

LOOKING GOOD ON WOOD

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Isaiah 58:1-9a; II Corinthians 13:3b-8

Father Daniel Berrigan used to say, “If you want to follow Jesus, you’d better look good on wood.”

A generous priest, and a generous French bishop, allowed *all* the guests at my brother’s wedding to receive Communion. As I lifted my head from the cup, there was an acolyte, holding low before each of us, in our line of vision, a small statue of Christ on the Cross. Nothing showy, and nothing gruesome, nothing but Christ—crucified. “Christ was crucified in weakness,” Paul says, “but lives by the power of God.”

Those Christians who are Protestants, of course, pride ourselves on the empty cross. The Resurrection cross, we say—it’s the cross that proclaims God’s power, and the victory of God in Christ over death—and there’s great validity to that, at least in the abstract. But a few years later, in the days and weeks after 9/11, I wanted a body on that cross. I wanted a little more of...that strength that can only be made perfect in weakness.

A tall-steeple Presbyterian church in the city has a complicated history with the homeless. Like many downtown churches, whose steeples used to be the skyline and are now dwarfed by the skyscrapers, those cathedrals of commerce and technological advancement, this particular church has been discovering its calling to join its new neighborhood, which includes not only the occupants of those buildings, but the homeless poor who surround them day and night, huddling close to the small amount of warmth that radiates from the heat inside, sleeping on the church steps because they feel a little safer there.

Now that congregation can be proud of having stood up to all the tall-steeple churches around them, the only ones who refused to kick the homeless off their steps, the only ones who, at great expense, and inconvenience to themselves while the construction was going on, excavated their basement for an overnight shelter, shower room, and lunchroom. But it wasn’t always thus. I can remember when the session and trustees of that church held a referendum for the congregation, and the congregation strongly advised NO to allowing any homeless on the steps or the sidewalks around the building.

But the Spirit was working, you see, and having voted that way, they then had to live with their decision. And their consciences. “Examine yourselves,” says Paul, “to see whether you are living in the faith. Test yourselves.”

And a few years later, they reversed that decision. So now, yes, they are proud of their new facility and excited about their mission. They’ve changed their core identity. No longer do they say they’re preserving a heritage, a noble house of worship, on the National Register of Historic Places, right across the street from the Trump Tower, on some of the most desirable real estate on the planet. Now what excites them is what’s been happening in their spiritual life together, since they’ve thrown in their lot with the poor—for the truth is, they’re stronger for it.

In the early days, though, I heard the following story. A lifelong member confronted the pastor one day. “Why in God’s name do you let all these lowlifes camp out on our front steps? They smell, they’re panhandling, they’re drinking, and they’re smoking, too—it’s a fire hazard! None of my friends want to come to church any more. What kind of a church is this? We’re such a bad neighbor

to the businesses and the other churches around here! Just give me one good reason you're doing this!"

The pastor thought for a moment, and then he said, "Well, I guess it's because I'm trying to love people as Jesus loves me, and by doing so, I hope I am able to point a few people to God." "Oh," came the reply, "Please don't misunderstand me. I completely agree that these people need God!" "And," he replied, "I don't want you to misunderstand *me*. I'm not talking about *those* people needing God. I'm talking about *you*."

And every time we take a risk, even the one that pastor took, we are simply being among people as Christ—crucified. In weakness. But living by the power of God.

Here's what it says about our "mission" in the Book of Order, that part of our Presbyterian constitution upon which the United States Constitution is based (F-1.0301):

The church is the Body of Christ. Christ gives to the Church all the gifts necessary to be his body. The Church strives to demonstrate these gifts in its life as a community in the world.

The Church is to be a community of hope, rejoicing in the sure and certain knowledge that, in Christ, God is making a new creation. This new creation is a new beginning, for human life and for all things. The Church lives in the present on the strength of that promised new creation.

The Church is to be a community of love, where sin is forgiven, reconciliation is accomplished, and the dividing walls of hostility are torn down.

The Church is to be a community of witness, pointing beyond itself, through word and work, to the good news of God's transforming grace in Jesus Christ its Lord.

That priest at my brother's wedding had been a worker priest, working in the porcelain factories in Limoges. Like many people in the porcelain industry, he had respiratory problems from decades of breathing the fine porcelain dust. He had continued all those years to serve among them, from the least to the greatest, without prejudice or recrimination. With Christ, crucified, in him. No drama, just living life, poured out for his neighbor, to the day he died.

The people of Isaiah's day were oblivious to what it meant to live every day as people of faith. They were back from exile! They had a Temple again! They came to the House of the LORD to pray and fast and give alms, just as they were supposed to do—weren't they just *blessed* to have such a beautiful place to come to, and the ability to worship in freedom? So they were perplexed and deeply troubled that the LORD would not draw near. They were good people, yet their relationship to the Almighty was cut off by their having cut themselves off, in their corporate life as a faith community, from the poor. They weren't committing any overtly evil acts, they were "good people," they'd rebuilt the Temple and observed all the Temple ordinances, so why wouldn't the LORD draw near?

Their nation, struggling at that time to restore itself, was so busy trying to take care of its own that it had lost sight of those who had fallen behind. And instead of challenging their community as its voice of conscience, the people of God were focused on themselves and their own needs and those of their families and friends, and therefore they resembled nothing so much as the world around them. God had not forsaken them, you see: they had, unwittingly, forsaken God.

Churches today are in a similar quandary. We want to thrive, yet in order for this to come about, we have to *be* good news in our hurting world *now*. And the Good News, the Gospel, hasn't ever been easily packaged. It isn't a particular kind of music, or style of worship, or program, or publicity. It's the *content*, not the packaging: still, after all this time, it's Christ crucified, the power of God made perfect in weakness, it's the *dying* before the rising—and *that* content has never been easy,

or popular. We'd so much rather go straight from Palm Sunday to Easter: from "Yippee! King Jesus!" to "Yippee! We're gonna live forever!"

The love and faith Jesus showed on the cross has to be used up, spilled out, poured out, *spent* in the world that so sorely needs it. And Jesus himself dispels any notion that the *content* of the Gospel will have any widespread appeal, at least among the comfortable—remember that last Beatitude? "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you, and do it in my name. Rejoice and be glad, for so they persecuted the prophets before you."

Perhaps that made more immediate sense to a tiny, fragile, obscure first-century Jewish sect than it did only three centuries later, when the Emperor Constantine, in one edict, turned Christianity into the state religion, the official religion of the Roman Empire, of status and power and wealth and privilege: overnight, you might say, from a storefront in Wyandanch to a tall-steeple cathedral in midtown Manhattan. Perhaps some of us Christians in America today can't help being aligned with the powers that be—so much so that millions of us are willing to blur and bend the lines between church and state, to claim America as "A Christian Nation."

Well, Karl Barth and Martin Niemöller and all the authors of the 1934 Barmen Declaration, which is in our Book of Confessions, knew something about that. I commend it to you. And they would say to us that by popularizing, secularizing, *enculturating* the Christian faith in this way, by subordinating faith to any other authority, you see, we deny the sovereignty of God, and weaken the moral authority of the church in the world.

But by living a joyful life; following Jesus; testing ourselves by the standard of Christ; trusting, in our weakness, only in the power of God: that is how the light of Christ shines through us. Think of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, pastor to his jailers, praying for his executioners. And he was only following Perpetua and Felicity, and Paul and Silas before them, and they were only following Jesus. The power of God made perfect in weakness.

The nineteenth-century philosopher John Ruskin watched a lamplighter light his lamps and said, "Now that is what I mean by being a Christian. You ought to be able to see where he has been by the lights that he leaves burning behind him." (Or her!)

Father Berrigan left a lot of lights burning behind him. Think about his life, given for the poor. "Looking good on wood?" He's describing a lot more than just the packaging. It's the content, not the form: flippant as he sounded when he said that, he knew very well you have to do—in fact, you have to *be*—a lot more than just *looking* good, on wood or anything else. Father Berrigan of all people knew that to follow Jesus, the church has constantly to test itself, to examine its conscience in the light of Scripture. Father Berrigan of all people knew that our strength is made perfect in weakness: "For whenever I am weak," he tells the Corinthians (several different times, in several different ways, so they'll be sure to get it), "*then* am I strong."

And I'd say we have no choice but to be the Body of Christ—not all-powerful, you see, but *crucified*—pouring ourselves out, giving all we have to bring light to those who hide in darkness, and speaking truth to power: the church must do this as the Body of Christ, even at the risk of losing its life—for only in losing our life, will we find it.

AMEN.