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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
9/19/2010, Holy Cross Sunday  
1 Corinthians 1:18-24, John 3:13-17  
Love, at Full Tilt

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

<sup>22</sup>For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, <sup>23</sup>but we preach Christ *crucified*, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, <sup>24</sup>but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. (1 Corinthians 1:22-23, RSV)

Strange to say, this is a sermon against an *ordinary* kind of life. A boy from humble folks that I am, my every instinct is against this kind of a sermon, for I have affection for ordinary people and hope to be counted among them. I was pleased, for example, by a Fourth of July interview a couple years ago with Garrison Keillor in which he spoke of his affection for ordinary people. His lovely line went something like this:

America is a great land, and it was not made so by angry people.

No, America is not made great by angry people, but by ordinary people displaying the ordinary virtues of neighborliness and courage that make a land strong.

Still, this is a sermon against an *ordinary* kind of life, for the simple reason that we follow an *extraordinary* Savior. The holy cross of Christ is the measure of how extraordinary his life was. And I believe that, at least from time to time, *our* lives should reflect something of His extraordinary life of love -- love that could not be put off even by the Cross.

Those who follow our crucified Christ should be the kind of folks who stun the world with goodness. There should be something about us that amazes the world with beauty of spirit. There should be in us a love so puzzling that the world can make no sense of it short of the notion that we really believe what we say, that we follow a Master who loved a sinful world so much that he suffered death on a cross that the world might live.

What ailed the Christians in Corinth is that they seemed to have believed none of this. Rather, they believed in business as usual. They spoke of Christ, yet went on in the accustomed ways of the world. To the deep distress of St. Paul, there seemed to be little about the Corinthians that seemed stupendous for its goodness. There was little about the Corinthians that could bedazzle onlookers and help fetch them into the Church. It was as if that young congregation in the Greek city state of Corinth did not yet get it, that their's was an extraordinary Savior -- one who was willing to suffer the cross for the sake of love.

Let me count the ways Corinth had gone wrong, judging by St. Paul's First Epistle to that church.

First, the church in Corinth was a divided church. I give thanks to God that I inherited from Pastor Schulze a peaceful church here at Immanuel. But some congregations are contentious, with wrangling, jealousy, and competing parties within the one body. The church in Corinth seems to have been such a church. Satan knows that a house divided against itself cannot stand, and he seems to have worked very hard at dividing the Corinthians up into factions, some claiming to follow Paul, some Cephas (or Peter), some Apollos, and some daring to call themselves the "Christ" party, as if our Lord can be thought to side with some sinners rather than others. (1 Cor. 1:12)

Second, the Corinthians boasted of an enlightened morality, as if the old laws of the Lord no longer constrained them. There was a man among them having an affair with his step-mother. This should have caused the Corinthians to grieve, heartsick for their witness in the eyes of the world, yet they did not grieve, but rather boasted of their tolerance. Paul writes that he hears that they are "puffed up" about this affair, while he feels that they should mourn for it. (1 Cor. 5:1-2)

Third, when it comes to legal disputes among them, the Corinthians seek no higher way, no more perfect way, than the world at large. Paul says that in going to the pagan law courts to settle their disputes, they fail to understand their own dignity:

<sup>2</sup>Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world is to be judged by you, are you incompetent to try trivial cases? <sup>3</sup>Do you not know that we are to judge angels? How much more, matters pertaining to this life! (1 Corinthians 6:2-3, RSV)

Fourth, forgetting that our Lord was a poor man, "with nowhere to lay his head," they seem to have divided their table fellowship, casting off to the side their poorer members:

<sup>20</sup>When you meet together, it is not the Lord's supper that you eat. <sup>21</sup>For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal, and one is hungry and another is drunk. <sup>22</sup>What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I commend you in this? No, I will not. (1 Corinthians 11:20-22, RSV)

It would be as if we had two sections of the Coffee Hour downstairs here at Immanuel -- one for the well-to-do and one for the poor. Take today's barbecue, for example. If we did as the Corinthians seems to have done, some of us would enjoy the barbecue, and the rest would be left to look on, to see and to smell the things, but not welcome to dive in. This *cannot* be in a Christian congregation.

And last, casting overboard their greatest treasures, the Corinthians doubt the resurrection of the dead. This Corinthian doubt led to one of St. Paul's greatest testimonies:

<sup>12</sup>Now if Christ is preached as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? <sup>13</sup>But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; <sup>14</sup>if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. <sup>15</sup>We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified of God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. <sup>16</sup>For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. <sup>17</sup>If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. (1 Corinthians 15:12-17, RSV)

Taking all this together, I do not know what the Corinthians were thinking! They were too much conformed to the surrounding world. They were too much committed to business as usual. They had not yet grasped the adventure to which Christ calls us when he calls us to take up our cross and follow him.

Some ideas slip away from us because they are so *strange*, so out of line with our present nature. After much prayer, for example, after much conversation with friends or therapist, we might come to some new insight to ourselves. Yet, if we are not careful, that hard-won insight might slip away. It might evaporate from us because we are not yet accustomed to it and have not yet made it part of our character.

So it is with the doctrine of the Cross. The example of the Corinthians teaches us to beware lest the heart of our faith slip away and we be left with business as usual. And the heart of our faith *is likely* to slip away because the Christian faith is so very odd in its emphasis on the cross. For ancient Greek people, like the Corinthians, the cross of Christ was an appalling feature of the faith. No ancient religion had room for the cross. Think of it: we claim that the only begotten Son of God, adored by the angels, eternal and therefore existing before this old world ever existed came to be born in an out-of-the-way subjugated nation in the Middle East in some non-descript era of time, lived an extraordinary life of love, and received for his good work, not a crown of glory, but a cross<sup>1</sup>.

Furthermore, we do not think that this cross was a mere accidental part of the story, but somehow goes to the heart of the story of Jesus. Let me try my hand at phrasing the importance of the cross: The cross displays love at full tilt. The cross teaches us that *nothing on this earth* can invalidate the call of God to us. Almighty God, Maker of heaven and earth, called Jesus to save humanity, to draw them on

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<sup>1</sup> Refer to *Crucifixion in the Ancient World and the Folly of the Message of the Cross* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977], pg. 111), quoted in *The Lectionary Commentary: The Second Readings*, page 163.

toward becoming better people, to treasure each person before him, both saint and sinner, both rich and poor, both well and sick, and to persevere in this manner of life to the *highest pitch* -- a height revealed by the cross, such that even on the cross Jesus continued steadfast in his ways, even forgiving those who crucified him.

After all, it would have been possible for Jesus on the cross to have exclaimed, "This is too much! This is outrageous. I am not going to walk this path anymore. Yon legions of angels, come rescue me! Take me out of this world with all its suffering and return me to heaven."

But if Jesus had done that, then he would not have been the man of love to the end, to the very end. If he had gotten himself down from that cross and sailed on to heaven, then he would not have been resurrected and you and I would not be able to cast our hopes on a man whose love cannot be doubted.

God willing, you and I will be spared the cross. Our attempt to follow on after Jesus and to live his manner of life will not be put to the ultimate test. However that might be, whether we are nailed to some rugged cross or not, we cannot be spared the *image* of the Cross, for we need to know that there is no legitimate end to God's call to us to love him and to love our neighbors, just as Jesus acknowledge no limits to his love.

How can we who cling to such an extraordinary man be content to be so very ordinary? How can we be content with business as usual? The Cross is forever the measure of an extraordinary love -- a love that belongs to our Saviour and which beckons to us in his name. At some time in our life, and maybe for lots of times in our life, let us try to stun the world with goodness, with patience, with cheerfulness, with forgiveness, and, with God's blessing, draw others to our Saviour Jesus, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.