

“In Weakness, Fear, and Trembling”  
1 Corinthians 2:1-5  
4<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany

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Westminster, Greenville  
Ben Dorr

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Let me invite you this morning to get TWO FEELINGS in mind.

The feeling of being accepted.  
And the feeling of being rejected.  
Can you get those two feelings in mind and memory right now?

The English novelist Somerset Maugham once said, “The most deeply ingrained, the most deeply rooted instinct in civilized humanity is the approval of other people.”<sup>1</sup>

If I can tweak what Maugham said, I believe a better word than approval is acceptance—to be accepted by other people...a parent, a teacher, a friend, a community—I’m not sure that instinct ever goes away.

This was part of the genius of Fred Rogers.

Do you remember the song he used to sing on Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood?

It’s you I like,  
It’s not the things you wear,  
It’s not the way you do your hair—  
But it’s you I like  
The way you are right now,  
The way down deep inside you—  
Not the things that hide you,

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<sup>1</sup> As quoted by the Rev. Dr. Fred Craddock, in his sermon “Handling Preferential Treatment,” in *The Collected Sermons of Fred B. Craddock*, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011.

Not your toys—  
They're just beside you.

The gift of Fred Rogers was that he helped teach multiple generations of children that they were accepted.

And then there's the flip side.

Not to be accepted, but to be rejected by others—this, I think, is one of our greatest fears.

When John Buchanan retired after serving as the Pastor at 4<sup>th</sup> Presbyterian Church in Chicago for over two decades, he knew that he needed to find other places to worship until the new pastor was called and installed and settled in.

So he visited two other churches in Chicago. They were much smaller congregations, and had their own customs, their own traditions...he liked them because they were, on the whole, friendly churches, but there was one particular tradition that they both had, one that he had come to dread:

The passing of the peace.

We don't do that here in worship, but perhaps you've been to worship somewhere else where they do this?

He writes:

“After the clergyperson says, ‘The peace of the Lord be with you,’ and we respond, ‘And also with you,’ ...people leave their seats, walk around and greet nearly everyone else in the room.

“As a visitor, I shake the hands of the people immediately around me and then venture tentatively into the aisle. There I encounter a barrier that might as well be a sign announcing, ‘Members Only.’

“I’m on my own and not sure what to do. I feel as if I’ve intruded in someone else’s family reunion.”<sup>2</sup>

Now John Buchanan had the admiration and love of hundreds upon hundreds of people throughout his career—and yet, when he walked into UNFAMILIAR TERRITORY—a church, no less!—he began to feel...like an outsider.

He began to feel rejected.

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I raise the topic of acceptance and rejection this morning for a couple of reasons.

The first reason is because of our text.

Paul is writing to the church in Corinth, and the Corinthians, you’ll recall, were having PROBLEMS...with rejection and acceptance.

There’s division in that community.  
There’s fighting in that community.

Some were saying: I belong to Paul.  
Others: I belong to Apollos.  
And others: I belong to Cephas.

They were arguing about who had greater spiritual gifts.

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<sup>2</sup> John Buchanan, “Members Only?”, *The Christian Century*, January 6, 2014, found at [Members only? | The Christian Century](#).

They were building their church community on things like status and standing and superiority.

And Paul's response is this:

*“When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified.”*

When it came to the problems in the Corinthian community, Paul's starting point was the cross.

Paul uses the cross as the central image for how to behave in that church, how to build community in that church...the cross of Christ is the lens that he wants the church in Corinth to look through,  
when it comes to creating a faithful community  
shaped by the love and grace of God.

Now that's all fine and good, but what does that mean?

It can sound like a preacher platitude—use the cross to shape a faithful community that reflects the love and grace of God...what does that actually look like not just in Paul's day, but in ours?

How does the cross of Christ shape our community, here at Westminster?

And how does it shape our responses to the difficult moral and ethical dilemmas of acceptance and rejection, of building community,  
in our society today?

If I can shift gears here, into territory that's a little more current than the Corinthian congregation or even Mr. Rogers...what does Paul's message about the cross and community say about the killing of Tyre Nichols three weeks ago—and the horrific video released by Memphis police this past Friday evening?

It's a death that raises so many more questions than answers.

Did the officers involved believe that their actions would be accepted and approved by their superiors?

Or did they not care?

Where did the instinct to beat someone so viciously come from?

And perhaps more importantly, how do we—as Christians—help create a society in which every person is treated with dignity, like the child of God that they are?

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These are questions, of course, that cannot be answered in one sermon.

But let me begin to get at them like this.

When Paul talks about building community, he starts with the cross.

How many of you have come to marvel at the beauty of the cross we have here in this sanctuary, and the two shadows on either side that it creates?

I've been told that when our cross was designed and first hung in this room, the shadows—were a surprise.

Did you know that?  
 The cross was hung. The lights were on.  
 The shadows emerged.  
 No one knew that there would be three crosses instead of one.

God works in mysterious ways, right?

I suspect that if I asked you to come up with one word to describe what this cross means to you, some might say:

HOPE...  
 FAITH...  
 FORGIVENESS...  
 LOVE...

All good responses for each of us here today.  
 But it's important to remember, that's not the way people thought about crosses and crucifixion in Paul's day.

As the Episcopal priest Fleming Rutledge puts it:

“The situation was very different in New Testament times.

“Everybody had seen crucified men along the roadsides of the Roman Empire. Everyone knew what [someone hanging on a cross] looked like, smelled like, sounded like...

Rutledge goes on:

“...proclaiming [that] the Son of God and Savior of the world...[was] a degraded, condemned, crucified person...  
 [in Paul's day, THAT was] UNTHINKABLE.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Fleming Rutledge, *The Seven Last Words from the Cross*, Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005.



So how does God's Church do this kind of work and embody that kind of love?

How do we build community, both in here and out there, through the lens of the cross of Christ?

I don't have any perfect solutions for you.  
I am thinking of two examples to help get the conversation going...

Example number one comes from within God's Church.

The pastor Sam Wells once reflected on something that happened in the very first church that he served as a minister.

"...there was an 11-year-old boy who started coming to my church at the suggestion of a teacher at his middle school," Wells writes.

"He was an isolated, disconsolate figure who didn't mix easily and took a greedy share of the cookies after worship. After he had been coming a few months, funds were found for him to participate in a parish weekend retreat.

"By Saturday morning, the complaints were raining down.  
He was rude. He was grabbing food.  
He was bullying the younger children.

"The adults finally had to talk to each other about it...

"The teacher through whose influence the boy had first come to church pointed out that, being brought up solely by his young and temperamental father, he was a troubled boy looking for security. Allowances were made, patience was maintained, and gradually the lad began to find his feet.



“Nine months later at a special evening service he was baptized.

His father was not there.

His mother and brother...they weren't there either.

But about 40 people from the church were there.

“And each member of the congregation was invited to describe what they valued most about being members of that church.

When the boy was asked the same question,

[he] ...broke...into a smile, and replied,

‘You didn't throw me out that weekend.’

For 23 years, Sam Wells thought that was the end of the story.

But then a few years ago, Wells received an email.

“I'm the boy from that weekend,” it read.

And they figured out a way to meet.

Wells heard what happened to the boy after Wells had left his church. It wasn't all smooth sailing. The boy had become homeless for a period of time, when his father threw him out of the house.

But now he was grown, he had a partner and helped raise her two children.

Wells was so glad to see him, and so pleased to see him doing well.

The young man had a backpack with him.

“Why've you brought a backpack?” Wells asked him.

And this young man pulled out a scrapbook.

In the scrapbook was a letter.

It was a letter that Sam Wells' wife had written some 20 or so years earlier.

“‘Sam and I are in Liverpool, and last night we saw the Liverpool soccer team in a restaurant, so we got their autographs for you because we know you support them.’

*And on the opposite page, there they were.*

*Six treasured autographs, preserved through seasons of struggle.*

Wells writes:

“...[his] life had emerged from chaos, and [he] showed me it's possible to live without bitterness. He didn't have a bad word for anyone.”

Those autographs were a symbol.

A symbol of what God can do when a faith community views one another through the cross of Jesus Christ, and refuses to say to anyone in their midst: we don't want you anymore.<sup>4</sup>

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Example number two—this comes from outside the Church:

A few years ago, a Black professor at Smith college, Dr. Loretta Ross, wrote column that sharply criticized today's “call-out culture.”

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<sup>4</sup> Samuel Wells, “Love becomes fruitful,” *The Christian Century*, September 13, 2017.

“Call-outs happen when people publicly shame each other online, at the office, in classrooms or anywhere humans have [a] beef with one another.”

“Today’s call out culture is so seductive,” she writes, “I often have to resist the overwhelming temptation to [strike] back at people on social media who get on my nerves.”

But publicly shaming someone else, she says, is very often “counterproductive” if not “toxic.”

Then she tells a personal story.

“On a mountaintop in rural Tennessee in 1992, a group of women whose partners were in the Ku Klux Klan asked me to provide anti-racist training to help keep their children out of the group.”

During the course of the day, the women said things to Loretta Ross that they should not have said, without even realizing they were saying anything wrong.

“Instead of reacting, I responded. I couldn’t let my hurt feelings sabotage my agenda,” she writes.

“I listened to how they joined the white supremacist movement. I told them how I felt when I was 8 and my best friend called me [something I should not have been called]. The women and I made progress. I did not receive reports about further outbreaks of racist violence from that area for my remaining years monitoring hate groups.”

Instead of a call-out culture, Dr. Ross advocates for a “call-in” culture.

“Calling-in is...done with love,” she writes.

“Calling-in engages in debates with words and actions of healing and restoration, and without the self-indulgence of drama... You may never meet a member of the Klan... but everyone can sit down with people they don’t agree with to work toward solutions to common problems.”<sup>5</sup>

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Do you remember when I asked you about the cross that hangs in our sanctuary?

How many of you think it’s a beautiful cross?

I do too.

You know what I think is even more beautiful?

When a church does the hard work of accepting difficult people, of creating space for people with whom we will get impatient, people whom you would find it easier to ignore, people whom you would rather call-out than call-in... it’s not easy.

It’s not easy work.

But when a church does that kind of work, I believe that God will also be at work, that God will once again move in mysterious ways...

And I also believe that God will surprise us with a different kind of beauty, the kind of beauty that’s found in a community—  
 whose creator is a crucified and risen Lord,  
 and whose lens for seeing the world,  
 and for loving every child of God in the world,  
 is the cross of Jesus Christ.

Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> Loretta Ross, “I’m a Black Feminist. I Think Call-Out Culture Is Toxic,” *The New York Times*, August 17, 2019.