

Counterintuitive Spirituality

I Corinthians 1:18-25

In a case of “truth is stranger than fiction,” comes a story of a church in Newfoundland, Pennsylvania which conducted a wedding-like “commitment ceremony” this past Wednesday where women dressed up in white robes and men in black suits and everyone wore a crown (some were made of high-caliber bullets) and carried their firearms, which in most cases was an AR-15 semi-automatic rifle. They promoted this event beforehand to the wider world, proclaiming that they would parade into their sanctuary to be ritually blessed by their pastor, as they were. This was the image of America exactly two weeks after the Valentine’s Day massacre in Parkland, Florida, where students and faculty were gunned down in cold blood by a lone gunman brandishing, of course, an AR-15!

Fortunately, for once, the church in question was not Baptist, though it could have been in many parts of this country, sad to say. In this case, it was a break-off from the Unification Church of Sun Myung Moon fame; the church oddly named the World Peace and Unification Sanctuary, led by one of Moon’s sons, the Rev. Sean Moon. Apparently, during the ceremony he prayed for

...a kingdom of peace police and peace militia where the citizens, through the right given to them by almighty God to keep and bear arms, will be able to protect one another and protect human flourishing.”¹

According to attendees, Rev. Moon encouraged everyone to bring their AR-15s to the ceremony to symbolize the “rod of iron” in the book of Revelation which will defend their families against “sickos and evil psychopaths” who want to destroy God’s kingdom. “Onward Christian Soldiers...”

¹ Michael Rubinkam, “Worshippers clutching AR-15 Rifles Hold Commitment Ceremony,” The Associated Press, published in *USA Today*, March 1, 2018.

Oh, where do I begin? With the appalling idolatry of firearms—something that seems grossly widespread in this culture? With the stunning incongruity with Jesus’s teachings? With the despair I feel about the lack of civility in our society or the bleak future for our children if this violent streak in our citizenry isn’t curbed for the common good? If this is indicative of trends in our times, what in the world will happen to this country in another generation?

As jaw-dropping as this story was for me, as abhorrent as it may seem in these times, the jarring reality of blessing this monstrous killing machine is not unlike what we do *every Sunday!* I know this sounds strange to your ears, but you and I know this is fundamentally true. Christianity’s perplexing paradox is the symbol of the cross—no less representative of a killing machine than an AR-15 assault weapon.

As I mentioned last Sunday, the cross is an absurd object of violence to raise up at the heart of our faith, let alone revere it as we often do in gospel hymns. For nearly two thousand years, it has been presented theologically as a perfectly normal, if not appealing, object to venerate—as if the cross is natural to what we hold central to our beliefs, i.e., living in right relation with God and with our fellow humans. Yet, this has only been accomplished by downplaying the fact that the cross is an instrument of death and destruction—a Roman form of capital punishment reserved for those they wanted to shame and torture the most: rebellious slaves, lawless pirates, traitors, and other enemies of the state. The cross is not a symbol of honorable glory, but of horrible, shameful death. Crucified criminals were publicly scorned by Romans as godforsaken miscreants—the worst of the worst. So, before we distance ourselves from Rev. Moon and his

church, in all fairness we must reckon with our own spiritual absurdity, i.e., why the cross has become so central to Christian worship and beliefs.

There are many reasons, I suppose, but eventually they harken back to the earliest writings of the Apostle Paul, perhaps more than any other single individual. All four Gospels were composed after Paul lived and had written his authentic letters.² At some point in the transformation of his own religious consciousness from Saul, the zealous Pharisee to Paul, the self-proclaimed apostle of Jesus, Paul reckoned with the monstrous reality of Jesus being crucified. What could this have meant? Given the stigma associated with this ignoble fate, crucifixion certainly was a huge obstacle to overcome within the Jewish community, let alone in the Gentile world. It would not be an easy selling point, especially with the claim that Jesus of Nazareth who was supposed to be the King of the Jews or a son (or the Son) of God was in the end crucified. That must have created some major concerns around credibility simply because it appeared that the god behind this new religion was either impotent to intervene or that Jesus was merely a fraud. The cross was, indeed, a formidable stumbling block to a rational mind. It made no sense.

So, someone had to make “lemonade” out of these “lemons”. Apparently, Paul did so with a remarkable innovation: he embraced the foolishness and absurdity as proof that God was behind it. No one else could be. Paul transformed the shame and ignominy into a startling theological claim: Jesus’s death on the cross was the counterintuitive way God addressed human sin, drawing upon the Jewish tradition of collective atonement on Yom Kippur (Lev. 16:13-16) as the means to bring meaning to

²Romans, I & II Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, Philemon, and likely Ephesians and/or Colossians, while the rest of the epistles ascribed to Paul are believed to have been written after his death by followers, likely based on his circulated writings.

Jesus's inglorious death. It was a risky tack to take, theologically speaking, because it required re-reading and re-interpreting texts to make it work. In many ways, it was a stroke of genius to transform something so horrific into something so theologically good—as the basis for bringing his contemporary Jewish and Gentile worlds together on equal footing by divine grace. God forgave the world through this profound act of atonement in Jesus's death.

Atonement, however, was by no means the only way the cross was interpreted in the early Christian communities and literature—not even the only way Paul himself presented it. In Colossians, the writer refers to the cross not as an atonement for the forgiveness of sins, but instead, as God's way of reconciling all things; in II Timothy, the cross was viewed as the way death itself has been destroyed. If we turn to Hebrews, the cross is presented as marking the end of the sacrificial system in Judaism; in I John, the cross is interpreted as the ultimate victory over evil. So even in the early Christian writings, there were different metaphors and meanings employed to present a positive purpose for Jesus's crucifixion.

The question is, would Jesus himself have understood the cross in this way? As I've said before, unlikely. I imagine the cross for Jesus was about the cost of taking on the powers that be over their corruption and injustices, as he represented God's new realm come to earth. It was the cost for being prophetic in a world not willing to embrace the divine mission.

So what, then, is the meaning of the cross? As contemporary Christian writer, Rob Bell, writes in his book, *Love Wins*:

What happened on the cross?
Is the cross about the end of the sacrificial system
Or a broken relationship that's been reconciled
Or a guilty defendant who's been set free
Or a battle that's been won [over evil]

Or the redeeming of something that was lost?

Which is it? Which perspective is the right one? Which metaphor is correct?
Which explanation is true?

The answer, of course, is yes.³

It's "yes," because any explanation makes sense that counters the conventional perception of the cross at the time—that turns the world upside down—that provides positive meaning to Jesus's execution without requiring it to be the only way to interpret it. In many ways, the counterintuitive spirituality behind the cross can only attempt to be metaphorical and suggestive, not dogmatic, because it is ultimately a mystery, as is the resurrection. It is merely a means to imaginatively take an incomprehensible reality and embrace it with a just and virtuous purpose.

The apostles had every reason to do this. Not only would it square with the man they knew Jesus to be—his goodness, his spiritual authority and power, his relationship with YHWH, his teachings and wisdom—but also because of what they knew of Israel's God, whose power they witnessed in Jesus. The imperial judgment by crucifixion could not be the final word on Jesus's life and ministry. Yes, what happened was a perplexing mystery—a spiritual paradox, if you will—that one who represented the presence and will of Israel's God would die in such shameful, godforsaken fashion. So, by mining the very texts of Jewish tradition they were able to see a range of possible meanings associated with Jesus's death—passages that had been interpreted down through the ages as the suffering and exile of Israel, now re-interpreted as reflecting the suffering and death of Jesus. That, of course, is the Christian tradition we inherit.

³Rob Bell, *Love Wins*, HarperOne, 2011, pg. 127.

To say the least, embracing the cross is nothing less than an exercise in counterintuitive spirituality. It's counterintuitive, obviously, because it's illogical; it doesn't flow naturally from the events themselves. The cross should be condemned, not glorified—dishonored, not revered! Plus, it makes no rationale sense to venerate the teachings and sayings of one who was ultimately judged to be a traitor or one deserving of such a fate. It was a rashly bold, even audacious, claim to make—that Jesus's death on the cross is the path to human redemption:

Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe...For God's wisdom is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

You tell me, what is more foolish—Paul's proclamation that turns everything upside down about the cross, or those who would choose to believe it?

Yet, before this unusual and innovative moral logic gets dismissed as mere foolishness, consider the counterintuitive teachings of Jesus himself:

- *Blessed are the poor and poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God.* [cynic says: how blessed do they feel? Do any of you want to become poor in order to be a part of God's kingdom?]
- *Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.* [cynic says: when was the last time you saw the meek get the prize?]
- *Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.* [cynic says: Good! I'll have everyone curse you and see how you feel then!]
- *You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor but hate your enemy." But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for*

those who persecute you... [cynic says, you can love your enemies; I'll defend myself from them]

- *The last shall be first and the first shall be last.* [cynic says, sure keep believing that and I'll come out on top every time]
- *If anyone wants to become my follower, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake...will save it.* [cynic says, why would anyone follow a religion like this?]

As the cynic says, every one of those teachings of Jesus seems illogical standing on its own, at least by conventional standards and norms. These are counterintuitive spiritual teachings—wisdom that on the surface appears foolhardy, but in a profound way is truer than many minds will ever grasp.

For this reason alone, Jesus's teachings must be continually studied, pondered, and digested to simply grasp them, because they will run counter to common sense and conventional wisdom. Since Jesus's wisdom will not come naturally or even logically, there is an obligation for spiritual discipline here; otherwise, the power of his words becomes too easily reduced to conventional wisdom and clichés. Too much of Christian proclamation today, in fact, pays little more than lip service to the hard edges of Jesus's teachings, smoothing things over to appeal to a general audience, making the gospel palatable and supportive of the status quo. In pulpits all across this country, Jesus's words can sound more like they belong in *Poor Richard's Almanac* than among the prophets of Israel!

Had Jesus merely echoed the conventional wisdom of his time, he wouldn't have been executed on a cross; he wouldn't have threatened the current order—he would have merely reflected it. Instead, we know that

what Jesus did and taught challenged the powerful interests of his time, which is why his life ended in crucifixion—nailed to the Roman scaffold of death—a form of capital punishment that can't be denied its gruesome horror, no matter how much modern Christianity softens its edges. The cross that stands in our sanctuary or around our necks, in its truest nature, is no less disturbing as a religious symbol than were we to use an AR-15!

Somehow, we embrace it, if we can. In some absurd way, the foolishness of the cross ends up being the wiser path to life. It may take most of a lifetime to fully wrap our minds and hearts around what the Gospel of Jesus Christ truly and ultimately means in our lives and in our world. But when we begin to grasp it, once we choose to own it, and as we commit to live into it and proclaim it, then its truth will stun us with its power and nothing else will ever make quite the same sense.

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