

# Cross My Heart

1 Corinthians 1:18-25

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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At our church retreat last weekend, Prof. Andrew Dyck from CMU led us in a series of sessions on the theme: “Being with God: Living Attentively.”

We talked about how to attend to God in Scripture, in community, in our own experiences, among other things.

We also talked about attending to God in silence. This one is the hardest for many of us, particularly in the digital age where distractions and diversions abound. I know it certainly is for me.

Well, one of our assignments during these sessions was to be silent for twenty-five minutes. We could go for a walk, we could journal, we could draw, we could sit and reflect. We could sleep. The key thing was that we couldn’t talk. The idea was to create a posture of listening where we might possibly hear the voice of God.

It was a cold and windy day, but I decided to take a short walk. Our retreat took place at Southern Alberta Bible Camp (which was a lovely venue!) and they have a hill overlooking the camp and the Travers Reservoir.

On the top of this hill is a large wooden cross. I think the locals even refer to the hill as “Cross Hill.” Our host had told us earlier that it was a significant symbolic reference point for the camp.

So, I decided to use my quiet time to go have a closer look at this cross.

I got to the top of the little hill. I stood there for a few minutes looking up at this cross. And I waited for God to speak.

And I waited.

Two things came into my brain.

The first one was, “This is such a cliché thing for a pastor to do. Of *course* I would go find the cross.”

The second was, “It’s even colder and windier up here than down by the camp!”

As far as epiphanies go, these didn’t seem very impressive.

But after few more minutes of standing up there and shivering and gazing up at this big wooden cross, something did occur to me, at least in a new way.

I couldn’t help but think of the strangeness of my fascination with this symbol.

We Christians make an awful lot out of what is on the face of it a rather unimaginative shape; two intersecting lines, a lowercase letter “t.”

But we love our crosses. / love my crosses.

I did a quick mental inventory.

In our church sanctuary, we have this cross made by Carl Granzow. This year we have decided to make it the focal point of our display during Lent.

There’s a cross on the banner at the back. There’s this stained-glass cross on the south side of our sanctuary.

In my office (home or church) I have

- a rosary with a crucifix that I bought a few years ago in a bustling Old Jerusalem marketplace.
- a small metal cross that Naomi picked up for me in a German church a few years ago.
- a handmade cross given as a gift from a church member sitting on one bookcase.
- a metal cross extending out of a dove fashioned out of nails perched atop another bookcase (the MCC cross)

At home, I have a little olive wood carving of Jesus on the cross that I got in Bethlehem that I put beside my laptop whenever I'm writing sermons.

On one side of my desk is a prayer rope that a good friend made me with a Celtic cross at the end of it. In the center, a *chi* and *ro*, the two Greek letters that historically symbolize Christ the King.

I have a little bowl full of tiny olive wood crosses I was given after worshiping at a Palestinian Christian church a few years ago.

I have a beaded ring and necklace made by a few of the inmates at the jail, both with crosses embedded in the artwork.

(It's been fascinating for me to watch one guy at the jail, in particular, as we've been watching *The Chosen* in our chapel sessions. He is covered in tattoos from head to toe, gives every impression of being a guy you would not want to mess with.

But he seems utterly captivated by this show and by the Jesus it portrays. Whenever it comes to a scene where Jesus heals someone, I see him whispering inaudibly and crossing himself. One time, he even got up, walked over to the plain wooden cross on the wall of the chapel, knelt down before it, and prayed while the show was playing. Before he rejoined the watching group, I saw him kiss his finger and touch it to the cross.)

Crosses, crosses, crosses.

It's a strange thing, when you think about it, this Christian fascination with adorning our bodies and our spaces with what was an instrument of execution.

In 2 Cor. 4, the Apostle Paul talked about how we "always carry around in our body the death of Jesus." He was talking about persecution, not interior decorating, or body art, of course, but it's an interesting turn of phrase.

*We always carry around the death of Jesus.* I thought of the phrase as I looked up at that cross in the cold and the wind.

I wonder if, on some level, we carry Jesus' death around with us, whether on our bodies or in our homes and worship spaces or in our hearts and minds, as a simple reminder of the price of peace and the cost of reconciliation.

A God who would love us and the world to this end is a beautiful thing, and we need these physical tokens that remind us of this.

In the end, the very fact that we love our crosses so much—that we have taken a crude symbol proclaiming a brutal reality and refashioned it as art—is only possible because God has done the same: taken something ugly (the sin of the world) and turned it toward beauty (redemption).

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This is the “foolishness” that Paul speaks of in our text this morning. For it is indeed foolish that a cross would in any way come to symbolize the “wisdom of God.”

“We preach Christ crucified,” Paul says. It sounded crazy at the time. Paul knew this very well.

He knew that for most people, the cross of Christ looked like a failed Messiah, another idealistic revolutionary who met his predictable end. Another example of brute power winning out over naïve idealism.

It looked like a shameful spectacle, not the moment of love’s triumph over all that is unlovely in us and in our world.

It is the kind of thing that sends people in search of other, more impressive gods. Then and now.

This is another thing I pondered as I shivered under on Cross hill eight days ago: What does it mean to *actually* embrace the foolishness of the cross? How does this foolishness represent the power of God in our lives today?

To explain more of what this foolishness might look like in real life, I want to shift gears a bit. I hope the connection will be clear in a minute.

This week, I clicked on an article in *The Atlantic* called “The Mystery of Partner ‘Convergence.’” It’s about couples, mainly, and about whether or how they come to be more like each other the longer they are together.

As someone who has been married for nearly three decades now, I was curious to hear what the experts might have to say.

Here's some of what it said:

Research suggests that couples can begin to resemble each other in personality, well-being, emotional responses, and health. One study followed couples, who had been together for an average of nearly four decades, over the course of eight years; partners matched each other's baselines in traits such as openness, agreeableness, and neuroticism, and their fluctuations in those traits were synchronized too.<sup>1</sup>

Now, I realize that not everyone is married or in a relationship. And for those of you who are, you can discuss the merits (or lack thereof) of this quote over lunch today. 😊

But I think the broader point is that over time, at least on some level, we come to resemble the people that we spend the most time with. It could be a close friend, it could be a social circle, it could be an online community (which we see evidence of all the time!).

Parents often tell their kids, "Be careful of the company you keep." They're not wrong. There is a sense in which we do, at least on some level, become like those we surround ourselves with.

Well, after reading the article I took it in another cliché "pastor" direction. I wondered, "If this is true of the *people* we spend time with, what about in the life of faith?

What about a life spent "keeping company" with Christ and his "foolish" way?

Is "convergence" a thing here, too? Do we become more like Jesus the more time we spend with him?

I'm not talking about rolling up our sleeves and reading our bibles more diligently or having more disciplined devotions. I'm not even necessarily talking about setting aside more time for silence or walks up hills to look at crosses (although I think in our context where we are drowning in words, we could likely all do with more of this!).

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2024/02/relationship-convergence-similar-personality/677534/>

I'm talking about something like Jesus coming to be the default setting of our lives. I'm talking about coming to see things in a cross-shaped way the longer we walk with Jesus.

Here I can only speak personally. I have spent probably four decades keeping company with Jesus. And over time, I think the needle on my default setting has moved in a more Jesus-y, more "foolish" direction.

What does this mean? Well here are a few examples.

It means that when I read the news, I try not to think in terms of all the pragmatic geopolitical calculations that are endlessly discussed and argued about, but about things like swords being beaten into plowshares and the rough places being made smooth, the lowly being lifted up, and about what God's justice might look like and require of someone who lives life under the shadow of a foolish cross.

It means that when I go into difficult places, places like the prison or some of the places I've traveled on MCC learning tours, I expect to encounter Jesus there. I expect something truthful to emerge that I would not encounter if I confined myself only to more "comfortable" contexts.

It means that I try not to embrace the world's categories for success, that I don't automatically admire the wealthy, the successful, the strong, the smart, the influential. It means that I try to remember that Jesus called people on the bottom "blessed" and had some strong warnings for those on the top.

It means that I try to pay attention to the small, the unnoticed, the seemingly insignificant rather than the obviously impressive and flashy voices clamouring for attention and praise.

It means that I am suspicious of performative religious piety.

It means that I am much more interested in stories of forgiveness and unmerited mercy than I am in scorekeeping. Or at least I try to be.

It means that in all my relationships—husband, father, friend, sibling colleague—I assume that there will be a death to self that is required to make them work well.

It means knowing that sometimes suffering and pain are the pathways to spiritual refinement. That Christ is sometimes most present in the painful parts of our world and our lives. And it means trusting that suffering is never the last word in any story.

It means that I go through life being open to things working differently than “conventional wisdom.” Or, at the very least, that I am kind of spiritually primed for a surprise.

**And it means that when my words or actions veer in the opposite direction in any of these examples—and they do, far too frequently!—I feel a compulsion to confess my sins and to seek the mercy of God which is new every morning.**

We hear a lot about how terrible guilt and shame are these days. And this is true. To a point. Sometimes guilt and shame are appropriate responses for the many ways in which we forsake Christ and his foolishness in favour of more convenient gods.

This is some of what can happen when you keep company with Jesus. Perhaps you would have your own list.

The point is that, in big ways and in small ways, our “personalities” begin to converge with his. Our hearts come to be “cross-shaped.”

Because “the cross” is not just meant to remind us of how Jesus died, but how he lived. Jesus died the way he did because he lived the way he did. The cross is not just an event in the life of Jesus but a symbol of his entire way of being, of his disclosure of God’s identity to us.

This is the insight that I think I think I came to on top of that hill on a cold windy day under a plain wooden cross eight days ago.

The Christian life is, in many ways, simply standing and walking and praying and loving and serving and striving and learning and growing and resting and accepting under this cross.

This is how our default setting changes, however gradually from self to God.

Now, I know what some of you might be thinking. I’ve been a Christian for a long time, too. I’m not so sure I’m very much like Jesus at all.

Two things to close:

1. None of us becomes fully Christ-like this side of eternity. We are all works in progress. “Crossing our hearts” is the work of a lifetime.
2. We have no way of knowing what paths our lives and our characters might have taken had we not been keeping company, however partially, with Jesus all these years.

And no matter how poorly or inconsistently or for how long we have kept company with Christ and his foolish way, 1 John 3:2 remains true for each one of us who have cast our lot with Jesus.

Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed.

**What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.**

The promise of the gospel is that one day the convergence will be final and complete. We will be like him. We will see him as he is.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

