

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
9/14/2008, Holy Cross Day
1 Corinthians 1:18-24, John 3:13-17

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹⁸For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

The word of the cross is folly to much of the world, the apostle warns us. It is nonsense, astonishing, and no way to run a business. We could not have invented this religion in a million years – one in which our Maker suffers such deep loss on account of his love for us, his mere creatures.

And so, yes, there is something counter-intuitive about the Gospel. And yet, does it not tug at our hearts? Could it really be so, that reality is so much on the side of love? Could it really be so: that the way of love, undeterred even by the Cross, is the true way of life in this world?

When we speak of the Cross of Christ, we are speaking of a mighty love indeed. After all, Jesus descended not from the Cross, not because he could not, but because he would not:

He descended not from the Cross, not because He could not, but because He would not. For Him Whom the tyranny of death restrained not, how could the nails of the Cross restrain?(Chrysostom, Homily on 1 Cor. 1:18–20)

He would not! He harmed not a soul upon this earth. He was only sweetness and kind-heartedness. He did not deserve to die on a cross, yet he declined to evade that cross. He loved his friends, yea, he loved this old world and all its people. He loved continually, without interruption, doggedly, relentlessly, peddling on and on in love as long as breath lasted in his lungs. And with those fading breaths he still spoke of love: “Father, forgive them...”

The Bible says that we are made in God’s image, and sometimes, glad to say, we look it. Sometimes, the extraordinary love of which we humans are capable is so divine, so Christ-like, that in it we are permitted a vision of our God’s eternal nature.

Let me give you an example. This is from the Second World War. It is the story of Staff-Sergeant Henry E. Erwin, from Adamsville, Alabama. He was a hero, awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor. What he did was almost inexplicable in human terms. In fact, it is reminiscent of that folly of the Cross of which the apostle speaks. There is no way to make sense of it except by the

notion that the man was acting in love for his fellow soldiers. Let me tell you the story, according to the Medal of Honor citation:



The President of the United States in the name of The Congress takes pleasure in presenting the Medal of Honor

to

ERWIN, HENRY E.

(Air Mission)

Rank and organization: Staff Sergeant, U.S. Army Air Corps, 52d Bombardment Squadron, 29th Bombardment Group, 20th Air Force. *Place and date:* Koriyama, Japan, 12 April 1945. *Entered service at:* Bessemer, Ala. *Born:* 8 May 1921, Adamsville, Ala. *G.O. No.:* 44, 6 June 1945.

Citation:

He was the radio operator of a B-29 airplane leading a group formation to attack Koriyama, Japan. He was charged with the additional duty of dropping phosphoresce smoke bombs to aid in assembling the group when the launching point was reached. Upon entering the assembly area, aircraft fire and enemy fighter opposition was encountered. Among the phosphoresce bombs launched by S/Sgt. Erwin, 1 proved faulty, exploding in the launching chute, and shot back into the interior of the aircraft, striking him in the face. The burning phosphoresce obliterated his nose and completely blinded him. Smoke filled the plane, obscuring the vision of the pilot. S/Sgt. Erwin realized that the aircraft and crew would be lost if the burning bomb remained in the plane. Without regard for his own safety, he picked it up and feeling his way, instinctively, crawled around the gun turret and headed for the copilot's window. He found the navigator's table obstructing his passage. Grasping the burning bomb between his forearm and body, he unleashed the spring lock and raised the

table. Struggling through the narrow passage he stumbled forward into the smoke-filled pilot's compartment. Groping with his burning hands, he located the window and threw the bomb out. Completely aflame, he fell back upon the floor. The smoke cleared, the pilot, at 300 feet, pulled the plane out of its dive. S/Sgt. Erwin's gallantry and heroism above and beyond the call of duty saved the lives of his comrades.¹

"Excuse me, Sir," the Sergeant said, as he reached across the copilot's chair to cast the burning bomb out the window. It's gentleness is akin to the dying words of Jesus, Father, forgive.

And it is not just Sergeant Erwin who practices such extraordinary love in full face of their own suffering. This week, we recall the fire fighters, police officers, emergency service workers, and Port Authority personnel who rushed into the Twin Towers back in 2001. They too loved humanity to the end.

And, then, there is you. Many of you have long labored in the field of love, undeterred by the Cross, sometimes exhausted, sometimes confused about the way forward, about what the true path of love is. And if you fell along the way, as Jesus did under the weight of the Cross, you have gotten back up and carried on in love, as did He. I know some of your stories. All I can say is that I am proud of you and proud to remind you of the promise of our Lord Jesus whose Holy Spirit has moved you too:

His lord said unto him, ...Well done, thou good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord.(Matthew 25:21, KJV)

And what of the God of Israel — the one Jesus called "Father" and urged us to call him Father too? Listen again to that Gospel verse we so much love:

¹⁶For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

This year, I find myself especially pondering the parental part of this. God the Father gave, even sent, his Son in love for the world.

Some fathers know that their son is not going to do well in this world. Some fathers might worry for their son because they fear that their son is naïve and will be taken advantage of. Some fear for their son because the son is weak

¹ More of this story can be found at <http://www.homeofheroes.com/wings/erwin.html>.

or sickly. But our Maker need not worry about either the naiveté nor the weakness of his only begotten Son, for Jesus was neither the one nor the other. What our Maker had to worry about was this His Son was unrelentingly good, and he could well have worried about what would happen to such a son in this world.

Yet what did God do? Did he refuse to let his Son go into this world? Did he pull the Son to his chest and forbid him to go? Did he argue that our human race is unworthy to have such a Son among us? Did he warn of the threats? No! in love, he let the Son go? He so loved the world that he *gave* his only begotten Son. Do not say that the universe is not on the side of love. Never say such a thing! God so loved that he gave his only begotten Son.

So, when Jesus was raised from the dead, the early Christians, like some winged creatures, like Mercury himself, raced over the ancient Mediterranean world shouting that Jesus lives evermore! This is the message that has conquered the world. By this message, the twelve fisherman overcame the fancy philosophers of this world.

When you glance at this rugged cross learning against our altar, or later, when you bring it to mind, let it be for you a sermon exhorting you onwards in Christ-like love. Its power and its eloquence does not lie in rhetoric or oratory, but in the deed — that blessed deed by which you and I and everyone have hope. I mean, the deed of the holy cross and the one who died on it, even Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.