



## THE CROSS AS KOAN

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I Corinthians 1: 18-25

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“If you can explain it, it’s not true.”

This is a saying in the Eastern Orthodox Christian church, a tradition that is much more comfortable with mystery in their faith than those of us from the Western Reformed wing of the church. I would have to guess that our text from First Corinthians this morning would be one of their favorites.

All of this talk from Paul about the value of foolishness over wisdom and weakness over strength is like some Buddhist Zen koan from ancient Palestine. What is the sound of one of Jesus’ hands clapping?

Of course at the center of this text about foolishness is the cross. And frankly we are at a significant disadvantage in this discussion. The cross is old news to us so it is difficult to recognize how absurd it is. Let’s rehearse what we have been told for many years. Jesus Christ is the Son of God. He is executed on the cross. He rises from the dead. And we are all saved by it. There you have it.

But imagine if you lived in a culture completely beyond the touch of Christianity. And you went out for coffee one day with this person who was new to town. And she told you this story. It has a nice ending with all of us being saved somehow. But I am not sure how well you would hear that part. After the announcement that God dies, you might lose a little focus. God dies. Really? God dies? I am no expert on the divine but it seems to me that part of the definition of God being God includes not dying. And the dying happens because humanity murdered him? And



you celebrate all of this? And explain to me how this happening over two thousand years ago has anything to do with my life right now. These would be very fair questions.

But perhaps the way forward with all of this is to be found in my offhanded koan comment. Perhaps considering the cross as koan is a way to unpack this text from Paul. I only know a little bit about Buddhism. I am not qualified to define what a koan is, but let me give it an amateur's attempt. Koans, those mysterious, nonsensical Zen stories and quips, are a tool used to free our minds from all of the assumptions of who we are and what the world is. They are designed to provoke great doubt. Their lack of rationality short-circuits the way in which we always think about things that we might begin to think about things on a deeper level. A couple of examples. The student asks, "What is Buddha?" The teacher responds, "Three pounds of flax." The emperor heard about a great Zen teacher and asked him to preach Zen for his edification and that of his subjects. The teacher stood before the emperor in silence. He then produced a flute from the folds of his robe, and blew one short note. Bowing politely, he disappeared.

Nonsense. Right? Pointless gibberish that could hardly advance our understanding of any sort of faith. Perhaps, but what about this one? Who is God Almighty? Jesus dying on the cross. Not quite so far-fetched to hear it as a koan.

One New Testament scholar notes, "Death on a cross was regarded in Roman society (and Corinth was a 'Roman City') as brutal, disgusting, and abhorrent. It was reserved for convicted slaves and convicted terrorists and could never be imposed upon a Roman citizen or more 'respectable' criminals. It was so offensive to good taste that crucifixion was never mentioned in polite society, except through the use of euphemisms." <sup>1</sup>

And we form an image of it fifteen feet tall and cover it with gold leaf so we can admire it every week.



Who would make use of our own sin to save us? Who would purposely be weak and vulnerable in order to conquer? Who would use death as a way to create new life? The answer to all three is our God. The answer to why God made these choices is well above my pay grade. But when I read this text I do wonder if the choice to save us by dying on the cross may have been such an utterly incomprehensible act in order to shake the foundations of everything we think we know about everything.

The Bible is littered with examples of humanity's effort to get a handle on who God is and how to get what we want from God. In the story of Adam and Eve, we are told that they eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of Good and Evil so they could know what God knew. In the wilderness, as the people wait impatiently for Moses to return they forge a Golden Calf so they could worship a tangible God, clearly set before them. In the New Testament, we hear of religious authorities who seem more committed to the details of God's law written before them than the God who created the law as a guiding gift.

It is a powerful human trait that we want to understand our God and how God works. And in doing so we risk limiting God. The Episcopal Priest Robert Farrar Capon writes this about why Jesus so often resorts to parables, "...his main point was that any understanding of the kingdom his hearers could come up with would be a misunderstanding. Mention "messiah" to them, and they would picture a king on horseback, not a carpenter on a cross; mention forgiveness and they would start setting up rules about when it ran out. From Jesus' point of view, the sooner their misguided minds had the props knocked from under them, the better. After all of their yammer about how God should or should not run God's own operation, getting them just to stand there with their eyes wide open and their mouths shut would be a giant step forward." 2

Koans and parables are not the same thing. But I do think they have some commonality. They try to confound us enough to think beyond our preconceived notions. So, perhaps the biggest parable Jesus ever told was one he demonstrated with his very life extinguished on the cross. A most confounding story.



It would be fair to ask if we are really that in need of being led to a place of confusion on our way to greater faithfulness. And I would say we are. Most of us tend to develop some image of who God is and we place that image neatly in the midst of our worldview. Then we live under a set of assumptions we have made. This habit of ours runs the risk of ignoring the fact that our God is alive and powerful and beyond any definition we may have created.

The cross is a contradiction that challenges our preconceived notions. Not only does it challenge our understanding of who God is, it challenges our understanding of who we are. The death of God on the cross changes absolutely everything. The murder of the divine is transformed into the defeat of sin and death. It rewrites the entire story of humanity's relationship with God. And it rewrites each of our individual stories.

We tend to see our lives as a collection of successes and failures. We each carry our own set of mistakes, our less than perfect moments when we have missed the mark in one way or another and have sinned. The cross does not ignore the reality of how imperfect we are. Rather it retells the story of all that we have done, casting it all in a new light. Richard Rohr writes,

“You can trust yourself because God trusts you, using your journey, your experience. Nothing will be wasted; all has been forgiven; nothing will be used against you. In fact, God will even use your sins to transform you! As Julian of Norwich heard from Jesus, ‘Sin shall not be a shame to humans but a glory...The mark of sin shall be turned to an honor.’ [*Revelations of Divine Love*, Chapter 38, Showing 13].” 3

The cross does all of this. The radical absurdity of it rattles everything we think we know. The incomprehensible idea that God would choose to die for us has created a wave so large it overturns everything in its wake. The cross is a new lens by which to see all of existence. An existence when even the worst of who we are and what we do can be remade by God's all powerful love.



And anybody who tells you they can neatly explain how it all works needs to also tell you what the sound of one of Jesus' hands clapping is.

It makes about as much sense as a shepherd leaving ninety-nine sheep behind to go in search of a single lost sheep; or a father welcoming home a prodigal son who abandoned him and squandered a fortune; or how anything the size of a mustard seed can move a mountain.

It is all utter foolishness. Any attempt to make sense of it is silly. We can try and come up with a way we think we can earn this love from God; to have it all make sense; but we are deluding ourselves. We can try and claim what God is offering us is really not that big a deal, but that would only prove we do not recognize what the gift truly is. We can ponder some set of theological propositions to get a handle on it all, but any attempt to fully take hold of this truth is like sand slipping through our fingers.

Accept that the ways of God are beyond all of our ways. Revel in the foolishness and absurdity of it all. Recognize that although the cross is beyond our comprehension, its effects are beyond question. We are loved so much by our God that all of life has been rewritten for us. All of who we are is claimed as worthy in calling us the children of God. Amazingly enough, we don't have to get it to receive it.

*Thanks be to God. Amen.*

- 1 Thiselton, Anthony C., 1 Corinthians, William B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2006, p. 44.
- 2 Capon, Robert Farrar, Kingdom, Grace and Judgment, William B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1985, p.7.
- 3 Rohr, Richard, Everything Belongs, The Crossroad Publishing Company, New York, 2003, p. 129.