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**Church of the Beatitudes United Church of Christ**

The Cross Is Foolish

*A Sermon by*

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Scripture: 1 Corinthians 1:18-31

March 15, 2009

How many of you read in USA Today that the fastest growing religion in the United States is no religion? The American Religious Identification Survey showed that almost all denominations are losing members. Since 1990 when the first survey was taken, the number of people that claim no religion is up to 15 percent. That is up 11 percent in one generation or 18 years.<sup>1</sup>

I was standing on top of our Habitat home yesterday talking to a young person of that generation who said, "How do you write your sermons?" I said, "I read about the scripture, its history, and cultural context, then I think about what is happening today that matches what was happening in those biblical times. I said, "Well, this week I am preaching and I am talking about the foolishness of the cross." I asked her, "What does the cross mean to you.

She said, "It's where Jesus died, it was a place of suffering. God came to live amongst us and share God's love and then died on the cross to take away the sins of the world, paying the price for our sin, sort a blood sacrifice. Yuck.

"Well, yes," I scratched my head and said, "actually you did a very nice job.

Thanks, she said, "So what are you going to say?"

"I'm thinking about explaining how many churches, parishioners, and pastors tell that story of the cross implying that God is judgmental and angry. That if there were no blood sacrifice God would be vengeful and mean and doom us all to hell, whatever that means." I asked her if she thought God was vengeful and mean.

She said, "No, God is love." She lifted her head up and quoted as if to herself, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind and love your neighbor as yourself."

"Excellent. Maybe you could think of it this way. God's nature is to care about our needs before we may even understand we have turned away. God came into the world to help us find our way back into relationship with God. God, in order to reestablish a relationship with us, chose to be born into human flesh to be able to more easily connect with us. And in that way, God came to teach, heal, know and be known by us and love us. Everything born dies bodily so it is no surprise God died. Most people that die suffer at least somewhat. But what Jesus did was show us throughout his life and death that he was willing to give of himself, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, give a drink to the thirsty and so on. He taught us to live life simply, so to speak, give of ourselves so that others might simply live and not help them just survive but to thrive knowing that love exists in the world."

So how does that connect to the "foolishness of the cross?"

"The Jews of Jesus' day were more interested in the law, keeping the rules than they were in being in committed relationships. They were often cut off from one another by the religious laws of their day. Jesus at times broke those laws because his purpose of bringing life and love to the world ran counter to their laws though he was a good Jewish boy. He healed on the Sabbath for instance when Jewish law said he was not supposed to."

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<sup>1</sup> USA Today, Monday, March 9<sup>th</sup>, 2009, Redrawing the map, American Religion.

“The Cross was foolish to the Jews because it said things like ‘Pick up your cross and follow me’. This meant sacrifice, and he did die on a Roman cross, a symbol of disgrace and a terrible suffering. Jesus lived his life in such a way as to put love and relationship ahead of his own life. Jesus chose love over keeping strict adherence to Jewish law. This appeared foolish. Jesus’ choice of relationship and love, living a self-sacrificing lifestyle, not choosing money and righteousness in the eyes of the community, meant he was acting foolish. The cross is in this case a lifestyle choice.”

“What are our lifestyle choices that run counter to our culture’s way that lead to the cross today?”

My friend said, “Well, get a great education, get a great job with a lot of money and benefits, and acquire as much as you can and pass it on to your kids after enjoying and spending as much as you can. Like they say, the one with the most toys at death wins.

I asked her how she thought that was working. “People are cut off from their friends. People have to build ever bigger walls around their homes, hire more police, build more prisons, global warming...”

What would the “foolishness of the Cross” say to that?

She thought a moment while I pounded in a few nails, “Share what you have, serve one another, extend grace, offer healthcare and/or healing, teach all the people how to thrive, meaning the rich might have less.”

Kidding her just a little I said, “But isn’t that socialism?”

She laughed and said, “No, I guess that is Christian. Part of why I don’t like going to church is it seems so foolish. People say one thing but live so differently.”

Remembering myself having said this years ago, I said, “Our task is to work together, like we are today, to build a better world giving our time, talents, and treasures with love so that other people can know they are loved by God and each of us, as best we can. Jesus calls us to pick up our cross and follow him. That means at times foolishly loving one another even when the way is hard and fraught with suffering. How can or why would you love your enemy? People that would actively work against you, lie about you, undercut whatever you are doing even in the name of the church? We do it because even if people are hateful, the way of the cross is love and grace.

At our Habitat house—it is not really our house, we are partnering with four other organizations—there were people there from other UCC churches, and Unity Church and people of no church. And even for all of us, it is still not our house. It is the house of a family, a mom and a dad and three kids who work beside us side by side, who put in their sweat equity hours, who are building their life one hammer swing at a time. They know what a safe secure healthy house might do to their lives and their children’s lives: dignity, value, and worth. Working how many jobs to survive and soon to have a house? I can only imagine what they will give back to the community which gave them, what, a few Saturday mornings? Might they see, beyond us, a loving God, a cross that says “The world says hoard, but we say give it away.” And it comes back. It comes back with love. Thanks be to God.