



Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA

Rev. Scott E. Schul

5th Sunday after Epiphany: February 9, 2020

Sermon Title: "The Foundation"

Sermon Text: 1 Corinthians 2:1-8, 10-12

When buying a house, real estate agents always say the three most important things are: location, location, location. Certainly location *is* important. But other considerations also matter, like the square footage and the layout. But *all* of these things pale in importance to the one feature common to *every* good home: a sturdy, stable foundation. The most beautifully decorated room is irrelevant if the foundation beneath it is crumbling. A gorgeous front porch is useless if the footers are rotting. A superb floor plan is wasted if the floor itself is wasting away. Everything ultimately depends upon the foundation.

What is the foundation of your faith? This was the central issue plaguing the Christian assembly at Corinth. In his letters to this fractured and troubled church community, Paul diagnosed the cause of their problems to be a faulty foundation of faith. They formed their self-identity and their allegiances around things like social status, wealth, and the particular gifts and popularity of their teachers and spiritual gurus. They didn't identify themselves as followers of *Christ*. Instead, they identified themselves as disciples of *this* teacher or *that* leader regardless of the teacher's faithfulness to Jesus. The Corinthians wanted popular and charismatic leaders who would tell them exactly what they wanted to hear.

Can you imagine people in our day and age joining a church simply because they like the look or sound or style of the pastor, or the music, or the style of worship, regardless of whether any of those things are faithfully proclaiming the truth of the Gospel? I suppose this still happens – perhaps more often than any of us would prefer to acknowledge.

The bickering, the factions and the divisions in the Corinthian church would have driven any normal pastor into an early retirement. Somehow, some way, Paul hung in there with them. But he refused to play the game on their terms because Paul wanted to make it clear that *nothing* about their church, their faith, their salvation, or their eternal destiny depended upon a faction, a charismatic leader or even *him*. Instead, *everything* depended on Jesus Christ.

Paul freely conceded that he wasn't an ideal leader, if judged by worldly standards. He wrote, "I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom." Paul was reminding them that if their faith depended on a charismatic, fearless leader who taught the popular wisdom of the world then *Paul was not their guy*. He didn't have the gifts or the inclination to pursue worldly popularity or teach worldly wisdom, and he didn't care if folks thought he was relevant, charismatic, or the "next big thing."

In fact, Paul saw his lack of these popular gifts as a *benefit* rather than a *disadvantage* because, as he noted, it enabled the faith of the Corinthian assembly “to rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God.” You see, Paul’s mission wasn’t to point to himself or *his* gifts or his wisdom. Instead, Paul’s mission was to point instead to the wisdom of God. And what is the wisdom of God? *Jesus Christ*. That same *Jesus Christ* was the foundation of Paul’s faith. *Jesus Christ* was the foundation of the faith Paul wanted the Corinthians to have. And *Jesus Christ* is the one and only thing that is to be the foundation of *our* faith.

Saying that Jesus Christ is the foundation of our faith can’t be our stopping point though. History is full of people who’ve invoked Jesus’s name for personal gain rather than discipleship. Luther condemned that brand of religion as a “theology of glory.” It’s still very much alive today. It’s the televangelist who proclaims that if you give money to *his* ministry, then Jesus will respond by making *you* wealthy. It’s a theology that claims that accepting Jesus as your Savior will make you “happier, richer and better looking.” And of course if things don’t pan out that way, it’s because YOU didn’t have enough faith. Friends, a theology of glory is simply not in accordance with the Biblical teachings of Christ and the Church.¹

Paul instead pointed the Corinthians (and us) in a very different direction. He wrote that he “decided to know nothing among [them] except Jesus Christ, and him crucified.” In other words, Christ crucified is the faith foundation Paul had and the foundation he wanted for the Corinthians and for us. But why? Christ crucified sounds gory and messy. Christ crucified might make someone feel uncomfortable or squeamish. Some would even argue that all this focus on Christ crucified is unnecessary because, after all, Christ rose from the dead. Didn’t Paul understand all this?

Of course Paul was aware that Christ rose from the dead. Likewise, Paul knew that the image of Christ crucified was an uncomfortable one for his flock. After all their memory of the humiliation, terror, and pain of execution by crucifixion was very fresh. So why did Paul insist that the foundation of faith was not just *Christ* but *Christ crucified*?

Paul stressed Christ crucified because it was and still remains the most powerful image of how God’s wisdom and way surpasses the wisdom and way of the world. Christ crucified is the most powerful testimony and illustration of God’s unyielding, self-giving, self-emptying, steadfast, sacrificial love for us. Christ crucified also points us away from our human tendency to seek honor and glory for ourselves, regardless of the cost to others. Christ crucified instead empowers and calls us to be kinder, gentler, more humble, more merciful and more loving. When we center our lives and faith around Christ crucified, we focus less on our needs and more on loving our neighbor. Can you see how focusing on Christ crucified might have transformed *the Corinthians*? And can you see how focusing on Christ crucified has the potential to transform *us*?

And so I ask again: What is the foundation of *your* faith? As you think about that, let me close with a story about a small hill in central Lithuania, called the Hill of Crosses. It got its name in 1831 when Lithuanians began placing crosses there in memory of loved ones who had died in their unsuccessful fight for freedom from Russia. In the coming decades the number of crosses on the hill multiplied as Lithuanians continued struggling for freedom. The Hill of

Crosses became a central place for prayer and a symbol of love, peace, and resilience in the face of hate, adversity and persecution. Even in the very darkest days, under Soviet communism and forced atheism, Lithuanians kept praying and placing crosses on that hill. The Communists tried to scare everyone away, and sometimes they even bulldozed all the crosses. But faithful Lithuanians still managed to make their way to that hill to pray and to plant more crosses. Some estimate that 200,000 crosses are packed onto that little hill today. The Hill of Crosses represents a foundation of courageous faith that eventually brought independence to Lithuania – an independence that sheer military might was unable, on its own, to bring.²

Paul calls us to live life on our own Hill of Crosses. The *treasures of this world* and the *things the world treasures* cannot *save us* or provide us with *lasting joy*. They are a faulty foundation for our faith, a foundation that *will* rust, crumble and collapse. Instead, Paul invites us to build our lives and our faith on the foundation of Christ crucified. *That* foundation was lovingly prepared for us by Jesus and is constructed of sacrifice, humility, mercy, forgiveness, grace, and love. We all know that the *world* calls it *foolishness*. But Christ crucified is *God's wisdom*, and I tell you, it is the *only* foundation on which we can truly stake our lives. Amen.

Citations:

¹ See, e.g., THE LUTHERAN HANDBOOK (2005 Augsburg Fortress), p. 136-7.

² Useful web articles about the Hill of Crosses I consulted were <http://www.lcn.lt/en/bl/sventoves/kryziuk/>; <http://www.divinemercury.org/divine-mercy-pilgrimage/143-the-hill-of-crosses.html>; <http://snarkynomad.com/the-erie-silence-of-the-hill-of-crosses-in-lithuania/>; and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hill_of_Crosses