

“Community of Blessing,” 1 Cor.1:18 & Mt. 5:1-12; 2/3/08; Albany UMC

When I went to Egypt last year, there were many things that seemed very new and even scary to me. Probably one of the most vivid images I still remember is this: the crescent moon and star.

You wouldn't believe how many mosques they have in the city of Cairo. Simply speaking, almost every corner of street has an Islamic temple and every temple has a gigantic tower with this symbol.

It was just unbelievable! I don't know, to be honest with you, it was very depressing to me, especially when they blew the siren for prayer times during the day. You wouldn't believe how big the sounds were and how they came from every direction; it was like multiple thunders rolling at the same time. What was amazing was that as soon as people heard the sounds, you could see them rush to each direction where they found the sign, the crescent moon and star. It was quite a scene to watch.

In the midst of all these, at the same time, I was very glad and happy to see this—the symbol of cross. They did not have many churches. But each time we saw a church, there was a cross too. To me, it was really a different experience.

We live with crosses. We see crosses here and there. In Korea, when the night time comes, you will see, the skies are packed with the red neon lights of church crosses. Sometimes a couple of crosses on top of a building if there are more than one church in the same building. Here in this country, we see many crosses all over.

But it was different there in Egypt. Crosses were so rare to see, it was so good to see one in the midst of tons of mosques. It was like seeing a close friend of mine there.

It didn't matter whether it was a Coptic cross, a Greek orthodox cross, a Presbyterian cross, or a Methodist cross. To me, they were all the same; they all excited me.

In today's Corinthian lesson, St. Paul says that it is the Christ, the crucified, that they proclaim. He says it is not the profound words and high sounding ideas but the message of the cross of Christ that saves people. Faith is not about how much we know about the Bible or God; faith is rather about if you simply believe or not that Jesus died on the cross for our sins. Faith is about our life, new life, eternal life that you receive from God through the death Jesus died on the cross 2000 years ago. It is not a philosophy nor a knowledgeable talk nor a political rhetoric. Faith is a belief in the fact that Jesus of Nazareth sacrificed his life for our sins on the cross.

Paul says the cross was a stumbling block to Jews. They hated the cross; they despised it. To them, the cross couldn't be a symbol of salvation; it was rather a symbol of shame. To them, Jesus was a failure, not a Savior because what they wanted was a military leader.

Paul also says the cross was foolishness to the Greeks. The Greeks believed that the son of God wouldn't die. To them, the cross was a symbol of ignorance; the cross was something the unwise people would believe.

To Paul, however, it was a very personal matter to talk to the world about the cross. He knew both worlds. He was a Jew who knew exactly what his fellow citizens had believed. Out of his loyalty to his Jewish faith, he used to arrest Christians. He knew what the Greeks were talking about. As a citizen of Roman Empire, he got the best education and he knew how to talk to his fellow intellectuals.

But Paul met Jesus personally. He met the Christ who was crucified on the cross but raised from the dead. To him, faith was not something he was taught from school or church. He *experienced* it with his own eyes and ears. It was something Jesus himself had forced him to experience. When the risen Christ appeared to him and said, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" on his way to Damascus, he just fell to the ground and half-died. Since then, Paul became a

different person. His life changed; he became a preacher from a persecutor.

When I say this about Paul, it also becomes personal to me. To me, Jesus is not someone I learned from a book. He is not someone I learned about at Seminary. I met him personally. I met him with my own heart. So I know him and I cannot deny him.

The name Jesus is too big for me. The experience of Jesus that I had is just too overwhelming to me. It was just wonderful, it was too good, it was too gracious, it was too redeeming, it was too generous, it was too joyful, it was too happy, and it was too exciting. He is a wonderful Lord. I just love him; I just love him; I just love him; he is my savior; he is my God; and he is everything to me.

So I don't care what the world says about Jesus. I don't care what the world is doing either. I love him and I will love him till I die. I will work for him and I will die for him.

To me, the cross is not a small thing. The cross means life. I found my life through Jesus. I found my real self through Jesus who died on the cross. That's why the cross means life to me.

But this also means what my life should be. The cross tells me not to forget how I became who I am. Jesus wants me to live a life he lived--the life of sacrifice and the life of sharing.

Out of his love, Jesus gave his life to us. The cross just tells us about it. Nowadays, this is a very unpopular message to us. The slogans of today are: "Enjoy yourself," "Take it easy," "Have a good time." The world calls for success without sacrifice, a crown without a cross.

But the cross calls for denial, discipline, and even death. "If anyone would come after me, let her deny herself, take up her cross, and follow me." You do that for yourself, for your family, for your neighbors, and even for your enemies.

It is a hard message to listen to. Well, listening may be ok but what about doing it?

The Christian life is a narrow road. It is a hard way to follow. Really!

But it is the most rewarding way we can take in our life. It is the way to win; it is the way to success; it is the way God wants the most from us. So as Paul says in our text, we are not ashamed of the gospel of the cross. We sing about it. We trust in it. We spread the good news about it.

We also have Matthew 5 as today's Gospel text. Mt. 5, as one of the most famous chapters in the entire bible, is called the Sermon on the Mount. It is a New Law Jesus is giving to his disciples as opposed to the Old Testament. I would say that this is *the* sermon Jesus gave in the New Testament.

And here is something I want us to look at closely. According to my NRSV translation, every single verse of Jesus' teaching starts with the phrase "Blessed are those..."

We know through this new teaching Jesus is asking us to do this and that. But before he does anything else, he blesses us. Christ blesses whom the world curses. (William Willimon, Circuit Rider, Jan, 2008, p.6)

It is a privilege for us to be called Christians. God not only saved us individually through the blood of Jesus Christ who died on the cross. But He also calls us as a community to share the good news of the gospel of the cross. Before He does anything else, however, God blesses us as his beloved people and calls us to bless and welcome those who cry, starve, and suffer.

Let us remind ourselves of God's grace and overflowing blessings. And let us also continue to be a faithful community of blessing.

Amen.