

## Living in the Shape of the Cross

Tish Warren writes in her book *Prayer in the Night* that “Christianity does not give us a concise explanation for vulnerability, loss, or pain, but it gives us a story.”

We are drawn to stories as bees are drawn to flowers  
They inspire us and give us direction and meaning in the overwhelming  
complexity of life.

Paul’s life story is about as dramatic as they come. It is the backbone of his evangelism and the matrix through which he understands the world and our place in it.

And to hear him tell the Corinthians that he came to them “*in weakness and in fear and in much trembling,*” is a testament to just how radical a transformation he experienced.

Before Paul was Paul he was Saul, “*ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women and throwing them in prison*” according the book of Acts.

He was not a murderous psychopath (in his eyes), he was a zealous young Jewish man who wanted nothing more than to be righteous in the eyes of God. If that meant weeding out renegade Jesus followers, then that is what he needed to do.

“Righteous” is a bit of an outdated term, not many of us speak of our spiritual goals in those terms, but I think we do understand the desire to live a life that is pleasing to God, in alignment with the will of our Creator.

There are only two people in the Old Testament that are claimed to have achieved the distinction of being fully righteous in the eyes of God. Abraham and Phinheas.

We'll come back to Abraham, but I imagine people have a lot more questions about Phinheas. Maybe questions that start with "Who's that?"

Phinheas was the grandson of Aaron, the first high priest of Israel. In Numbers chapter 25, one of the more disturbing chapters of the Bible for reasons that will soon become apparent, the men of Israel began to have sexual relations with the women of Moab. This led to Israel worshiping and sacrificing to false gods, which angered God [see 10 Commandments]. God told Moses to "*Take all the chiefs of the people and impale them in the sun before the Lord, in order that the fierce anger of the Lord may turn away from Israel.*"

Just then, in what was disastrously poor timing, an Israelite man, in the presence of Moses, Phineas, and the entire congregation of Israel, brings a Midianite woman into his family and enters his tent.

Phinheas takes a spear in hand, follows them into the tent, and pierces the two of them straight through the belly, killing them both.

The text then reads:

*The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, "Phinehas son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the priest, has turned back my wrath from the Israelites by manifesting such zeal among them on my behalf that in my jealousy I did not consume the Israelites. Therefore say, 'I hereby grant him my covenant of peace. It shall be for him and for his descendants after him a covenant of perpetual priesthood, because he was zealous for his God and made atonement for the Israelites.'*"

I don't know if Paul had posters of Phinneas on his wall growing up, but he undoubtedly would have known that story and seems to have had a similar philosophy on righteousness.

Righteousness meant total commitment to God through the strongest of actions, whatever the cost.

And then one day, on his way to Damascus, to spear more Christ followers.

Paul has an encounter with the risen Christ.

It was not a "winning the lottery" type of encounter, but the three days in complete darkness without food or water type of encounter.

Paul's world was turned upside down. In the months following, in his vulnerability he was ministered to and nursed back to health by an early Christ follower named Ananias, a man he might have put a spear through days earlier.

We don't know what all transpired in Paul's encounter with Jesus. Were words spoken? Were words necessary? Did Ananias and the early disciples fill him in on more of the details after the fact?

We do know that Paul's desire to be righteous before God continued to be unwavering.

And yet the shape of it had changed.

Paul's life would no longer take the shape of the spear, but would instead take the shape of the cross.

*"When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the testimony of God to you with superior speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified"*

When Paul speaks of righteousness in his letters to his churches, he does not speak of Phinneas. But he speaks a lot about Abraham.

Abraham was righteous in the eyes of God without the mindset of “total commitment through the strongest action whatever the cost.”

Abraham was righteous because when God called him, he left a good life, where he had position, privilege, safety, legacy and a sure identity.

Like Jesus, Abraham’s commitment to righteousness was through self-emptying. Not through the shape of the spear, but through the shape of the cross.

Andrew Root writes:

*“Abraham is reckoned righteous because he will seek God in the negation of his own experience, giving fidelity to a new reality where from death comes life. Abraham uniquely sees that that loss might be the very locale for God’s ministry to come to him.”*

*“For Paul, to share the faith of Abraham is to believe that God can bring life out of death to fulfill a promise. [In his letter to the Corinthians] Paul embraces his negation and like Abraham, seeks the gift of faith... to be “in Christ” is to find the divine in the human, life in suffering, strength in weakness, righteousness in curse, and the apostle in the murderous persecutor.”*

Considering that Paul, a highly educated Jew, with an impressive resume and pedigree writes this letter to the Corinthians in part to defend his ministry from those who would challenge his authority, it is extraordinary that he leads with his weakness and fear.

Come on Paul, defend yourself!

And yet Paul, living in the shape of the cross does not lead with the spear, following instead in the spirit of Jesus, who was told: *“You who destroy the temple and build it in three days, save Yourself! If You are the Son of God, come down from the cross.”*

This is our story, this is our song.

Even 2000 years later it is hard to reconcile righteousness in the shape of the  
cross.

Setting aside position, privilege, safety, legacy and a sure identity, to empty  
ourselves. And in the emptying, becoming the people God called us to be.

Us pastors put a lot of time and thought into our sermons, and I hope you are  
blessed by them. Yet oftentimes it feels to me like the most profound and  
spiritual moments of our service come during sharing time.

Why is that?

We spend hours planning these services, ensuring that the theme is cohesive,  
that bulletins are printed with a clear order of service, that presentation and  
delivery are pleasing.

And yet it is in the sharing of our vulnerability and brokenness, the darkest  
and most depressing parts of the service, that we feel the presence of Christ  
most profoundly.

Root writes:

*“We experience the cross in our many death experiences, our encounters with  
rejection, loss, and fear, those moments when we feel our being in question,  
alone to face the darkness. Paul seems to contend that when we confess these  
experiences, we find the risen Christ coming near us, giving us new life out of  
death, ministering to us out of God’s own experience of death on the cross.”*

*“To be “in Christ” therefore is not to be magical but to be a person who shares  
in personhood with Jesus at its center. To have faith is to be loyal and give  
fidelity, not to an ideology or concept but to the very person of Jesus, who  
binds his own life with yours--and thus with others.”*

First Mennonite, let us live in the shape of the cross, not the spear.  
And don't assume your pedigree as pacifist automatically puts you in the  
shape of the cross. There is plenty of spear throwing in the Mennonite  
Church.

Consider the self-emptying of Abraham:  
What have you done to set aside your position, privilege, safety, legacy and  
identity to enter into the suffering and vulnerability of others?

Have you been willing to lead, like Paul, *“in weakness and in fear and in  
much trembling...so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on  
the power of God?”*

Or are you guided by “total commitment through the strongest action  
whatever the cost?”

*“Faith is the gift to trust that the narrative shape (the story) of Jesus’s death  
and resurrection is the constitution of reality... to allow ourselves to be bent in  
the shape of Jesus’ own story of cross and resurrection.*

May we have both the humility and the courage to live into that reality.

Amen