

The Way Up is Down!

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Philippians 2:1-11

UMC Geneva

“Singing Methodists” – that’s what we’ve been called for hundreds of years – going way back to the Wesley brothers – John and Charles – founders of the Methodist Church in the 1700’s. Indeed, Charles Wesley was a prolific hymn writer known for taking bar-room tunes and transforming them into hymns. Thousands of hymns! Over 6,000, in fact! A number of them remain favorites to this very day. Hymns like “Love Divine All Loves Excelling” and “Rejoice, the Lord is King.” In Advent and Christmas, when haven’t we sung “Hark, the Herald Angels Sing?” Rarely does an Easter pass without singing “Christ the Lord is Risen Today” thanks to Charles Wesley.

There’s something that we “singing Methodists” have known, intuitively, over the years. And that is the importance of hymns and songs for our spiritual formation and for our basic understanding of theology, of God and discipleship.

Perhaps the Apostle Paul was Wesleyan...a Methodist even! Why? Because he knew the power of songs...of hymns. Indeed, in today’s passage from his letter to the church at Philippi, Paul draws on an ancient hymn of the early church to illustrate a central point he was trying to make with the Philippian believers: “Let the same mind be in you that was also in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 2:5) How do we do that? Paul uses a hymn from the early church in verses 6-11 to spell it out. He tells the Philippians – and us – to follow Jesus’s example, “who though he was in the form of God did not count equality with God something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, born in human likeness, **he humbled himself**, and was obedient to the point of death – death on a cross.” What a descent, folks!

“Therefore, God highly exalted him, gave him the name above every name, so that at the name of Jesus, every knee will bow, every tongue confess, that Jesus Christ is Lord! To the glory of God.” What an ascent! In short: **The way up is down!**

I love to read. Seriously. At any given time I’m reading 4 or 5 books related to my work. And just for the fun of it, over the past few months I’ve been flipping through *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology* in alphabetical order

and reading anything that interests me. A few weeks ago, the article on the Theology of the Cross jumped out at me.

What in the world is this Theology of the Cross? And who espouses it? Well, the Apostle Paul certainly espoused it, as evidenced in today's letter to the Philippians emphasizing Christ's humility and death on a cross. To the believers at Corinth he said, "I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ—and him crucified." (2 Cor.2:2) To the churches in Galatia he wrote: "May I never boast, except in the cross of Christ." (Gal. 6:14) Martin Luther advocated a Theology of the Cross in the early 1500's during the Protestant Reformation, relying heavily on the writings of the Apostle Paul. Luther made a clear distinction between a Theology of the Cross and a Theology of Glory.

Modern theologians who've espoused a Theology of the Cross include German theologians Dietrich Bonhoeffer who lost his life in a Nazi prison cell for opposing Hitler and Jürgen Moltmann who entered WWII an atheist and emerged a follower of Christ after experiencing the horror, suffering and death of WW II and incarceration as a POW. From those experiences emerged his Theology of Hope rooted in a Theology of the Cross. S. American Liberation Theology, by the way, owes much to Jürgen Moltmann. Other forms of Liberation Theology in turn sprouted from the seedbed of S. American Liberation Theology such as N. American feminist and womanist and black theologies. Korea has its own unique form of Liberation Theology - *Minjung* theology. And in India, *Dalit* Theology (a theology by and for India's outcasts). All have much to teach us.

All these are forms of a Theology of the Cross. They address suffering and the plight of the poor, the powerlessness of marginalized peoples, and prejudice against people for aspects of life over which they have no control: gender, race, sexual orientation, age, ethnic background and so forth.

But, what exactly is it? What is this Theology of the Cross? According to the Reformer, Martin Luther, we see it most clearly in the crucifixion, where God's victory was in defeat (Jesus's suffering and death), yet life came about through the power of God precisely in the midst of death. Hence the juxtaposition of "descent and humiliation" with "ascent and exaltation." To quote Luther: "God receives none but those who are forsaken, restores health to none but those who

are sick, sight to none but the blind, and life to none but the dead...He has mercy on none but the wretched, and gives grace to none but those in disgrace.” (1)

I can hear you saying, “Pastor Rich, bring the cookies down from the shelf and put ‘em on the table so we can all enjoy them!” Well...One of the clearest explanations I’ve read is that – “a **Theology of the Cross contradicts the assumptions we normally have about life**. It asserts that God is most reliably present not in our strengths or our successes or the things we like best about ourselves (that would be a Theology of Glory). Paradoxically, God is present and working in the world exactly in places where people and life are falling apart (where is that happening in your life? My life? Our country and world?)...Indeed, God is at work where folks are discovering the limits of their knowledge and power (think Covid-19). God is present and reveals God’s self precisely in our experience of suffering, in our weaknesses, our ignorance, our pain and experience of death.” (2)

In short, throughout the entire scriptures, God is nigh, God is near, God reveals God’s self - to the poor and the powerless, the outcasts and outsiders, the marginalized and the maligned, the suffering and sorrowing, the despised and the dying. This biblical motif is magnified and clarified and centralized – where? **In the cross of Christ!**

You didn’t know you were going on a world tour of global theologies today, did you! Well...let’s end up with one. Asian theologian Kosuké Koyama of Japan, one of the most traveled theologians of our time, acknowledged that his theology was shaped by two major experiences. 1) The devastation of Nagasaki and Hiroshima by the atomic bomb in 1945. And 2) his many years of missionary immersion in the multi-religious realities of Asia. He has been a prolific writer with intriguing titles to his books such as *Waterbuffalo Theology* and *Three Mile an Hour God*. But his book titled *No Handle on the Cross: An Asian Meditation on the Crucified Mind* best captures his take on a Theology of the Cross. Its central theme is that Christ had a “**crucified mind**” not a “**crusading mind**.” His peculiar emphasis is on the fact that the cross has no handle...therefore it cannot be controlled or manipulated by humans.

For Koyama, a Crusading Mind is an aggressive mind. A mind whose sole interest is in controlling and conquering others. A Crusading Mind is a triumphalist mind

filled with feelings of superiority and condescension toward others. A Crusading Mind is bent on power, and privilege, and authority. (Think Hitler, White Supremacy, and the German State Church's support of Nazism.) In contrast, a Crucified Mind is a mind that lets go of self-control and allows God to control. A Crucified Mind is open to God's will (saying "thy will be done, not mine"). It is a humble mind that renounces all manipulation and control and emphasizes serving others. That is the mind of Christ! (Think of the early Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the German Confessing Church's opposition to Nazism. Think of Martin Luther King Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement.)

Friends, the Crucified Mind of Christ points the way for us. The way up is down! The path to exaltation is a life of humility. The road to life and exaltation is down the road of humble service.

So what will it be for us in the days ahead? A Theology of Glory?...Or A Theology of the Cross that looks for God to reveal God's self and God's presence in the midst of the suffering, pain and loss of Covid-19? That looks for God, and experiences God, in the stress and anxiety of economic recession, job loss, and financial worry? In the anger and turmoil surrounding the evil of systemic racism? In the anxiety and fear over the upcoming elections. I ask us all: In the days and weeks ahead, will ours be a Crusading Mind or a Crucified Mind? A Mind grasping for self-control or a Mind submissive and open to God's control? A Mind of humility and service.

Whose mind will be in control of us individually and as a church? Ours or Christ's? It matters! It really does! Amen.

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-David Zahl, *Mockingbird* blog, "Another One From Martin Luther," quotes Martin Luther (*Weimar Ausgabe* 1.18f), Dec. 19, 2007.

-*Mockingbird* blog, *Glossary*, "Theology of the Cross."

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