

**TO PROCLAIM THE GOSPEL**  
Rev. Gustie Linnea Newquist  
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Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

Christ sent me to preach the gospel, Paul says.

To tell the story.

That is all.

Not with eloquent wisdom.

Not with a fancy seminary degree front and center for you to fawn over.

Not with academic prowess or oratory skill that wraps you up in my ability to win a prestigious preaching prize, Paul says.

Christ simply sent me to you—beautiful, divided, bickering Corinthians that you are—to draw your attention back to the cross. To that dreadful, awful, glorious, rugged cross. And to proclaim that in some mysterious way this cross is for us—as beautiful and divided and bickering as we are—the very power of God in our midst.

I have a problem with that.

Not with the unity part, although I admit unity in the church is hard.

I have a problem with the cross part.

Paul says quite plainly that the cross is the power of God, as does the dominant stream of American Protestant Christian interpretation of the cross.

But like the first century Jews and Gentiles to which Paul writes, I have a hard time seeing the cross as anything other than the power of the *Roman Empire* pretending to unify the conquered with a false sense of peace and security.

I have a hard time seeing the cross as anything other than *Pax Romana*—a peace rooted in mass violence that defies any logical understanding of the word “peace.”

It is a pseudo-peace that I simply cannot proclaim in good conscience.

If we are honest—and we really must be honest—we have to admit that the cross of Christ to which Paul points—and to which Christian preachers throughout the ages have pointed—is but one of literally thousands upon thousands of crosses on which the bodies of good and decent men were mutilated before the very eyes of their own people, decade after decade, in the empire’s public displays of military, political, economic and social power over the communities they colonized.

*There were crucifixions every week in Jerusalem!*

Roman guards flogging so-called “rebellious uprisers.” Cross-bars crushing the backs and shoulders of the condemned as they carried them across the streets of the city. Agonizing pain as they literally suffocated to death, sometimes over the course of several days.

In our own time, Black liberation theologian James Cone has challenged the church to view the cross of Christ as a first century parallel to the lynching tree: a tool of torture weaponized against a subordinate population not just to “punish” a so-called “offender” but more importantly to terrorize those who remain into abject submission.

There has to be another way to preach the gospel than to proclaim the power of God—the will of God—the *salvation* of God—can only come to us through an act of torture.

Thankfully, theologians and biblical scholars who are concerned about the impact of violence on the human religious psyche have for years given us another way to preach the gospel: embracing the *life* and *ministry* and *community* of Christ as the point, rather than the glorification of a violent death.

The power of the cross, we would say, in this view—if there is to be any power in the cross at all—rests solely on the triumph of the *resurrection*.

Death is done and new life has dawned. Good defeats evil. Justice defeats injustice. Life defeats death and that is why our cross is empty. The cross in this great reversal of fortune is about *life*, not death.

Christ is risen! Suffering is no more! Hope springs eternal! And that is what it means to preach the gospel.

Right?

Well ...

Let's be really, really honest.

Many of you know I served a congregation in Tucson, Arizona, during the mass shooting and assassination attempt of Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords. January 8, 2011. The day before Baptism of the Lord Sunday. The Season of Lent not too far behind, followed by the dread of Easter.

Yes, you heard me right. We “dreaded” Easter with all its forced celebration.

Our tears were too close to the surface, or buried deep down so we could just keep going. Our children still wondered if they were safe, and—at least for me—our parents did, too.

Yes, we could celebrate the life that was saved—the life that so miraculously managed to survive in that moment and beyond—the life that sprang to action in a moment of madness and kept on keeping on.

But we were nowhere near ready to leap to resurrection.

We spent an awfully long time in Holy Saturday, that space in between Good Friday and Easter, where the shooting was done but the “after-the-shooting remained.”

We were going to be there for a while, and that was just the way it was. I had to figure out what it means to preach the gospel from the place of Holy Saturday, because there was no other place from which I could preach it.

In order to do that, I turned to the field of theological response to trauma, a field that completely transformed my entire understanding of Christian faith when I encountered it in seminary.

If you think about it, the cross was literally a traumatic event. “The aftermath of trauma” accurately describes how the disciples of Christ experienced the cross 2000 years ago. The aftermath of trauma can also help us understand what Paul might really have been up to when he called the cross the “power of God” in his letter to the Corinthians. The aftermath of trauma might even help us understand the power of the cross between the crucifixion and the resurrection: where the first is over, but the second is not yet here.

The cross, as Shelly Rambo writes in *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining*, speaks a truth to us about what remains in the wake of a trauma. It names the unnamable, which is so hard to do when trauma occurs.

In Tucson, for example, we called it “the tragedy.” Or “what happened that day.” Or “the events of January 8<sup>th</sup>.” [Which, I might add, just happens to be my mother’s birthday.]

It was so hard to let the words come out of our mouths about what had really happened to us.

The truth is, we had a shooting. And it was awful.

The truth is, the disciples had a crucifixion. And it was awful.

The truth is, white supremacists – yes, here in Jefferson County, WV – had a lynching. And it was awful.

The truth is, in our own congregation, we just had a suicide. And it was awful.

*This* is the power of the cross, according to trauma theory. *This* is the power of the cross I believe the apostle Paul is really trying to get at: we name the thing for what it really is.

We mark it.

And we trust that somehow, someday, God is in it.

Not causing it, but witnessing it, lamenting it, raging against it. Drawing us closer together through it. Calling those who collaborate with the cross to repent for it. Working with all of us to find a “new normal” on the other side of it.

And loving us within it.

This is what the Scriptures mean when they say, “God’s steadfast love *endures* forever.”

And that, at least for me, is what it really means “to proclaim the gospel.”

Amen.