

The Comfortable Cross
1 Corinthians 1:18-25
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M. Michelle Fincher
Calvary Presbyterian Church

Back in early 2012, I had my first interview with the Session of this church. Like any interview, the Elders had some questions they asked of me and I asked some questions about Calvary. Things had gone along reasonably well, I thought, and as we were wrapping up, someone asked, “Is there anything else we should know about you?” You know, you’re never quite sure how honest you should be when someone asks a question like that, but I decided I needed to be as upfront as possible. So my response was, “Yes, there are two things you need to know about me. First, technology is not my gift. If it has a cord, or it used to have a cord at some point in its life cycle, I don’t know anything about it nor do I want to know anything about it. And, the second thing you need to know is that I do not camp—not for anybody, not for any reason, not under any circumstances.”

Why do I tell that story? Very simply, what I was really doing was making a public confession about my love affair with comfort. I like the outdoors, I really do, but at the end of a day spent hiking or biking, I want a hot shower with soft, fluffy towels and lovely-scented shower gel. I want to sink into a warm bed piled high with pillows and fall asleep under the dome of a highly controlled HVAC system. The whole concept of sleeping on the ground where I can be eaten alive by insects, poked and stabbed by rocks every time I turn over, in a tent that is sure to leak at the first hint of a raindrop is completely foreign to me. I don’t get it. In fact, I am at least slightly suspicious of people who love camping. I think they might be a little nuts.

Okay, so maybe I was scarred for life by that very bad camping experience in the 6th grade, but I am not the only one who loves comfort. Think about all the human brain power and resources that have gone into creating memory foam for your bed, Lazy-boys for your living room, Sketchers for your feet, heated seats in your car and heated floors in your bathroom.

There is nothing inherently wrong with being comfortable until we begin to love comfort too much. It’s not always obvious that as we more and more seek out comfort in our lives, there is a danger of allowing our faith to follow suit. It’s all too easy to become Christians accustomed to comfort. We arrive at our church on Sunday mornings and our sanctuary is warm in the winter and cool in the summer.

There is carpet on the floor and cushions on the pews and before you know it, it's not just the seats that are padded. The messages become padded with easy teaching. The doctrine become lifeless and leathery, and eventually the Good News of God's Messiah gets reduced to moral code mush. It can be a shock to the system to hear Jesus say, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself, take up his cross daily and follow me."

What are comfort-craving fans to do with the cross that Jesus speaks of in Luke 9? I mean, it's pretty hard to avoid the cross when you're a Christian, right? That's true if you're a follower, but what fans tend to do is find a way to make even the cross comfortable. "Take up your cross" gets thrown around loosely, referring to even the most menial and mundane tasks and inconveniences. We turn the cross into jewelry and art that adorn everything from sanctuaries to t-shirts to ear-lobes, but it moves to the background of our sermons and Bible studies where we leave it largely hidden until Holy Week forces us to trot it out.

But what else are we supposed to do? The cross is a tough sell. It's bad enough that Jesus had to die on a cross, but why did he have to go and insist we *all* end up on crosses? Isn't that kind of ruining Christianity's hope for decent public relations? Doesn't the cross hinder our ability to win new people? You're supposed to put your best foot forward, after all, and don't we want more people coming to church, coming to Jesus? So, we try our best to make Christianity sound as appealing and comfortable as possible. But, what have we sacrificed in return?

The Apostle Paul understands the dilemma all too well. For those living in the first century, the cross was the ultimate symbol of weakness. For him to preach that it was Good News that God came to earth in the form of man and was crucified—that was complete nonsense, utter foolishness. In the Corinthians' minds the obvious question would be, why would God use a symbol of torture, death and weakness to save the world? They had a very different view of the cross than we do. Crosses are no longer used to execute people and we've dressed it up, using it as an ornament, decoration or jewelry. But if a first century Jew came in and saw our illuminated cross hanging from the wall, they would think we were sick. Imagine people walking around with a guillotine hanging around their neck or an electric chair dangling from their ears or used as a decoration above their mantle. For the Jews the cross meant nothing but weakness and death.

And, perhaps that is exactly God's point. God takes what, from a human perspective, is foolish and ugly. God chooses what has no glory and carries no honor. God finds the least likely symbol for love and life and says, "I'll use that."

God takes what the world says is foolish, demeaning and shameful and says, “watch this,” and then turns it into the power of salvation.

Paul says that God chooses the weak things and we see the truth of that throughout Scripture. Over and over God chose the weak over the strong: Abraham was old; Jacob was insecure; Joseph was humiliated; Moses stuttered; Gideon was poor; Samson was proud; Rahab was immoral; David had an affair; Jeremiah was depressed; Jonah was disobedient; Naomi was a widow; John the Baptist was eccentric; Peter was impulsive and hot-tempered; the Samaritan woman had several failed marriages; Martha was a worrier; Zacchaeus was unpopular; Thomas had doubts; Timothy was timid. The biblical narrative is one long list of imperfect misfits who discovered that weakness becomes strength when God gets involved.

It seems backward to us, of course, this idea that when we think we’re strong we’re really weak. I want to put my best foot forward and make a good impression, just like in the job interview. I want to do my job with competence and skill. I think God wants me to bring my best. But, the truth is that it is when we acknowledge our weakness and humble ourselves before God that we put ourselves in a position to receive God’s strength—and that is strength that I could never muster on my own.

In 2 Corinthians 12:9-10, Paul says, “I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ, for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.”

That just doesn’t compute for us. In our world, in our economy, weakness isn’t strength—strength is strength. There are hundreds of self-help books published every year that communicate one message—you can do it. You’ve got what it takes. Live out of your strengths. But, Paul says strength comes when we realize our weakness, because:

Who else but God could take a cross that represented defeat—

And turn it into a symbol of victory?

Who else but God could take a cross that represented guilt—

And turn it into the symbol for grace?

Who else but God could take a cross that represented condemnation—

And turn it into a symbol of freedom?

Who else but God could take a cross that represented pain and suffering—
 And turn it into a symbol of healing and hope?
 Who else but God could take a cross that represented death—
 And turn it into a symbol for life?

No one else could, but God can. What seems like the ultimate moment of God's weakness was in reality the ultimate moment of God's strength. And here's what I don't want you to miss: what God did for the cross, God can do for you and God can do for me.

When you are your weakest, you are exactly where you need to be for God to be the strongest in and for you. The upside-down truth of the cross is that when you are at your most vulnerable, your most weary, the most overwhelmed, the most sorrowful, that is when God's strength is most available to you. "For God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong." It's not that God used the cross in spite of its weakness—he chose the cross *because* of its weakness.

Children are much better at recognizing and admitting their weakness than adults are. Perhaps you've had an experience of being with your child or grandchild when they insisted on carrying their own backpack full of toys and books and snacks. For a while they manage just fine and are so proud to hear us say, "What a big girl or boy you are!" But, if the day goes on long enough, the body begins to droop and eventually the bag lands on the floor. Mom or dad picks it up to carry it the rest of the way. Sometimes, even the child ends up drooped onto the ground, and mom or dad ends up carrying the bag *and* the child who by now is sound asleep in their arms.

There is a lesson for us in that. The follower learns to admit his weakness, and is glad to do so, because then he can ask for God's strength. It is pride that keeps us determined to carry our own load and to refuse any help. But, the cross makes it clear that when we are weak, Christ is strong.

It really comes down to a matter of trust. Will you, like Christ did before us, trust God enough to let your weakness be God's strength? Because when we let go of our need for comfort, our need to be in control, our need to be admired for our accomplishments or our trophies or our paychecks or others' approval—or whatever it is that keeps you from abandoning a comfortable, manageable version of the cross—it's then that God does in our lives what he did in Christ's death. It's then that God does in our hearts what he did for the cross. God takes followers

who are hanging by a thread and lifts their spirits. He takes followers who are at their lowest moment and uses it for the kingdom. He takes followers who are all but defeated and turns their testimonies into life-giving messages of truth and hope. That's the power of the cross...but we'll never experience it as long as we cling to a comfortable version of Jesus and his death.

So, will we, today, abandon all our attempts to be strong on our own and instead, embrace our discomfort and weakness, so that God can be our strength, all for the glory of God's kingdom?

Amen.