

1 Corinthians 1:18-25    A Theology of the Cross  
Exodus 20:1-17  
March 3, 2024

In 1 Kings 3, there is a well-known story about King Solomon, who had been given the gift of, and had established a reputation for, wisdom. As an illustration, a case study is given.

There were two women that lived in the same house and gave birth to sons at about the same time. Tragically, one of the babies died. Afterwards, there came to be a dispute about which woman was the mother of the living child, and which of the dead.

One of them accused the other of switching the babies at night while she slept, the dead for the living. The other, of course, denied the whole thing and accused the first of making up the story. Solomon was not wise and clever enough to decide the case solely on the basis of their testimonies.

We all know the resolution. Solomon asked for a sword and threatened to cut the living child in two and give each woman half. One of the women said, “let the other have the child, don’t *kill* the baby.” Thus renouncing her claim on the living child in order to save it.

The other, was not so compassionate, or even sensibly humane. She said, “neither of us shall have him, cut him in two,” thus choosing the death of the baby rather than to give up *her* claim. The king gave

the child to the woman who sacrificed her claim, “she is the real mother,” he said. The people marveled. One way to look at this story is that it is an example of Solomon’s wisdom and no more. Perhaps that is the case. But let us also consider the possibility that there is something else at work.

Last week we read in Mark’s gospel that, among other things, Jesus taught his disciples this life-principle, “whoever wants to save his own life, will lose it, and whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel, will save it.” In this Jesus is explaining his previous words, which offer a companion statement, “whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow me.”

Perhaps it is not too much of a stretch, when speaking about the Solomon story, to say that the two mothers represent our claims over our lives. Whoever wants to be truly alive must renounce, as it were, their claim over their own life; whoever does not do this, will lose their life anyway. The one who sacrifices her claim on her own life, or comes to understand and accept that her life is not her own, *finds it*.

I am not sure what Solomon was thinking when he asked for the sword (although I doubt he was really going to harm the child), or what the authors of Kings were trying to say when *this* case study was included in their account of Solomon’s wisdom rather than what must have been many other stories that could have been told but were left out, but his story seems to fit

as an example of, or at least as something similar to, what eventually became a *theology of the cross*.

Here, on the third Sunday of Lent, and a Communion Sunday at that, we see a further development of the idea, in 1 Corinthians. Paul writes, “the message of the cross is foolishness to the ones who are perishing, but to those who are being saved it is the power of God.” And then he speaks of it also as the wisdom of God, in a way throwing a salute back to Solomon and his reputed wisdom.

“We preach Christ crucified. . . a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, it is Christ, the wisdom and power of God.”

And as well, it is hard to have a worship service in which the Ten Commandments are read, and not at least mention them in concert with the wisdom of God. They teach us about the two primary relationships in our lives, first with God, then with each other, with people generally.

They offer similar renunciations; we give up the worship of other gods; and when we agree that we will not kill or commit adultery, steal, or bear false witness, or covet, we are turned away from *our* claims on *our own* lives, which is the right to establish ourselves as the god of our lives. And we do this for God’s sake and for the sake of the truth about things, for the sake of others.

We live in the era of practical application. People want to know what *to do*, rather than what to think, or believe, or be. A theology of the cross is easier applied to the way we think about our attachments in life, and is less definable in terms of what we actually do, from day-to-day. We can ask general questions:

Should we pursue a vocation or consider work to be a means to the end of earning our way? Should we marry? Should we give support to non-profit organizations? Should we associate with a political party or movement as a way of living our citizenship? Should we go on vacation; watch television, surf the internet, participate in social media? The general questions are endless.

But we do not live generally, but specifically, so the questions can become more precise. What vocation should we pursue or what job should we take? Who should we marry? To which non-profit organization should we contribute or volunteer? Which political party should we join or associate and for whom should we vote? Where should we go on vacation? Which television shows should we watch, which websites and search engines and social media platforms?

It stands to reason that in some cases a cross theology may not change what we do when we get up in the morning, but how we go about doing it, and how we think about it.

Two ideas are clear, that in giving thought to these questions, and making decisions about what to do, we must remember that we belong to God, in a way that qualifies any sense that we belong to ourselves. In what Paul called, “the world’s wisdom, “ we are encouraged always to decide for ourselves, to always protect our claim to our lives.

But in God’s wisdom, we are counseled to give it up. With regard to the world, we belong to ourselves, but in the higher sense we do not, but to God, and it is in the doing of God’s will that peace is to be found.

And we ought to consider the ramifications of our actions for other people. In many cases there will not be any really difficult considerations, but keep the well-being of others in mind. The Ten Commandments do more than just give practical advice. They compel us to honor God and each other, and, people generally.

What does, “Christ crucified,” mean? One final thing to say, it means that Jesus renounced *his* claim on his own life, *for us*; or another way of saying it, God as Father renounced *his* claim on his Son’s life, *for all of us*) . . . Christ crucified

These commandments, along with a cross theology, point us in the direction of our truest selves, and then on to the fulfillment of life, where all things are reconciled, essential questions answered. It liberates us from unrealistic attachments to things in this life that result when we make the mistake of assigning

eternal significance to temporal things, a mistake which leads to disappointment. And they lead us, these commands, and this cross theology, on the path of divine wisdom, which is the path to life.

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