THE SIGN OF THE CROSS

1 Corinthians 1:18-25

March 3, 2024

If you’ve circled any crowded parking lot in America in the last several decades, you know that there’s probably at least one space that’s usually open. And maybe it’s yours. Or maybe not. Depends on whether you’ve got that special blue tag hanging from your rearview mirror.

We’re talking about the spaces reserved for handicapped persons (or differently-abled persons), of course -- spaces which are clearly marked by the universally-recognized blue sign featuring the outline of a person in a wheelchair. If you’re not disabled, it’s easy to become so accustomed to the presence of this sign that we instinctively drive past without a second glance or thought. If you’ve got one of those blue placards in your car, however, the blue sign with the wheelchair symbol is the sign you’re looking for every time you go to the mall or here to church.

If you take a minute to look closely at those blue signs, however, you might notice that they don’t actually conform to the reality in which many disabled people live. The sign has a person sitting in a wheelchair with back ramrod straight and arms stuck out perfectly straight – a posture that looks more like a motorized zombie than an actual person. It’s a sign that seems to convey helplessness, passivity and stiffness, and has long rankled many of those who use the spaces.

In New York and other places around the country, however, there’s been a move to change the parking signs to symbolize something quite different by relacing the stiff person surrounded by a chair to a more active symbol where the person is leaning forward and using their arms to make the chair roll. “It’s truly about people with ability. It’s not about people with disabilities,” says the mayor of a small Massachusetts town that has already made the sign switch. The hope is that as these more active signs find their way into parking lots, they will change the perspective of the public toward disabled persons. At the very least, they’ll cause people to look twice the next time they circle the lot.

THE CROSS AS A SYMBOL – DOES IT NEED A MAKEOVER?

Sometimes it takes a fresh look at a symbol to understand what it really means, and there is perhaps no symbol that has been take for granted more than the cross. While it’s often worn in churches by pastors and others who preach and teach, it also adorns the necks of people who glam it up, using it as jewelry whether they’re Christians or not. Sexy starlets and violent rappers can wear a cross, and not see a paradox between the symbol and their words and actions. It’s just *jewelry*.

In fact, I gather that there’s a trend to wear a “sideways cross” necklace where the cross is laying on its side. It symbolizes anything from laying down or picking up the cross, to being a sign that Christianity has failed and fallen.

Just as an aside, I think that the American flag patch worn by the military on their sleeves has done this a little too. It shows the flag with the blue star quadrant (whether it’s blue or not on the uniform) up and on the right of the flag, like it was backwards. It makes me sad, angry, and feel defeated all at the same time. It feels to me like our military is disrespecting the flag and the nation behind it. You know that a flag flown upside down is a sign of distress? The military sleeve flag does the same thing for me. It feels like our military has gotten it all backward, that they’re running the flag into the ground. I wish I had the ear of whoever is in command of uniforms to change it . . . or at least wear it on the other sleeve, where it would be a right-side-around and charging sort of thing.

Anyway, back to the cross. The cross is everywhere. Like that blue sign in the parking lot, the cross is so ubiquitous that it’s become part of the background.

But that wasn’t always the case. In the Roman world of the first century, wearing a cross around your neck would have been the equivalent of promoting the electric chair. You might as well wear a bejeweled hangman’s noose.

It was more than a handicapped symbol. The cross was a signpost that told everyone passing by that you—if you were “wearing” the cross, i.e., were hanging on it— you were a dangerous criminal who deserved to die. The cross in those days was the ultimate handicapped sign, because if you “wore” this cross, you experienced a handicap from which you never recovered. Death.

Only the worst sorts of insurrectionist, terrorist criminals were hung on crosses, and no one in polite society dared even mention the symbol. When the early Christians used the cross as the primary symbol of their preaching and faith, then, it was a chance for the Roman world to mock them. There remains today an early graffiti caricature scrawled on the wall on the Palatine in Rome that features a slave falling down before a crucified donkey with the inscription, “Alexamenos worships his god.” In the ancient world, the cross was a stiff sign of helplessness, passivity and victim hood – the ultimate moral handicap that people turned away to avoid.

The early Christians, however, leaned into the cross as a sign of the active triumph of their God over the power of sin and death, and it caused a major sign revision.

SO WHAT DOES THE CROSS MEAN TO US?

 “For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing,” writes Paul in v. 18, “but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.” When Christians look at, or even wear a cross, it’s the sign that allows us to park our lives in the saving space God has provided for us in His kingdom. It’s a sign that others will not understand because it looks ridiculous, but God has “made foolish the wisdom of the world” (v. 20). What was considered weak, handicapped, and useless is now *the* sign that saves whose who believe (v. 21). The ancient sign of death became a sign of life.

In New York, the old handicapped signs are being replaced with the new as the originals get old or defaced. Eventually, the new signs will be everywhere and the old ones laid aside. In the world where Paul was writing, there were two old signs that tried to point to salvation. For the Jews, it was the sign of the Messiah, and the Messiah himself would demonstrate signs that would prove his anointed stature as Israel’s true king and saviour. This is the reason that the religious leaders kept asking Jesus for signs, wanting Him to prove His power.

For the pagans, on the other hand, salvation was all about health and wealth in this life with no real hope for anything beyond that. A long life and a prosperous one was the best anyone could hope for, which is why many Roman tombstones bear the inscription *Non fui, fui, non sum, non curo*. I was not, I was, I am not, I care not.”

“For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom,” says Paul to the people of Corinth, who were each, no doubt, steeped in one of these worldviews. “But we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block (literally a *scandal*) for Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles” (vv. 22-23).

The Jews were confronted with the horrific prospect of a crucified Messiah, while the Gentiles were given a sign that there is resurrection life beyond death. The newly refreshed sign of the cross challenged their definitions of health, prosperity, and hope, and pointed to a different sort of life and future than they imagined. The cross revealed the reality that everyone is handicapped by sin, and the only way to healing is through the death of God Himself on our behalf. Paul invites his readers to lean into that new reality. “But to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength” (vv. 24-25).

CAN WE FRESHEN THE SYMBOL?

 So, how do we freshen that symbol in a world where the cross has become a fashion accessory and a sign that is often ignored? First, the powerful sign of the cross has to be *activated* within the people for whom it is giving life. The best sign of the cross is found in the life and conduct of those who are being saved through it by the power of God. “Consider your own call, brothers and sisters, says Paul. Christians should not be recognized by the usual signs of success in this world, but by the sign and work of Christ within us. It’s in Christ that we find true wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption (v. 30). We demonstrate Christ best not by jewelry we wear or the fish signs we stick on our bumpers, but by living lives that are scandalously humble, generous, and meek. We admit our own spiritual handicaps and allow God’s grace to come through us on its way to someone else.

And then, having recognized that the cross has offered salvation to us individually, *we then begin to live as a cross-shaped community.* Paul’s letter to the Corinthians was designed to address divisions in the church, which obscured the sign of the cross in the world. Instead, we are to be “united in the same mind and the same purpose” (v. 10). The early church thrived in the Roman world because it continued to live the life of the cross despite ridicule, censure, and persecution.

In a world that’s becoming ever more divisive, even within the church, the sign of the cross once again has to become the sign that reminds us that it’s not about us, but about what God has done for us in Christ. The cross is the sign that allows us to drop our pretentions of individual strength, and invites us to become part of a community whose strength is always found in weakness.

Handicapped people hang a blue sign in their cars to remind people that they have a different skill set, different array of challenges than others. The new parking signs teach us, however, that “the chair is part of the person” and not the other way around.

When the sign of the cross becomes part of our person, then the Person of Christ will lean us forward and propel us into the world with God’s own strength.

Amen.