



Preaching the Folly of the Cross

MARY CATHERINE HILKERT

*University of Notre Dame
Notre Dame, Indiana*

The message of the cross is complete absurdity to those who are headed for ruin, but to us who are experiencing salvation it is the power of God. Scripture says, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise and thwart the cleverness of the clever." Where is the wise person to be found? Where the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God turned the wisdom of this world into folly? Since in the wisdom of God the world did not come to know God through wisdom, it pleased God to save those who believe through the absurdity of the preaching of the gospel. (1 Cor 1:18-21)

NO LESS A PASSIONATE PREACHER THAN THE APOSTLE PAUL REALIZED THAT THE ministry of preaching is a share in both the utter absurdity of the cross and its power. Nowhere is this more apparent than when the preacher is called to speak a word of hope in the midst of suffering. Whether we turn to Haiti, Rwanda, Northern Ireland, Bosnia, the Sudan, Central America, the Mideast, India, Pakistan, the rain forests of Brazil, or our own city streets, we are surrounded by the absurdity and injustice of suffering and violence. Even in the richest country in the world, battered women's shelters, AIDS hospices, unemployment lines, and statistics on child abuse, not to mention the daily struggles of families and individuals gathered

MARY CATHERINE HILKERT, O.P., is associate professor of theology. She is the author of Naming Grace: Preaching and the Sacramental Imagination (Continuum, 1997).

In the context of global suffering, preachers can announce the wisdom of the cross only after addressing its folly. Preachers are called to voice the lament of the community and name the grief of embracing the cross before proclaiming paschal joy.

for Sunday worship, confirm that suffering, and in many cases sin, abounds. Is it really possible that grace abounds still more? Is the power of resurrection really active among us? Does the Spirit of God continue to raise the dead to life? As preachers wrestle with the word of God for a blessing in the context of global and cosmic suffering, they are confronted again with what Karl Barth identified in 1922 as “every hearer’s question” about the good news: “Is it true?” Noting the contrast between liturgy and life, Barth observed:

The whole liturgy says: God is present. The whole situation witnesses, cries, simply shouts of it, even if in the minister or people there arises questioning, wretchedness, or despair....But what does “God is present” mean in the face of the great riddle of existence?...Is it true?—this talk of a loving and good God who is more than one of the friendly idols?...A passionate longing to have the word spoken that promises grace is the desire of every church-goer no matter how they express their want in so-called real life.¹

We all long to have our deepest desires and hopes fulfilled, to believe—especially in the midst of the complexity and suffering of our lives—that as the poet Emily Dickinson once proclaimed: “This world is not conclusion.”² Hearers of the word come to church not in order to be entertained, much less to be lectured or scolded, but rather hoping to hear a word that will enable them to enter more deeply into the paschal mystery that is already there in their daily lives, hoping to believe again the promise that is almost too good to be true: that death is not the end, that forgiveness and reconciliation are possible, that work for justice and peace is not in vain, that the power of love really is the mystery at the heart of the universe.

The word of grace that all human beings, not only churchgoers, long to hear cannot be spoken too quickly, however. Hope in the resurrection cannot be a radical experience of grace unless the cross of Jesus is seen for the profound sign of contradiction that Paul reminded us it is. Especially in a society that endorses capital punishment and is noted as not only the most powerful but also one of the most violent countries in the world, preachers need to be cautious about romanticizing what is in itself an instrument of execution. Further, as Leonardo Boff reminds any who would glorify suffering: “the cross always crucifies.” In Christian faith the last word about the cross may be that it is indeed a mystery of divine love, fidelity, and solidarity, but in the context of global suffering the first word that must be spoken is of its scandal, injustice, and absurdity.

¹Karl Barth, “The Need and Promise of Christian Preaching,” in *The Word of God and the Word of Man* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1957) 107-109.

²Emily Dickinson, “This world is not conclusion,” in *Selected Poems and Letters of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Robert N. Linscott, (New York: Doubleday/Anchor, 1959) 135.

I. THE SCANDAL OF THE CROSS

How are we to preach that mercy is at the heart of reality when there is so much evidence to the contrary? Can we refute the claim that the centrality of the cross in Christianity fosters an understanding of God as divine executioner and of Christian spirituality as encouraging passive acceptance of suffering and injustice as “bearing one’s cross”?³ Perhaps a first step is to realize that we do not preach the cross, but rather we preach Jesus Christ, and him crucified—and risen.

Not only political and liberation theologians, but most theologians reflecting on christology today, emphasize that the cross must be put in the context not only of the resurrection but also of the life and ministry of Jesus—both of which announce unconditionally that our God is a God of life. But living the life of God has consequences in a world of sin. As many have noted, it is no coincidence that Jesus did not die in bed. Jesus was executed as a political criminal and a religious blasphemer as the result of his “dangerous preaching” of the reign of God. His healing ministry and his inclusive table-companionship threatened traditional boundaries that distinguished insiders from outsiders in both religious and political realms. Jesus shocked religious authorities as he announced the forgiveness of sins, a proclamation that was the prerogative of God alone. He touched lepers and spoke with Samaritans. He formed bonds of friendship with women and with tax-collectors who collaborated with the Romans, and invited both into the circle of his disciples. A faithful Jew, he radically reinterpreted Jewish tradition and laws of sabbath observance and ritual purity. His liberating lifestyle, his shocking parables and beatitudes, and the unconditional compassion of God that he embodied in his person were all profound challenges to religious and political structures of the day. Even the joy and freedom he invited others to embrace turned the present order upside down. As liberation theologians have noted, festivity, too, can be subversive.⁴ That life—the very life of God-among-us—was rejected in the execution of the cross. In the end the one whose entire life proclaimed “God’s ‘no’ to human suffering”⁵ was betrayed by an intimate disciple, abandoned by many of his closest friends, handed over to the empire by religious leaders, sentenced by a political leader who knew him to be innocent, shamed, mocked, and tortured by soldiers, and executed as a criminal, dying on a cross between two thieves.

The stress of political, liberation, and feminist theologians on the human evil and injustice that brought about the folly of the cross gives rise to the further question of Jesus’ own experience of death and suffering. It is not possible to know the inner experience of Jesus with certitude. But those who take seriously the full humanity of Jesus can begin to imagine the stark reality behind the gospel portrait of

³See, for example, Rita Nakashima Brock, *Journeys by Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power* (New York: Crossroad, 1988) 56; Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker, “For God So Loved the World?” in *Christianity, Patriarchy and Abuse*, ed. Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole Bohn (New York: Pilgrim, 1989) 1-30.

⁴See, for example, Leonardo Boff, *Liberating Grace* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1979).

⁵The phrase is taken from Edward Schillebeeckx, *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology* (New York: Seabury, 1979) 178.

Jesus' anguish in the garden of Gethsemane or his cry from the cross, "My God, my God why have you forsaken me?" The one who preached absolute trust in the reign of a compassionate God was left in darkness to face rejection of his mission and the utter silence of Abba. Jesus knew the experience that many describe as nothing short of abandonment by God.⁶

On the one hand, in connecting scripture, liturgy, and human life, preachers must confront the genuine stumbling block: the cross of Jesus, like all human suffering, raises profound questions about God and God's fidelity. On the other hand, it is precisely the language and symbol of the cross that enables preachers to identify the religious depths of all human suffering, to connect our grief and our God in ways that are beyond comprehension or words. As Simone Weil so powerfully named the experience:

It is when from the uttermost depths of our being we need a sound which does mean something—when we cry out for an answer and it is not granted—it is then that we touch the silence of God.⁷

Without condoning or glorifying suffering, one of the tasks of the preacher is to hold open the hope that there is no experience of human anguish that is beyond the absolute presence of God.

The challenge of preaching the wisdom of the cross requires us to hold on to the conviction that at the farthest edges of darkness we fall into the hands of the living God, while at the same time rejecting any religious legitimation of human suffering as God's will. In an age of massive and senseless suffering including two world wars and the holocaust, Edward Schillebeeckx, among others, has underscored the scandal of the cross. He has gone so far as to suggest that in one sense we are saved in spite of the cross of Jesus, rather than because of it.⁸ Nevertheless, Schillebeeckx concludes that in the end Jesus faced the cross as the final consequence of fidelity to his preaching mission with a radical hope in the compassionate God he knew as Abba. He filled an experience that was in itself meaningless and absurd with meaning, love, and solidarity with all the innocent who suffer. What Christians celebrate is not the cross, nor the sufferings of Jesus, but the power of a love that is faithful even unto death.

Preaching about the "saving power of the cross" is preaching about God's unlimited mercy and forgiveness, not about a God who tests us in ways we just cannot understand, much less about a vengeful God who exacts a blood ransom as the price to be paid for human sinfulness. The triumph of the cross is that in Jesus, God's love and fidelity have taken on the evil and suffering of this world and broken their hold once and for all with the stronger power of love. Hence the mocking

⁶See Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974); idem., "The Crucified God: God and The Trinity Today," in *New Questions about God*, Concilium 76, ed. J. B. Metz (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972) 26-37; and Robert J. Schreiter, "The Crucified God," *The Bible Today* 28 (May 1990) 159-164.

⁷Quoted as frontispiece in William J. Hill, *Search for the Absent God* (New York: Crossroad, 1992).

⁸Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord* (New York: Seabury, 1980) 729-730.

tone of Paul: “O death where is your victory?” (1 Cor 15:55). Christians continue to hope that God can and will bring life out of death, that like Jesus, those who have lived faithfully will be vindicated and transformed beyond death, that the power of love is stronger than the power of evil. But the dynamic of hope, like the power of resurrection, is beyond human control or possibility. Only God can restore the dead to life. Too often the temptation for the Christian preacher is to move too quickly to the good news of resurrection without honoring the depths of the anguish of the crucified and the human process of grieving. We too often try to “offer answers” rather than to stand in solidarity with the family and the community in the midst of their grief and, with them, to entrust the pain to God. Perhaps this is because the preacher’s own faith that God can and will bring life beyond death is pressed to the limits especially in situations of suffering caused by radical evil. When there is truly no way forward in a situation of human grief, pain, or injustice, lament may be the most appropriate form of preaching as well as prayer.

II. THE WISDOM OF LAMENT

One of the most powerful brief preachings I ever heard at a wake was proclaimed by a young woman who stood with her mother and sisters and brothers before her father’s casket and said: “We have God’s promise that death is not the end. We are here to hold God to that promise.” The genre of lament and the tradition of arguing with God, both firmly established in the Jewish tradition of prayer, have everything to do with holding God to the promises of the covenant. But lament goes further in incorporating into prayer accusation or complaint against God in protest, anger, or anguish, precisely because the present situation seems incompatible with the covenant. Boldness before God that “cries out to heaven” for a response is rooted in an understanding of the covenant as a relationship binding on both divine and human partners. The psalms of lament reflect the psalmist’s experience of both external threat and internal disorientation. Worst of all for the believer is the silence and even absence of God reflected in the haunting refrain from Psalm 22: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” While the majority of psalms of lament end with a confession of trust, some are more stark, never reaching a point of resolution or even explicit hope, such as Psalm 88 which ends with these verses:

Why, O Lord do you reject me:
 why hide from me your face?
I am afflicted and in agony from my youth;
 I am dazed with the burden of your dread.
Your furies have swept over me;
 your terrors have cut me off.
They encompass me like water all the day;
 on all sides they close in on me.
Companion and neighbor you have taken away from me;
 my only friend is darkness.

Yet even here, the psalmist has not yet broken off relationship.

If preachers are to speak in the name of the community in times of lament they must also be in touch with and able to express the community's "complaints" against God. At times the language of lament may be the only language available, if, as Will Soll says, one is "not to play hypocrite to one's heart, but to keep, as it were, a channel open to God."⁹ The anger against God that results when hopes have been disappointed or betrayed can remain a form of connectedness, a form of hope in the possibility of renewed relationship that may not be genuinely possible at present. As Beverly Harrison has argued, anger can indeed be a grace if directed toward the work of love and reconciliation.

Anger is not the opposite of love. It is better understood as a feeling-signal that *all is not well* in our relation to other persons or groups or to the world around us. Anger is a *mode of connectedness* to others and it is always a *vivid form of caring*.... [A]nger is a signal that change is called for, that *transformation in relation* is required.¹⁰

Naming grief is an integral part of the process of preaching hope in the resurrection because the first step toward overcoming suffering is finding a language that leads one out of the prison of silence.¹¹ A form of good news is to be found already in the language of lament and tears. Naming pain and claiming forgotten memories are parts of a larger journey toward healing, wholeness, and joy, although that future hope cannot be seen at every step on the journey. The grief of those forced to bear the cross or those who witness their crucifixion can give way to the grace of anger at the human injustice that is the cause of so much suffering and fuel an energy that can be focused toward establishing just relations and protecting human dignity and concern for all creation.

Further, lament can also provide the occasion for believers to recognize divine rage and grief over the violation of God's beloved children and creation. Preaching lament in the midst of a battered women's shelter or at a gathering of survivors of sexual abuse may elicit or free a rage that has never come to words, a rage entrusted to the God whom Hosea described as a she-bear, furious at the violation of her own young. When do we hear God's own rage proclaimed as forcefully as the prophet voiced it? "I will attack them like a bear robbed of its young, and tear their hearts from their breasts" (Hos 13:8). Clearly one of the roles of the preacher is to enable the community to connect their grief and their God, their frustration and their faith, their rage and their redeemer.

⁹William Michael Soll, "The Israelite Lament: Faith Seeking Understanding," *Quarterly Review* 8 (1988) 86.

¹⁰Beverly Wildung Harrison, "The Power of Anger in the Work of Love," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 36 (Supplementary Issue 1981) 49.

¹¹See Dorothee Sölle, *Suffering* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975) 61-86.

III. THE CALL TO CONVERSION AS GOOD NEWS

At times another form of naming grief is necessary if Christian communities are to give witness to the cross as power of salvation. Relinquishment, repentance, and divestment are necessary losses for the dominants in any social system of oppression if the equal dignity of all members of the human family is to be the criterion for distribution of basic goods and resources and if baptismal dignity and the gifts of the Spirit are to be the basis for how we live and minister as church. For those who benefit from their role or status in ecclesiastical hierarchies and systems of power, embracing the wisdom of the cross includes a *kenosis* (emptying) of power and privilege and a call to lament the many ways in which the church and Christian ministers have not yet named or embodied what is truly the heritage of disciples who have had their feet washed by “one who came to serve not to be served.” Voicing that kind of ecclesial lament and working to establish alternative communities of equal discipleship will involve an experience of both the folly and the wisdom of the cross for those who are dominants in the present system as they proclaim that “all is not well,” that the future can and must be different from the present. As Douglas Meeks and Jürgen Moltmann once noted:

There is no solidarity with the victims of racism, sexism and capitalism without the betrayal of their betrayers. Whoever wants genuine communion with the victims must become the enemy of their enemies. Thus if he or she comes from the ranks of the enemy, he or she will become a betrayer. To become free from the oppressive prison of one’s own society means to become a “stranger among one’s own people.” Yet it is only through this estrangement that one can show to the oppressors the homeland of humanity.¹²

The preacher’s reframing of a familiar situation, naming the injustice and oppression that often go unnoticed or unnamed, challenges the wisdom of this world by confronting the market economy with the economy of grace, by contrasting both the corporate ladder and the clerical system with a servant leader who washed feet, by juxtaposing the survival of the fittest and the survival of the cosmos; in short, by announcing the reign of God. The public lament of the preacher can focus the repentance, protest, and new energy of the baptized and move the assembly to active involvement in work for a more just order. In the shared struggle for more equitable distribution of the resources of creation, for more authentic relationships, and for a church that more clearly images the body of Christ, contemporary disciples will discover their own share in the folly of the cross.

There are, however, situations of suffering that are so severe and dehumanizing that there is no redemptive dimension to the suffering and active resistance is simply impossible. As Elizabeth Johnson describes the degradation that Simone Weil has named affliction, “the effect is to squeeze out life, dry out power, intro-

¹²Jürgen Moltmann and M. Douglas Meeks, “The Liberation of Oppressors,” *Christianity and Crisis* 38 (1978) 310-317.

duce unwarranted guilt and self-hatred, plunge the sufferer into darkness.”¹³ As she wrestles with this final grotesque revelation of God, Johnson leaves us with the earliest women in the tradition at the foot of the cross: “There is no solution here....Only a terrible sense of the mystery of evil and the absence of God, which nevertheless may betray divine presence, desecrated.”¹⁴

Faced with that kind of evil, preachers, like all other Christians, are reduced to silent witness and solidarity with those who suffer. Here David Power’s suggestion for preaching at the time of a suicide may have broader application for Christian preaching in other situations that call for lament over the desecration of all that is sacred. Power writes:

Rather than focusing on Christ’s resurrection, or on resurrection in Christ, the funeral liturgy on such an occasion serves to recall the death of Jesus Christ and his struggle with the forces of death, throughout his ministry and at the point of his own consummation. The solidarity of Christ with the human race in its struggle is more likely to touch the hearts of the bereaved than words about our solidarity with him in paschal joy. Indeed, it is only out of the memory of Christ’s solidarity with human strife that hope can be born whenever the ambiguities and tensions of life’s meaning are as prominent as they are in the story of a suicide.¹⁵

Amid that kind of darkness Christians can only stand together and support one another as we await the birth of the kind of “hope against hope” that is at the heart of Christian belief in the resurrection.

IV. WITNESSES TO THE RESURRECTION

The wager that wisdom can be found in the “folly of the cross” rests firmly on the conviction that the Spirit of God has raised Jesus from the dead. Paul is quite clear about the implications of the resurrection for Christian preaching: “If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is void of content and your faith is in vain” (1 Cor 15:14). Christians have no explanation of either suffering or hope, but only the story of Jesus and a cloud of witnesses who throughout history have testified to their experience of resurrection. The gospel narratives offer witness that the unexpected grace of hope can and does happen: Two companions who journey on a road, telling the story of their dashed hopes, welcome a stranger who listens to their pain and suddenly reshapes their story from the perspective of the promise and fidelity of God. A woman stands at a tomb weeping, mourning the loss of all she held dear. In one she could see initially only as a gardener she encounters her beloved speaking her name, commissioning her to share the good news with others. A man

¹³Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992) 261. See the original essay by Simone Weil, “The Love of God and Affliction,” in *Waiting for God* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973) 117-136.

¹⁴Johnson, *She Who Is*, 264.

¹⁵David N. Power, “The Funeral Rites for a Suicide and Liturgical Developments,” in *Worship, Culture and Theology* (Washington, D.C.: Pastoral Press, 1990) 261-269.

who betrayed his closest friend is forgiven and entrusted with the mission to “feed my sheep.” A fearful community hears a word of peace spoken; a doubtful disciple touches human wounds and recognizes the transformation of a friend. All the resurrection experiences testify to hope born amidst loss and pain. Hope emerges in the power of God breaking forth in new imaginings and new energy. Beyond grief the disciples discover it is possible to love again, to trust that one is forgiven, to get on with life, to invest new energy in the people and mission that have been entrusted to them. The details of the Easter narratives differ, but in each case the Spirit of God brings about what appears to be impossible. This reading of the relationship between cross and resurrection emphasizes that good news is to be found in the defeat of the cross, God’s definitive overthrow of evil, breaking the power of sin and death. The resurrection, not the cross, is God’s final word.

Stories of Christian martyrs, too, from those who died in the persecutions of the early church to those tortured and murdered today for living the gospel, are proclamations of the gospel enfleshed. The lives of all those who have gone to death like Jesus, alone and in silence, but nevertheless with a radical trust in God’s mercy, give the clearest testimony to the possibility of Christian hope. Many have spoken explicitly of the possibility of their own death, but at the same time expressed their firm conviction that sin and death hold no final power. Oscar Romero’s words take on even deeper meaning when we realize that two weeks after he spoke them he was assassinated while celebrating eucharist:

I have frequently been threatened with death. I must say that, as a Christian, I do not believe in death but in the resurrection. If they kill me, I shall rise again in the Salvadoran people....If they manage to carry out their threats, I shall be offering my blood for the redemption and resurrection of El Salvador.¹⁶

The preaching of Christian martyrs shares most explicitly in the absurdity of the cross. But all Christian preaching calls the community to embrace the mystery of the cross into which we have been baptized. The role of the preacher is to offer an alternative way of imagining the human situation by refocusing human life and creation through the lens of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Like Jesus in the Emmaus narrative, the preacher is called to walk with people on their journeys and listen to their stories, searching for traces and echoes of God’s grace in their dashed hopes, their sufferings, and their ongoing journeys. At the appropriate moment, it is the preacher’s role, as one “entrusted with the word,” to try to reinterpret the journey of human life by naming the grace that is available in the most desperate of circumstances through offering the metaphors of God as ways of perceiving and living human life. As preacher, Jesus broke open the imagination of the disciples on the journey to Emmaus by suggesting that their hopes for a Messiah had indeed been realized but precisely in a way they could not imagine: through a suffering Messiah now raised to new life. That impossible possibility opened up for

¹⁶Cited in Jon Sobrino, *Archbishop Romero: Memories and Reflections* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1990) 99-100.

the disciples not only the recognition of Jesus in the breaking of bread with a stranger, but also a new way to imagine—and therefore a new way to live—in the face of all the suffering and reversals of their lives.

Perhaps the deepest challenge to both preacher and community is that the promise of hope can never be proclaimed only in words. Rather, the symbols and stories of Christian hope will “capture the imagination” only when they are enfolded in living communities of hope and resistance, communities of solidarity and love, communities of believers who cling to God in the darkness—that is to say, communities that are foolish enough to give witness to the wisdom of the cross. ⊕