

Lent 4
Church of the Good Shepherd, Silver City, NM

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Judgment

The Cross stands in judgment on the world. In Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* there is a girl the town whose elevator does not quite reach the top floor. She lives in the streets, she is kind, humble, simple and pious. Everyone loves her, and takes care of her. They feed her every day, they take her in when the weather is rough. Everyone knows her as the Holy Fool. In Eastern Orthodoxy the tradition of the Holy Fool is deeply set. It refers to the one whose godliness runs totally counter to the ways of the world that they appear foolish, yet, in the end, they prove to be wise and compassionate in ways the world is not. As the story progresses the girl becomes a young woman. Soon people notice that she is gaining weight. Then in the middle of the night there are screams in the dark alleys of the village. People rush out to find that she has given birth and died in child-birth. No one knows who the father might be for sure, but there are implications that it is the father Karamazov, who is a scoundrel and a profligate. The outrage that he might have taken advantage of this simple and defenseless girl is palpable on the pages of the book. It is bigger than simply someone having violated a defenseless girl, someone has desecrated the sanctity of the Holy Fool. She has proven even in her death that godly foolishness is more powerful than wealth and power.

The paper last week told of a couple charged with first-degree felony when their son was taken to the hospital with serious injuries to the head and ribs. We have laws intended to protect innocent and defenseless children. If we have laws about it, it must be an issue. And it's true; we do not always live up to the ideal. Domestic Violence in the form of sexual assault alone touches one of every 4 girls and one of every 6 boys before they reach 18. It is so unnerving because the home is supposed to be a safe, nurturing place, and when domestic violence descends upon it the sanctity of the home is desecrated. The ideal of the home stands in contrast to the destructive cycles that have invaded it like a pernicious parasite.

Schools across the nation continue to battle students bringing weapons to campus. Students learn best in safe environments that give them the freedom and security necessary to face the challenges of learning. When the very students make the schools unsafe it is a violation of something sacred. The sanctity of the learning environment, fragile as it is, has been desecrated.

When we hold something as sacred and it is desecrated we feel outraged, and the value of whatever we hold sacred is strengthened rather than diminished. These things transcend

the actions of some that stand in contrast to them. What is true is true, what is of value is of value. An act of desecration cannot change that.

The Cross stands for the most central and holy truth of our existence. I have said over and over again that our God is a God of unconditional love. Unconditional Love is of the essence of the godhead. It is what makes them three and yet one, one and yet three. That love seeks relationship, union and communion, and so God creates. We are created in love, by love and for love. Love stands at the very heart of existence. But unconditional love must be freely given, and so we have the freedom to love, which is of our deepest nature, and we have the freedom to be selfish, to choose our own way over against another with no thought to whether our actions are life-giving or death-dealing to another. We have the freedom to let our egos run our lives rather than our spirits. We have done that, every one of us, and so we are alienated from God, from one another and from the rest of the created order. To show us what God's heart of love is like Jesus came. In dying Jesus took upon himself the alienation we chose. In rising Jesus showed us the way through ego to spirit, through selfishness to love. As John 3:16 says, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son..." The Cross is the paramount symbol in the world of the love of God.

But in the eyes of the world the cross is foolishness. The Romans were the people who laid the foundations for our own culture. The Roman Republic was built on the novel concepts of the Rule of Law and Democracy. It became great through a sense of fairness and justice. The cross for the Roman government was reserved for those who challenged the sanctity of the realm built on these ideals. Did Jesus not die the cruelest and most inhumane death the Romans could devise? The most logical conclusion would be that Jesus got what was coming. Is not a death by crucifixion proof enough of his guilt, or at least of his foolishness? After all, a gospel of love cannot stand up to the rigors of today's world. It's an eat-or-be-eaten world out there, if I do not take care of myself who will? Time has shown the foolishness of disbanding all law enforcement and letting people just "live in love."

And how is it that a simple preacher from an outlying province of the western world's greatest power of the day becomes for Christians the very Son of God? There is scant proof historically that this man even existed. There is no external record of his execution, much less of this purported resurrection. Are you Christians not fabricating something just so you have something to talk about?

These ideas are a desecration of the love of God expressed on the cross. But as always, the way of the Cross transcends any attacks on it. The sanctity of the Holy Fool still stands. The holiness of the home still stands. The sacred space of learning still stands.

These are all expressions of that defenseless, senseless, and foolish love of God, that, when crucified by the world only results in resurrection. Somehow this foolish love ends up being greater than the death dealt it by the world.

The Cross, by the very fact that it is standing there, proclaims to the world another way of being, one rooted in love, not ego, one given to the good of another as much as the protection of the self, one capable of giving oneself for another. Here is the strongest force in the world. In a dog-eat-dog world the end result is one very lonely dog. In a world of unconditional love the result is community, life and health. Here, then, is the only escape from dog-eat-dog. Here is the only respite from the doomed struggle of "me first at all costs."

By clinging to the Cross we stand at odds with the world. All three lessons today show us what it is like. In the Old Testament lesson, Jesse was the head of a respected family, and firstborns had rights to a double portion of the inheritance. Who would have guessed that his last son, David, would become the greatest king Israel ever knew? St. Paul, in the Epistle lesson says, "You were children of darkness, the darkness the world calls light. But now you are children of the light; live as children of the light in a world of darkness." In the Gospel lesson Jesus heals a blind man on the Sabbath Day. Predictably, it upsets the Pharisees, the most prominent religious leaders of the day. In the ruckus that follows it becomes clear that the real blind ones are the Pharisees who cannot see goodness when it slaps them in the face.

In the same sort of way, we cast our lot with the power of love over selfishness. We are not afraid to be holy fools. In making the sign of the Cross this Lent, know that in doing so you commit yourself to the Kingdom of Love. You sacrifice on that cross your conformity to the darkness of selfishness, and you pledge yourself to live a different sort of way in this world.