and all his angels.

Father, dear Father, grant me what I need for this body and life on the table, in my family, in the state; for if the devil gets his way, I will never have even a crust of bread to enjoy; of your bounty dear Father, of your infinite grace and goodness, grant all that I need and enough to share, so that others too may see what a kind and gracious Father you are.

And then, O Father, dear Father, how it pains me to say it: Forgive me my sins! For even though you richly grant all these earlier petitions and thus have removed any and every possible excuse that I might have for sinning, nevertheless I have sinned; for a sinner is what I am, and I have not been slow to prove it in thoughts, words and deeds. But still, Father, dear Father, your Son knowing full well that I would never be perfect this side of the grave, has bid me call to you for full and free pardon for the sins I know and the sins I do not know; trusting in his invitation, trusting in its implicit promise that you will hear and forgive, I beg of you: Give me the favor that he alone has deserved; give me what he has promised; give me what his cross alone has merited for me.

And then, Father, dear Father, deliver me from the horrible temptations that would drag me away from your Word, your Name, your kingdom and your will; for I am so weak that by myself I will run headlong into them, then live in them and finally perish forever.

And finally, Father, dear Father, I even make bold to plead with you: Deliver me from the dread consequences of my sins, sins for which I have no one to blame but myself; spare me the evil that I have deserved; save me from spiritual death here and from eternal death hereafter. For see, Father, dear Father, I place myself entirely in your hands; in every moment when I trust you and your Word, in every instant when I embrace the cross of your dear Son, in the hour death when I depart this life with his name on my lips as my highest joy and only good, then Father, dear Father, yours will be the praise and the glory forever and ever.

That's not a phony humility. That, again regardless of our outward circumstance or inward condition is an embrace of the cross. In our prayer we do not ask God to take the cross away. We do not ask him to relieve us of every burden in life or from every anguish of the soul. For he never promised to do that. What we do ask for is help and rescue to bear the crosses of the moment. What we do ask for is grace to endure the afflictions of the soul. What we do ask for is faith that trusts his Word, for a confidence that denies self, what self wants and feels, in favor of what God has said and done, especially on the cross of our Redeemer.

What then is our cross? It is the struggle which leaves us exhausted as we strive to deny self in favor of everyone else. It is the struggle to see that the needs of my family and my neighbor and my co-worker and my enemy are all more important than my wants. It is the struggle to live as though I had all my needs supplied - - and in reality that is more the case than we like to admit or recognize - - and that therefore I have nothing better to do than serve everyone else. It is the struggle boldly to stand up for the truth of the Scriptures when my family insists that it is all too hard and others around me laugh at how old fashioned and silly I am to hold on to what everyone else has long since cast aside. The cross is everything that I endure because of my faithfulness to Christ and his Word. The effort to carry it wears me out, as my stubborn self resists and wants only the comfort of being served rather than the bother and trouble of serving.

What then is the cross? It is the fear that God has abandoned me and is finally giving me what I deserve when I suffer sickness or the loss of wealth or friends or family. It is the fear that overcomes me when I see no escape from the problem of the moment and have the specter and the shadow of failure or ruin or disgrace hanging over my soul. The cross is that struggle to deny the anger and despair of the soul in the face of tragedy and to cling instead to the Word that insists that God is still my gracious and always loving Father for Jesus' sake.

What then is our cross? It is the recognition deep down inside that all that I am by nature and that all that I am in my life deserves nothing but God's wrath and punishment. It is the crushing memory of some sins and temptations that drive me to despair. It is the weakness that especially haunts me and threatens one day to undo and destroy me - - the Achilles heal, the chink that each one has in the armor of his soul. It is the dread thought that God may finally abandon me to myself, as I so richly deserve. It is the voice that wakes me up in the middle of the night and grabs me by the throat as it whispers in my ear: *And you too must die!*

All of that is cross because all of it is painful, painful especially as it tempts me to doubt God's Word and his promises. The cross changes its weight and its configuration from year to year. But Jesus says that anyone who comes after him must bear the cross. It all seems so horrible. It all is ever painful. It all is that which we would really like to escape. And it is all so necessary. That is one of the many riddles, the many great mysteries of our faith. The cross is, again, God's pre- and post-evangelism program, a program that he sends or permits our whole life long. It is his foreign work that he allows because he loves us, because he knows that without it we would forget all about him. Without it we would be forever the greedy little child at Christmas who thinks but little of where his presents came from; he wants only to enjoy the presents, and that with as little interference from the giver as possible. He would prefer that he not even be bothered with a polite, not to say sincere, *Thank you!*

When we experience the pain of the cross, no matter how subtle or how crude and heavy it may be, we do well to cheer up and say within ourselves: *Ah, so there it is: das liebe Kreuz, the dear cross! By it God purges away the dross of self adoration. By it he drives me to his arms. The devil wants to use it to drive me to despair. But he will not have his way with me! No, for God has given his Word and he will not deny himself. And so, invited by his promise of grace and rescue I will fly to him, to the cross of his dear Son, to the water of Baptism, to the Sacred Supper. To spite the devil I will embrace my struggle as Christ embraced his. I will bow low under its weight that God may raise me up with his Word of promise as surely as he raised his own dear Son on the day of resurrection and just as he had promised!*

It works!

And so once more we put the question: Does it work? Does the suffering that God sends and the cross he permits really bring people to embrace the Word of God and bow before the Crucified to trust in him and him alone for their salvation here and their blessedness hereafter? Oh yes, it works, it works miraculously, it works beautifully. That is what that beautiful biblical and uniquely Lutheran doctrine of the means of grace is all about: So powerful is the Word of the gospel that it overcomes my natural unbelief and my continuing tendency to believe only what I see, what I think, what I feel; that Word brings me to abandon my own thoughts and feelings and to cling instead to the promises of the gospel. Again, permit just a few of the dramatic examples of how well it works from the Scriptures.

Consider again Abraham in Genesis 15. As noted before, he is in anguish of soul. For although he seems to have it all, the only thing that really matters he does not have: the son of promise through whom must come The Son of promise. And how does God deal with Abraham's anguish of soul? Just with words! Just with a more outlandish promise than the promises already made: *Count the stars if you can; so shall your descendents be.* Well, did it work? *Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness* (vs. 6). What an astonishing thing! The promise of God performed a miracle in the heart of the Patriarch, the miracle of faith that denied what is seen and reasoned and felt in favor of what is promised. And then God blessed the miracle that he had performed and credited it to Abraham for righteousness! O blessed cross that causes the cry of despair to which God responds with the miracle of faith credited for righteousness! God's promise creates faith; and the despairing gains from God's grace God's own righteousness.

Or consider David, this time in Psalm 32. His guilt is real. His crimes are monstrous. His understanding of what he deserves crushes him. *For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer.* Where shall he go in his despair? *Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD" – and you forgave the guilt of my sin.* It would help David nothing to continue the cover up. It would doom him, were his pastor to come and say to him: *There, there, it's not really all that bad; others are worse; just buck up, and don't do it again. God understands these things and so do we; after all, nobody is perfect.* Oh no, that will not do! David is crushed. David is killed first. Then, only then, does he hear the message of grace and pardon. The beginning and also the end of the Psalm gives the happy, the most blessed, the miraculous end of his heart broken confession: *Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered.* (Not: blessed is the one whose sins are minimized or covered up by our own rationalizations and excuses.) *Blessed is the man whose sins the LORD does not count against him and in whose spirit is no deceit.* Indeed it is so: Only such a man is blessed! David understands that and so concludes the hymn inspired by the Holy Spirit himself: *Rejoice in the LORD and be glad, you righteous; sing, all you who are upright in heart.* And where did that righteousness come from? It came from the Lord who forgave, from the Lord who covered the guilt with the blood of his Son. And who is the one who is upright in heart? It is that one who beneath the cross and covered with Christ's pardon rises up to continue the struggle against self, always returning to be forgiven, always coming back again for guilt to be pardoned. What a miracle! What a blessed resolution to the riddle! Were it not for the cross, where would be the joy of the blessed? Were it not for the cross, where would be the song of the righteous?

Or consider Jeremiah, that weeping prophet of doom. He is surrounded by the ruins of Jerusalem. He had spent his life warning the people of their coming destruction if they should refuse to repent and refuse to be forgiven. And they had refused. And now all is lost. His own work appears to have been an utter waste of time and suffering without purpose or point. And what is Jeremiah's conclusion concerning it all as he sits in the rubble that had been Jerusalem? He sings a hymn in the middle of his great lament: *I remember my affliction and my wandering, the bitterness and the gall. I well remember them, and my soul is downcast within me. Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope: Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. I say to myself, "The LORD is my portion; therefore I will wait for him." The LORD is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him; it is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD* (Lamentations 3:19-26). Wow! What a wondrous thing! What a miracle of the gospel, that the promised mercy of God should awaken from the dust of desolation such a song of thanksgiving and praise! Again, quite clearly it is a miracle of God's Word. For all the evidence is against it. All the evidence calls for the encouragement of Job's wife: *Curse God and die* (Job 2:9). But there it is! The prophet clings to the Word, to the promise. And he clings to it only because of the power inherent in that Word that causes him to cling to it! Yes, and it is precisely his misery, his heavy cross, his suffering because of the sins of others, his suffering because of his own faithfulness to God's Word that helps bring him to the point where he recognizes: All that matters is God's promise, God's mercy, God's always unmerited favor! Beautiful mystery! Wondrous riddle!

Then how about this example, one which to my mind is the most astonishing of all. In Acts 2 we listen to Peter's great Pentecost sermon. He minces no words. With the sharpest knife possible, clearly without the benefit of *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, he carves up his hearers: *Jesus, the one accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, as you yourselves know. This man YOU put to death by nailing him to the cross! But God raised him up from the agony of death. ... Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, WHOM YOU CRUCIFIED both Lord and Christ!* What is there for the hearers but despair? They killed the Lord of life, murdered most cruelly and wickedly and without excuse their God, the Son of God! What hope can there be for such miscreants? What possibility of rescue? They get the point, and respond to Peter's dagger: *When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?"* Their question is both a foolish and a despairing one. What can one possibly do to atone for or undo such a monstrous crime as Deicide? But listen to the Word of the Lord: *Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins." ... With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation."* Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day. What an astonishing thing! What a miracle of grace! What power there is in the message of forgiveness from the cross which I by my fault, my own fault, my own most grievous fault have pressed on to the shoulders of the Son of God! On Pentecost three thousand actually believed it, that their great crime was God's way of saving them! They actually believed it, that the blood of God's Son on their hands would be washed away in the water of Baptism!

We could go on and on. At least we have still to mention the apostles themselves. They abandoned the Savior, forsook him and fled. Peter denied him with oaths and curses. None of them were in any hurry to believe what he said about his coming Passion and resurrection. Even

on Easter Sunday they preferred terror and doubt to the message of the women who went early to the tomb and found it empty. And then what happens? Jesus comes to them and tells them not to be afraid. Not be afraid? How could they help but be even more afraid when he appears than they had been before? For their earlier fear was in direct contradiction of his words and promises. Now that the Risen Christ appears, they have reason to be more afraid than ever, afraid that they are finally going to get the just reward of their fears and doubts and unbelief. But Jesus' mighty words of grace triumph! *The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord* (John 20:20).

And finally there is the example of Paul. He did not cover up what he had done. He admitted that he was not worthy of any of the Lord's blessings, and certainly not worthy of his apostolic office. For he had persecuted the bride of Christ, the church of God! But, against all reason, contrary to his own natural feelings, he believed the word of the gospel. And what is more, he trusted that the power evident to him and in him would likewise triumph in the hearts of those whom the Lord was pleased to call and gather by that same gospel. And so he declares boldly that he is not ashamed of that gospel because of the power inherent in it to create faith (Romans 1:16-17). He goes on preaching, whether people listen or don't listen, because he knows that always in some the miracle will take place, the miracle of faith which trusts God's promise at the foot of the Savior's cross (Romans 10:8-17, et al.).

Yes, and Paul even admits that long after this great event of his conversion, he is still - - not just "was at one time" - - nothing but a sinner and the chief of them. That fact is a cross. The realization that still, still, after so much time and so much experience of God's grace and mercy, still, he is nothing but a sinner, that's a cross. It's a cross that drives him to his knees before the cross of the Crucified. Listen to the joy and the peace, the life and the salvation that he finds there: *Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life.* And then, in response to this grace of God shown to him and promised to us, the apostle sings his hymn of adoration: *Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen* (1 Timothy 1:15-17).

But wait! There is one more example, perhaps the most dramatic of all: YOU believe it too! Jesus made promises to you as he in his Passion drew near to the cross. He said *I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world* (John 16:33). Reason wants to answer: *Well, if you have overcome the world, then why should I have so much trouble?* But you haven't fallen for that argument. Instead, contrary to reason, you have rejoiced that he has overcome the world even as you are crushed by it! Yes, and that's how Paul and his co-workers cheered up the believers of his day too: *Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God," they said* (Acts 14:21-22). It's little wonder that Paul calls the preaching of the gospel "foolishness," and that on so many different levels (1 Corinthians 1).

Yes, and little wonder that the gospel must have within it God's own power to win us to trust it. For by nature we would not. By reason we would not. By what feels right we would not. Not to us, never to us, but to God's powerful Word, the word of the cross of Christ for us and for our salvation, goes the credit for our "foolish" faith! And again, that message of his cross for our

salvation is rarely far removed from crosses that he sends us to bring and keep us near to his cross.

The forms of our crosses change. Today I am tempted by fear of yesterday's sins. Yesterday I was tempted by fear of loss for today. Tomorrow doubts about the goodness and mercy of God may haunt me because of what I see happening in the world or in my own life. Only in heaven will there be time for each of us to describe the crosses by which Christ kept drawing us close to himself and his cross. Only in heaven will there be enough time to thank him for the blessings of his cross which came so miraculously in the gospel and to which we were drawn by the pain of our own crosses. So, yes, we dare to say it in days of fear and doubt, of suffering and loss and pain, in the hour of death: **CHEER UP! IT'S THE CROSS!**

Implications of the theology of the cross in our daily life

The theme of the last synod convention and hence the motto marking much of what we do as a synod in this biennium is *Christ's Love, Our Calling*. It should be clear that the love of Christ is not love the way the world thinks about love. It is not that phony cheap "anything and everything goes" love that knows neither modesty nor discipline. Rather it is the love by which God *did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all* (Romans 8:32). Notice that little word *spare!* Not just that God gave his Son, though that too really says it all. But this, that *he did not spare him*, did not spare him any pain, any sorrow, any temptation. We try to shield and spare our children. Not God! For us and for our salvation he did not spare his own Son. He let him suffer all, even death, even the worst death of all, the death of the cross. To call that the ultimate and the all sufficient evidence of God's love, as Paul does in the rest of Romans 8, seems to be biblical understatement of incomparable proportions. To call that *love* seems totally inadequate. But as so often in the Bible, when describing who God is and what he has done for us, no language will ever be fully adequate for capturing the reality. Do you want to see the love of God a thousand times and then some squared? Look at his Son! Look at his cross! There it is. There it is, just for you!

And now here it is: *Our Calling*. And what is that calling? It is to rejoice that God loves us enough to send us, to permit us, to bear the cross so that we will stay close and draw closer still to his redeeming cross. We do that in our station in life, as Luther considers the same in the Table of Duties at the close of the Small Catechism, as we noted earlier. We strive to deny self, to rejoice and to serve as spouse and parent whose goal it is to live for the benefit of those God has entrusted to our care. We do that understanding that their greatest benefit is in the gospel which has won the victory over our unbelief and covered our sins with the blood shed in such love for us and for our salvation. The Christian nurture with the Word and the sacraments is therefore the greatest gift we can give our children as they see our devotion to that gospel and as we share it with them by our example at home and away from home. We carry the cross in our confession of an unpopular faith before a world drowning in vice made virtue by an evolutionary biology and sociology. We carry a cross of self denial by our struggle to be chaste in a world that loves filth. We do it likewise by our struggle to remain honorable and honest in a world that counts success by how much one has and how much one gets away with. We do it in the struggle to submit all of our life to the Word of God, to embrace those doctrines which the world reviles and to cling to those words which our own heart wants to contradict. We do it all in the confidence expressed by the apostle: *If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things* (Romans 8:31-32)?

Implications of the theology of the cross for the way we worship

As that love of Christ is our calling in our day to day life under the cross, so and no less it is our calling in the way that we worship. What is the loving call of Christ to us as we enter his house? It is the call that echoes so beautifully down through the ages from his own lips: *Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest* (Matthew 11:28). It's not the perky and the frivolous that he calls. It's the burdened, the sick, the sinner. It's the one who is bowed down under the cross. We come into his house with doubts, with guilt, with fear. Our cross may be that of the one who cannot understand why God would let him suffer this and that loss. Our cross may be that of the one who groans under the pain of searing temptations that just will not go away, of one who can't understand why God permits those temptations to come and come again. Our cross may be the anguish of a soul that is all alone in the world, the anguish of one who knows that no one understands what he is going through and probably no one would care even if they did understand.

Our cross may be not all that dramatic and soul-searing. It may just be the run-of-the-mill day to day struggles of life. It may be just the awareness kindled by the law that in myself and in my works I am such a failure as judged by God's standard and the frustration that such an awareness brings with it. It may be that at times I really do wonder if its all worth the bother and worth the effort; after all, most around me don't seem to care all that much, and they get by just fine, maybe better than I do.

The plain truth of the matter is that in God's house there are souls with burdens known only to God and the one who carries them. Many look nice and neat and untroubled on the outside, while the inside is a mess, a mess they may be willing to reveal only to God. All and each of these hurt in their own way. All and each of these has a cross that God has sent or permitted. All and each of these is, yes, really is blessed by their cross. For while the devil and the world and their own sinful flesh want to use that pain to destroy them, to drown them in doubt and despair and unbelief, God has a most blessed aim and end in mind: By the cross and not long apart from it he draws them to himself. Think of the disciples in Matthew 8:23-27 on the Sea of Galilee. They thought they understood Jesus' words just fine. But then the storm comes up. But Jesus seems asleep to them. Then when all is lost, when the cross presses hard, they cry to him for rescue. Then they recognize their own weakness, their utter impotence, their total and absolute and every moment dependence on the might and mercy of Jesus. Blessed cross! Apart from its crushing us in life or in conscience we learn nothing.

At the same time there are no doubt many in church who are unaware of the cross because they have long since refused to carry it. They may be visitors who really know neither of the cross of the Redeemer nor the consequent cross of the believer. They may be members of convenience, who for whatever reason have ears that do not hear and eyes that do not see. Their refusal of the cross may be very subtle. It may be that over time they have just made one compromise with the devil after another, until they no longer notice that they are sick, that they are burdened, that they are sinners.

In point of fact, those really are the only two kinds of people there with us in church. Either we are burdened by this or that very specific cross or by the cross of an awareness of our sinful condition and constant need for God's mercy, grace and pardon from Christ's cross, or we are not thus burdened. And if not thus burdened, then we have fallen into some sort of carnal security. We have made a deal with the devil. Like the fool who tells the weeds in the garden that

he will leave them alone if they confine themselves to the patch he has allotted them, so is the fool who bargains with the Tempter, the Destroyer: Bit by bit his sins overtake him, the good in the garden of his soul is choked out and he dies. Such a one is like the frog in the pot that gradually heats up so that the frog doesn't jump out until finally he is boiled to death without ever having recognized his peril. Such careless souls need again to be crushed and killed and driven to despair by the law, if not by life. Is it too much to suggest that if the law doesn't do that work, God's *foreign work*, then life will? Is it too much to suggest that much of the misery God inflicted on his people in the Old Testament came precisely because they refused to let the law kill and crush them first, and that that is also how God often deals with us? When we don't listen to the word that kills, he sends things in life that have the same effect. He often must get our attention with, as we say, a strong hand up the back side of the head.

O blessed cross when he does that - - whether that be the cross as narrowly defined by Jesus in Mark 8 or the suffering that comes even to the unbeliever as God's *foreign work*! O blessed cross when life crushes or when conscience is suddenly awakened by a temptation too hot to handle. O blessed cross when then the Christian of convenience shows up in church in anguish of soul and longing for the saving message of the gospel.

So the way we worship tries to strike a proper balance between these two polar opposites. Those at the one pole recognize their need. They are weary and burdened and long for rest that only the Savior can give in his message of peace and pardon in the gospel of Word and sacraments. In all likelihood we do not know who these are. Their pain is as hidden as it real. But if we imagine that they are not there or that they are very few in number, then we must likewise imagine that the law doesn't work anymore and that God no longer sends things into our life to get our attention. The worship service that ignores the needs of these people that God has called to himself with the cross will miss the major point of a true worship: The bringing of Christ's cross and rescue to the weary and the burdened. At the other pole are those who are not thus weary or who do not recognize their burden. For them the gospel has become little more than a license to sin: *Since I'm forgiven, I need not bother with the struggle; Jesus will forgive me anyway.* The church that panders to the second pole will end up driving away those at the first pole while giving no lasting benefit to those at the second. It will neither provide the solution for the unfelt need of the secure nor with clichés afford any real comfort to the weary and the burdened.

Traditional and genuine Lutheran forms of worship take these realities into account. In our worship we confess not only our sins, but also our sinfulness – *by nature sinful and unclean!* Such a confession may indeed turn some people off. But without the awareness of that fundamental truth of our fallen existence, where will be the longing for the only possible solution, the solution of Christ the Crucified and Risen Savior? In our worship we frequently offer the prayer: *Lord, have mercy! Christ, have mercy!* In that cry we recognize not only our need for mercy to cover our sins. In it we recognize as well our need for the mercy of God just to get us from one day to the next, one breath to the next. We recognize our total and absolute and constant dependence on God for help in every need, for help won for us and promised to us by Christ in the gospel. In our worship we confess our faithfulness to the historic creeds of the church. Those creeds are both inclusive and exclusive. That is, their saving truths are for all; but those who reject those saving truths are doomed to eternal punishment and excluded from the kingdom of God, from heaven. And the faith that confesses those saving truths is created and sustained by the very truths confessed. To refuse to confess that truth and yes, to rejoice in it,

would seem the height of ingratitude. Worse still, by our silence we would encourage the damning notion that perhaps truth is relative and with it the benefit of both Christ's cross and our own.

But, some may object, how can we attract people or even keep the ones we have by the constant reminder of these truths, of our need and its only solution? In our day and age there are just so many people who don't want to hear it. The answer: What else is new? Our day and age is no different than any other. No one has ever really wanted to admit that he was by nature sinful and unclean. I'd rather not admit it either! But that doesn't alter one bit the need to recognize that truth, to confess it, and to find in Christ the only solution for it. Additionally, the texts of the Bible around which the liturgical year is shaped deal with us and our cross in such a variety of ways that the message need never seem redundant to us. Add to that that our crosses themselves are constantly in flux; they change from year to year, some times from week to week. Thus what we think of as repeating what everybody already knows is still always new because it is the answer to ever new forms of the cross. The simple truth is that if we want forms of worship that no one can object to, we might just as well sit in a circle, hold hands and let each feel whatever he wants to and call it *Spirit filled worship*. Then the salt has lost its savor, as Jesus put it in a slightly different context in the Sermon on the Mount; it is henceforth good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot. Jesus' sermons were certainly not tasteless salt. And that's not the way the apostles preached and taught either. It's not the way the church has been created and sustained for the last two thousand plus years.

When we adopt or adapt our forms of worship, we need always to remember first and foremost that it is the truth that creates faith, not our forms. But for the forms to be really serviceable, they must contain and conform to the facts, to the truth of the Scriptures. And that truth is always law and gospel. It is always the confession of my need, the awareness of my cross and then the solution to that need in Christ the Savior. Liturgies, hymns, sermons that are not infused and filled with those truths can do more harm than good; they can lull people into a sense of security apart from Christ's cross; they can foster a careless indifference to their need to carry their own cross in accord with the Scriptures. Thus our best hymns and liturgies have more references to Christ and his work than they do to me and my worship or my feelings. That's how they focus our attention on Christ as the solution, on Christ as the answer that I need for my burdens and cares. The hymn verse says it best: *Thy Word doth deeply move the heart; Thy Word doth perfect health impart; Thy Word my soul with joy doth bless; Thy Word brings peace and happiness* (TLH, 5).

St. Paul has given us the kernel, the heart and core of what our worship services should always have as their primary purpose: *God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. As God's fellow workers we urge you not to receive God's grace in vain* (2 Corinthians 5:19-6:1). There it is: The recognition of our desperate need and the one and only solution to it. There it is: The understanding that not my works, not my worship, not my good intentions or best efforts, but only Christ's work for me gives peace and pardon, help and finally heaven itself. There it is: The foolishness of the gospel that God would do such a thing in Christ, and that he would even beg me, urge me, appeal to me to receive it!

With such a powerful message, a message that has overcome our own stubborn unbelief and sinful flesh and brought weary and burdened ones peace and rest, what could tempt us to water it down in favor of something that *seems* more appealing? Indeed how could anything be more appealing than this saving message? One has to wonder why so many church bodies have forsaken this central and ultimately only saving message for the husks of happy talk worship that is more entertaining than edifying. One has to wonder why so many churches have abandoned sin and grace for services and sermons that focus instead on me, on how I feel, on what I should do to be a better person and get right with God (and that apart from confession or the understanding that getting right with God is God's work, not mine). Permit a couple of answers to the question, answers that we should take into account when we are tempted to go down the same road in the interest of making our services more appealing, more popular.

Could it be that those who take away the confession of sins and the absolute nature of our need for the gospel just don't trust the gospel? We are filled with the love of Christ and we understand that our calling is to bring the love of Christ to a perishing world. And so we want to fashion our worship in such a way that people are not "turned off" and repelled by it. But if that eagerness to make the service appealing turns into an appeal separated from our real need, then we miss the whole point of the worship service. Again, it is to the hungry that Christ comes as the bread of life. It is to the sick that he comes as the great physician. It is to the sinner that he comes as Savior. Those who recognize their condition are in pain. They are bearing the cross of God's sending and come for food intended for the starving, for healing offered to those who know that they are sick, and for pardon to those who recognize that they are sinners. It is our calling to appeal to them as Paul did in the passage cited above: *As God's ambassadors we urge you, we appeal to you: Be reconciled to God! Here is your great need and here is God's own and the only solution to that need. Here is Jesus!*

So let us trust the gospel to do its work. After all, if you wonder about its power to accomplish faith and then to sustain it, just look in the mirror: In spite of how unappealing it is to your flesh to confess to total depravity and absolute need, you do it. Why? Because the law has crushed you again and again. In spite of how unattractive it is to see in Christ the only hope and help, the only Savior, the one who alone is good and gives me the only goodness worth talking about when he forgives me, in spite of how unattractive that is to sinful pride, it is your one and greatest joy. Yes, you said it already when you were confirmed: You would rather die than be separated from that saving gospel. Well, then, if the gospel has done its promised work in you, why should you be so afraid that it won't do that same work in cross bearers and in cross shunners who come to church on any given Sunday or holy day? I am reminded of the institutional chaplain who said to me when I was a young pastor: *Some times I go into a hospital room and I see such suffering that the thought springs to mind – There is no God! But then I have a devotion with the sufferer; I point them to the cross of Christ, to the mercy and grace of God, to forgiveness poured out on the cross and in the gospel. And what happens? The sufferer smiles, breathes a sigh of relief, and when I leave takes my hand, sometimes with tears in the eyes, and says: Thank you, Pastor!* I thought of that so often and so often relived the story in my own ministry. What I said seemed like a cliché, just words. But those words were as God promised, gentle rain falling from heaven, words filled with God's own power and grace. The gospel works. Nothing else will. Nothing else really matters.

Or there is another possibility, one far worse than fearing that the gospel might not work. That dread possibility is that we are afraid that it will work. What a horrible prospect! What has

Christ promised whenever his Word is preached and taught in its truth and purity? He has promised that rejection will follow in some, persecution will come from others. He has promised that as the world hated him, so at least some in it will hate us too. And fearing that he will keep that promise we may water down the offense of the cross. We may dress up that fear. We may convince ourselves that what we really want is for people to hear the Word, when in point of fact what we are really after is that they hear us, trust us, like us. Then, or so we might imagine, if they like us, they will like God too, and contrariwise, if they don't like us, they won't like God and we will have failed in our mission. But again, let's not forget what our mission is: *Christ's love, Our Calling*. His love sustains us under the crosses that he sends, even and especially when those crosses come as a direct consequence of faithfulness to his Word. The alternative, an escape from the cross by a gospel of entertaining convenience, is the fearful judgment: *Depart from me. I never knew you*. Read the prophets. Read the parables of the last judgment. Read Paul. God has not been sparing in his warnings against unfaithfulness to his Word.

Implications of the theology of the cross for the way we do evangelism

Whether we are speaking of evangelism as a program followed in a very organized way by a committee in the congregation or program offered by the synod or of the best program of all – the sharing of the gospel by one person with another, the same truth will be at the heart and core of the message: Christ and him crucified for us in our desperate and total need. To be sure we have looked for and found all kinds of ways to try to get people into the door. We have special services with a major advertising push. We have pre-school programs. We have Saturday programs for children. We have canvasses and door hangers. All are packaged as attractively as possible so that at the very least the curiosity of non-members may be sparked. And all of that is fine and good. But when we do all these things we need always to remember what our calling is. It is to proclaim Christ's love from the cross. It is to help people to see their need for him and the wondrous, the amazing, the always fresh and new beauty of his solution to a need that they may not have even perceived when they first walked through the door.

If the packaging leaves people with the impression that what the church offers is nothing more than friendly fellowship and feel-good-about-yourself happy talk, then when we get to our real calling, people may feel that they have been subjected to some sort of bait and switch campaign. Worse yet, we may be too slow in getting to the real message because of what we led people to expect when we invited them to come. Or in fact some may not bother coming at all - - they already belong to the Rotary and a bridge club. Perhaps we should give some thought to encouraging people to come by at least hinting at their need, at least letting them know that they have a real need even if they are not aware of it. Advertise a Christmas program with the theme something like this: *Come and see the Child who came to make you God's child*. Or an Easter service promotion might have a theme something like this: *If you're worried about death – and who isn't - come and hear what the One who came back from the dead has to say about it*. Wouldn't that be more to the point than: *Come and hear special music and enjoy coffee and rolls after the service with our real nice and friendly members!!* Isn't that after all how the most "effective" one-on-one evangelism is done? A friend, a neighbor has a problem; I see it or he tells me about it. And that gives me the best opportunity to speak to him of the ultimate solution to his pain. After I've done that I might well say, *Come and see!* as I invite him to worship with me or go to a Bible class with me or let me call the pastor and ask him to visit. The goal of the Lord was just that in the person's problem or pain: To make him receptive to the real answer to

his real problem in the love of Christ. Or to put it another way, to get him to cheer up; it's the cross!

We want our church to grow, but not just for its own sake. We want our church to grow the way the church grew in response to the faithfulness of the apostles to their calling. As they proclaimed without fear or favor the message of Christ's love to those who deserved nothing but God's wrath, *the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved* (Acts 2:47). That didn't happen because everybody liked the message or the apostles who brought it. It happened because the gospel works, just as God promised it would. It happened because even in the midst of opposition and persecution the Lord was present with his Word in the message of the cross. Yes, and it happened as people often were attracted to the message by the love that they saw the Christians practice in response to Christ's love - - a love evidenced by self denial, by a cheerful bearing of one another's burden, by a happy embrace of the cross. But it never happened because they tolerated false doctrine or in any way tried to remove the message of the cross in order to make it more popular. For it is still the rule that the Holy Spirit works through his Word, not through our efforts to make that Word more appealing by denying it and its power. When the opposition comes, we remember how the Lord is still teaching also us to rely on him alone as under our cross we find our whole joy and success in his cross. And when some who were perishing join us at the foot of the Savior's cross because of our faithful sharing of Christ's love, then we rejoice with the angels in heaven that Christ has again kept his promise to save by means of his Word of grace.

The implications of the theology of the cross for the way we counsel the troubled

Our pastors are called on to do more counseling today than we ever imagined possible even 20 years ago. People have moral and marriage problems, family battles, inter-personal-relationship hassles that seem to drown all and sundry in lives of unending misery and strife. At the bottom of so many of these problems there will often be found a long standing refusal to bear the cross, the cross of self denial in a life lived in service. Sadly so many come to the pastor not really for counsel from the Word of God on what they should do; they come looking for some Lutheran holy water to be sprinkled on what they have already done or decided to do. They often want the pastor to fix somebody else. Or they want a ten minute solution to a problem that was years in the making. And if they don't get it, they will "quit the church!"

It is beyond the scope of this paper to enter into any kind of detailed analysis of the particular problems that are usually presented in a counseling situation. But it is not too much to say that most of them have common roots: A refusal to recognize that it is my business to serve, not to be served, and that God serves me in others as he finds that necessary and most useful for me. To put it another way, it's not my business to get anyone to bend to my will, but my business to bend to the Word of the Lord. And when that entails pain, then the Lord is calling me to find my greatest peace and joy in him as I confess my own sin and guilt and rejoice in his grace and pardon. It takes careful listening on the part of the pastor to get past a person's self defense mechanisms and down to the real roots of the problem. But again those roots will so often be, as we say, the same only different; the manifestations or presentations of the problems may vary, but the real root is the need for confession and absolution. After that the call to the cross will always be there in one way or another. It's often surprising how much dust people throw in the eyes of one another and then of the pastor to mask that real problem, their real need.

Of course the pastor needs to recognize that some problems may require more expert help than he can give. Then he will look for someone that he can trust and make such referral as he thinks wise. But even then he will not want to set aside his own pastoral (*Seelsorger*) concern and care. He will try to keep in touch and supply what as a faithful pastor he is uniquely equipped to provide.

The pastor needs to remember some basic truths about his work as *Seelsorger* whether he is the only one dealing with the troubled soul or is working in conjunction with another professional counselor. Some problems he will be able to solve with the application of basic truths from the Bible as he brings people together at the foot of the Savior's cross. At the same time the pastor will recognize that some problems have no immediate solution, that they need to be endured with patience in the knowledge that God has not abandoned or forgotten the lowly and the needy. When that is the case it is the theology of the cross, his cross and ours, that affords strength and understanding for days that may be long and difficult. She may still be a nag. He may forever be a boor. This person's kid may still pick on mine. That person may never be anything but mean and nasty - - no matter how nice his obituary will some day read in the daily newspaper. And yes, this temptation or that one may present me with a fierce battle for days or even years to come. But in it all Christ has called me to be his own. In it all he bids me follow him under the cross, washed by his blood in the water of Baptism, fed by his gospel in the Word, strengthened with his body and blood in medicine of immortality.

Will it always be easy to get people to see these things? No, it never has been easy. Will everyone eventually get the point? No, some will go away angry. Will the pastor beat himself up because he couldn't solve the problem and fix things? Probably. But when that happens the pastor needs to go to his brother pastors who will help him see that he has not been called to be the second savior. They will encourage him to dig still deeper into the one great source of his own comfort and strength, into the Word and the message of the sacraments. They will point him to that same message of the cross and of self denial which was the essence of his counsel to those who came to him. To be sure our pastors do well to study and seek insights into human behavior that can be found in excellent books on pastoral counseling. To be sure even many insights of secular scholars may at times be useful too. But all of the works he studies and all of the insights he gleans from the insights of others will have value only as they point to Christ and his cross and help us in pointing others to his cross and our own.

So then, as the sum of all, we are not in heaven yet. And until we get there: Cheer up! It's the Cross! That's what Christ carried for us. That's what Christ now calls us to carry. It's the cross that Christ promises to make sweet for us. It's the cross that Christ guarantees will provide us with an eternity worth of reasons to thank and praise him when we do get to heaven.

Prof. D. Deutschlandler

The Feast of the Ascension – May 13, 2010