

STUDY GUIDE FOR *THE USE AND ABUSE OF THE CROSS WITH DR. VITOR WESTHELLE*

LECTURE 1: THE SCANDAL OF THE CROSS

What does the cross really mean? Is it a reality? Or is it something that happened eons ago and has absolutely no relevance now? The cross has become the essential symbol of Christianity but is there something wrong with this symbolic significance? What is it that is wrong? These are some of the questions that this lecture is trying to address.

The cross has enthused an array of meanings but lost in the midst of it all is the historic scandal. The son of God convicted as a criminal and dying on the cross simply did not fit into the story of a loving God. The next step was to find ways to evade it and this set the stage for the various options of either evading it and/or domesticating it. The most convenient option was to argue about the humanity/divinity of Jesus. While Ebionism (one of the schools of interpretation of what that meant) and its successors downplayed the divinity of Jesus, Docetists (another school of interpretation) and their sympathizers minimized the humanity. Such arguments and criticisms led again to either a call for the abandonment of the cross or to lift up other alternatives like the teachings of Jesus or the resurrection. What was incomprehensible, not to mention scandalous, could be thus avoided. These options did have the merit of at least softening some the paradoxes associated with the crucifixion but the thorn still kept poking. This led to the domestication of the cross or to use the words of Julian Barnes, "democratization." The shocking reality of the cross was sublimated and domesticated, its meaning spiritualized, thereby removing it from the historical context into which they had been originally inscribed. In other words, the actuality of the event was displaced for a palatable representation. But what we are exhorted to remember is that the particularity of the cross cannot be washed away by spiritual soap. So, what then? The tradition of lament while not attributing suffering itself any redeeming meaning calls for God's help in the midst of trial and distress. It thus became the frame to cope with their experience of the life and fate of Jesus. But interestingly, even in this lament there was no soteriological significance which means that initially there was no connection between what happened with the crucifixion of Jesus and the saving work of Christ. It was only much later when the first writings of the New Testament were penned that salvific claims were attributed to the cross. These writings allowed the Christian community to look at the cross event through a soteriological (salvific) lens. The lecture presents an overview of both the centrality of the symbol of the cross and the persistent restlessness in the meaning it evokes throughout the process of the Church coming to terms with the event of the Cross and its resurgent power of negativity and non-adaptability to systemic theological and philosophical constructions. It also shows how the Cross, from a political incident, despite the fact that in the early centuries it was not seen under soteriological rubric, becomes wrapped in religious garment. This reading offers initial guidelines for the understanding of the relationship and the communication between politics and religion.

Study Questions

1. The cross is a stumbling block, a *skandalon*. Some call for its abolition while others claim its centrality. What do you think? What place does it have in the Christian tradition and what justifies the position?
2. If cross is indeed central to the Christian faith, what in your opinion anchors the cross as the core of Christianity?

3. What were some of the attempts made to bring some logic into the otherwise incomprehensible and meaningless event of Jesus' crucifixion?
4. What are some of the options for evading the cross?
5. How do you understand the theology before the cross and the theology after the cross with reference to the two Christological foci that support these theologies? What are its implications for the contemporary church?
6. What do you think are the reasons for the absence of soteriological motives for the cross in the very early stages of Christianity? How does it compare to the times we are in now or what are the prevalent motives now and why?
7. How can we understand the tradition of lament? Are we allowed to blame God or are we to accept blindly whatever is meted out to us?
8. Historically Jesus' trial was primarily a political one but the accusation against Jesus was that of religious blasphemy. So then why was he crucified, a punishment for a political crime?
9. How do you understand the term "apocalyptic?" Can it be translated or transposed to our context? Why?
10. God's embodiment through Christ encompasses the whole world? How have Luther and the architects of the Lutheran Confessions articulated this presence of Christ in our midst?
11. "...For that which He has not assumed He has not healed; but that which is united to His Godhead is also saved" (Gregory of Nazianzen) How can we understand this?

LECTURE 2: LUTHER AND THE CROSS

What did Reformation mean then, in Luther's time, and what does it mean now? And more importantly, what needs to be remembered is that the Reformation is not the point; it has a point, or even a counterpoint in a polyphonic composition. It was not about "reforming," as when one restores a building or remodels a house, but it is about a *new* formation. This is what the lecture aims at presenting. Through an overview of the medieval rules of theologizing we are led to ponder on what it means to understand the cross as tribulation.

What does it really mean to be on trial, where it describes a situation in which one is not assisted by the approval of others, but despised and criticized? A theology done under such conditions by those afflicted, assailed, oppressed, and on trial is what can be understood as "theology of the cross." It is a certain practice (*usus*); a certain way of doing theology. It is the resolute practice of stepping into the middle of a battle in fighting against suffering. This then leads into the question of the justice of God. How can God be just and still love? What is justice in God's eyes? We are then invited to a new definition of justice which says that justice is the knowledge of Christ; it is to know about Christ and to have the knowledge that Christ had. This new justice is about grace that is given in the midst of our brokenness thereby making us whole which is exemplified by the saying that we are saints and sinners at the same time. This justice is done by disclosing the evil in the structures and systems of knowledge and power that has taken over the world. And what is even more disturbing is

that this new definition of justice does not operate by the set juridical rules of *suum cuique* (to each what is due). Instead it operates under the principle, "to others what is not due to them [but is freely given]." This then leads into a discussion of faith. What is it that made Luther say that even if he knew that the world would end tomorrow, he would still plant a tree? As an explanation to this is presented the two kingdoms doctrine, which can be understood as two functional aspects of God's revelation: a kingdom of listening and a kingdom of seeing; it is the relationship between the visible and the Word, between creature and Creator, between what the senses register and reason draws together, and what grace reveals to the spirit. In other words it is the relationship between faith and reason where reason is given a place in the infrastructure of faith as its handmaid but the faculty of reason stops when it is talk about God. What the eyes cannot see faith brings into vision. And this is brought about through irony rather than analogy, as irony creates an unexpected rupture and enables to break with preconceived ideas. The goal is to show that the theology of the cross is a way of breaking away from the hegemonic ways of knowing; it is a knowing that comes out of doing. As the Heidelberg disputation (thesis 21) says, it is about calling a thing for what it is, it is about speaking a risky and dissonant word, a word that cannot be cashed into the system that does not fit into the economy. It is an invitation to face with hope, but a hope against all hope.

Study Questions

1. How do you understand *oratio* (prayer), and *meditation* (meditation)? Do they go together? What has our God-talk been? Has it led others into having a conversation with us? Or has it been otherwise?
2. In what ways do you see the cross as tribulation, as being on trial?
3. We live in a world fraught with crosses, where we are constantly tested or are under attack. How can we understand this *tentatio* (trial)? How does it play into the life of a church be it as individuals or as a community taking into consideration ELCA's affirmation that we are marked by the cross of Christ?
4. God is just, God is love. Can these two statements co-exist? If the answer is yes, discuss how. If the answer is no, explain why not.
5. Justice is the knowledge of Christ. What is different about this justice from what we know justice to be?
6. What are the implications of this new justice which goes against the norm given the politically correct, religiously pluralistic and ethnically/culturally diverse context we live in?
7. Consider analogy and irony as two ways of understanding something. Analogy aids in corroborating when compared against another where as irony destroys analogous corroboration. How can you understand the relationship between faith and reason with the cross as the backdrop employing these two ways of formulating one's understanding?
8. Where is God – hidden in our crosses or hidden behind our crosses? Does our understanding of where God is say something about who God is?
9. Reformation came about in a particular context - the issual of indulgences and the plague, just to name a few. Living in the conditions be it social, political or economic, as we are, do you think that we are in need of a reformation? In that sense how

faithful has our church been in living out *ecclesia semper reformanda* (the church is always being reformed)?

10. If Luther's quest for a merciful God was labeled as a pathological quest of a medieval monk overburdened by a sense of guilt, what should nations, people, now and among them most with practically no sense of guilt be labeled? Wherein lies the problem and what do you think has brought about this?
11. What the eyes cannot see faith brings into vision. How can this be understood? Bring to the table instances in your life as individuals and as a congregation and discuss.

LECTURE 3: THE PRACTICE OF RESURRECTION

What is one's relationship to the Cross, more specifically what is one's location vis-à-vis the Cross. The theology of the cross is a dispositional practice. It is not to be understood only as an action or an operation, but also a disposition or a *habitus* in the sense that it entails, more than action, also an involvement in the midst of the circumstances in which the practice takes place. Where do we locate ourselves in relation to the cross? And, the question of who is God, which the Cross elicits, implies also the question of where God is. Using biblical examples, four locations are identified: a) The Cross itself (Mark 15:33-37); it is the theology of the crucified, where one is simply asked to be honest about the world in the hope against hope that God will deliver us from this meaningless suffering and humiliation. b) By the Cross deriding (Mark 15:25-32); it implies posing of the question, "show me what you do and I will believe who you are." This was what people were asking of Jesus while he was dying on the cross. This is different from what a theologian of the cross says: "I know who you are for I have seen you there in the midst of brokenness." c) Away from the Cross (Luke 24:13-35); it is leaving the dead behind, only to encounter the living God concealed in the opposite, bringing about a conversion, a turning around and engaging a new dispositional practice. d) Theology of the Cross as a practice of resurrection (Luke 23:55-24:3). This fourth location, the theology of the Cross as a practice of resurrection, suggests a reading of the resurrection that focuses on the *connection* between the scandalous event of the Cross and the affirmation of God's creative power. This connection is found in a labor of mourning and love symbolized by the women at the foot of the Cross who, after witnessing Jesus' body placed in the tomb, go home to prepare spices and ointments for a broken body, only to be, on Sunday morning, surprised and bewildered by the absence of the dead one whom they loved and mourned and, then, meet the resurrected one. The experience of those women can be recapitulated through a creative version of the Franciscan spiritual exercise of the Stations of the Cross. Instead of the fourteen stations, this new itinerary, employing literary and biblical narratives, consists of four stations akin to four steps in a dance which follows a horizontal "8" shape, where the last step sends us back to the beginning. The movement is not restricted to the passion narrative (as in the traditional Stations of the Cross), but encompasses the relationship of life, passion, death, and resurrection as narrated by the gospels poignantly intermingled with passages from Toni Morrison's novel, *Beloved*. In this liturgical movement, we are invited to place ourselves meditatively at each station trying to locate oneself in Jesus' position or to find ourselves or our communities represented in that station. The goal of this mournful but hopeful and empowering dance is to bring home the point that it is a labor of love and mourning that gifts us salvation, thereby emphasizing the importance of the Sabbath as the crucial interval and connection between Good Friday and Easter and following an expression coined by poet Wendell Berry, to call it the "practice of resurrection."

Study Questions

1. On the cross God is revealed, but this revelation of God is doubly elusive. It is not only an indirect revelation but it is revelation hidden under its opposite. How can we understand this? Can you think of passages in the Old Testament that compares to this indirect and or double indirectness?
2. What does it entail to see the other and hidden side of history, the margins, the excluded, the stranded ones, the illegal immigrants, as privileged spaces of God's self-revelation?
3. What are the implications of taking a position from the stand point of the suffering?
4. What is a theology of the crucified? Find relevant passages in the bible and discuss.
5. A theology away from the cross promotes the claim that what happened in the past is over and done with where as a theology of the cross as a practice of resurrection asserts the openness of past victimization. What in your opinion would most opt for and why?
6. "Show me what you do and I will believe who you are." "I know who you are and what you do for I have seen you there in the midst of brokenness." Which of the above echoes your thoughts? Where does that place us in relation to the cross? What are the consequences of such a position or attitude?
7. What in our present context is the place of resurrection? How can we understand it?
8. Resurrectionism implies an optimism that renders the cross as something that can be forgotten once we climb the glory of Easter. What is the danger of such an optimism? Who and what are the casualties resulting from such an attitude?
9. In the itinerary of cross and resurrection, four steps or stations are distinguished. Bring to the table instances that relate to each of the stations and discuss if you were frozen at one position or were able to move to the next. Why were you immobilized at some stations and what is it that enabled you to keep moving at other stations?
10. What is the point in anointing a dead body as the women did? Can resurrection be seen as the gift of Shabbat?
11. What in your experience is the relationship between cross and resurrection? Discuss instances where you could not see any light at the end of the tunnel, when you thought that the story would end in the tomb. Where are you now? How did you get there?