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The Cross: God Did It
A sermon on 1 Corinthians 1:18-31
Souper Bowl Sunday
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Today the Kansas City Chiefs play the San Francisco 49ers in the Super Bowl.

It got me thinking about all the different names of the NFL teams. Names like Giants, Broncos, Vikings, Raiders, Titans. Names that suggest size, strength, and fighting ability. Even the milder names, like the Dolphins, suggest things like intelligence and speed. The 49ers are named for the the ambitious, adventurous men who came to California in 1849 looking for gold, while a name like the Chiefs for most of us instantly brings to mind—appropriate or not--images of Native Americans who are leaders of their tribes. NFL teams are named for leaders, warriors, go-getters, animals that are fast, or ferocious, or flying. They are not named Earthworms, Sloths, or Minnows. I mean, we MIGHT get excited about a football team called the Kansas City Kittens or the Topeka Turtles—I don't want to suggest we couldn't--but if the Chiefs had little baby kitties on their helmets instead of arrowheads, it just wouldn't be the same. Symbols do make a difference.

In the scripture reading we just heard, Paul reminds us that the central symbol of our faith is the cross. Christ was crucified, and the resurrection doesn't cancel it out. In fact, we couldn't have the resurrection without the crucifixion.

Our challenge is that the cross has been around so long that it doesn't have the shock value that it did in Paul's day. Remember that death on a cross was the most humiliating way a person could die in those times. The Romans designed this method of execution to be so horrible that it would send the message: don't mess with us.

Can we imagine being slowly tortured to death in front of crowds of people? And to be naked the entire time, with our most private parts on display? That's the symbolism of the cross.

Imagine that next Sunday, you walk into this church, and every place where we have a shiny gold cross today, we had an electric chair. And instead of wearing crosses as jewelry, we wore little miniature guillotines around our necks. Even that wouldn't convey how offensive and ridiculous the idea of a crucified messiah sounded to ancient ears.

At the very heart of our faith is God who died the death of a criminal. Paul keeps coming back to this, because the Corinthians are like us: they like to win. Crucifixion is the opposite of winning.

Paul point out that Jews, with their long history of being occupied and oppressed, were looking for someone who could stand up to the Romans and win, just like Moses stood up to the Egyptian Pharaoh during the time of the Exodus. For them, a messiah would be someone who saved the people with demonstrations of massive, spectacular power, like Moses parting the Red Sea.

The Greeks, on the other hand, wanted wisdom. They wanted someone who had something clever to say, and knew how to say it in a way that would impress. In those times, people who could speak well were the Brad Pitts and the Adeles and the Patrick Mahomes of their age.

Paul says, what you GET is a crucified Christ. Remember that the resurrected Christ did not appear to thousands of people at a stadium, but only to some, to those who knew him. There is no grand comeback at the end of the Gospels, where the resurrected Christ rides in on his mighty steed and vanquishes all the Romans.

As we mentioned last week, Paul is addressing a deeply divided congregation. Members have aligned themselves with different teachers, bragging about who they follow, believing this gives them status.

And can't we RELATE! Deep down inside, if we are honest, doesn't it feel good to have a little something others don't have, to know a little something that others don't know, and have access to things others can't quite reach?

I love that episode of Modern Family where all the adults go to Las Vegas, and because of a business connection that family patriarch Jay has made, he and the family all get suites on the very top level of the hotel, the Excelsior level. Their rooms are accessed by a special elevator, and staffed by a butler.

At first Jay is pretty pleased. Then he finds out that the Excelsior level is NOT the top level, as he thought—there's another level above them, called the Excelsior PLUS. Once he knows there's an Excelsior Plus, plain old Excelsior will not do. After expending considerable energy to impress the owner of the hotel, Jay finally scores an upgrade to the Excelsior Plus level. And just as he finally starts to relax and savor the amenities of Excelsior Plus, he discovers to his utter horror: there's yet another level above him, the Excelsior Ultra.

I got a call from my daughter on Friday, informing me she had just accepted a snap bid from a sorority on her college campus. It was a pleasant surprise for her, because she considered them to be "the cool girl" sorority, and last year during rush week, they did not choose each other. This year, this sorority sought her out and invited her to join. I was happy for her, because of the friends she will make and the sense of belonging she will feel. At the same time, she and I both know that you can't have sororities and fraternities without excluding someone.

That feeling of being included when others are not is part of what makes it such a thrill to be chosen.

Churches don't exclude people, at least theoretically, but we still like a little status. I've often shared that I'm proud to serve a congregation with such a strong history, such an outstanding choir, such gifted members, such a beautiful place of worship. . . proud to be part of a denomination with such solid, grace-filled theology whose members and pastors are among some of the most highly educated in the country.

Because we are proud, we also feel anxiety about our church—that attendance in worship isn't what it was in the 1980's or 1990's or even six or seven years ago. The fact that it's not just us, but most churches, does not make it easier.

Once upon a time we were the place to be, and the people to be with. Today, we may be more famous for our past than our present. We have to learn to see ourselves as evangelists and mission workers for Christ again, and that is a hard adjustment to make. The danger is that instead of looking to the cross, and trusting in God to guide us and provide for us, we will look to our own efforts in a desperate attempt to regain the status we used to have. And instead of preaching Christ crucified, the danger is that we will say what we think we need to say and do the things we think we need to do to get people in the doors again, rather than relying on the message and the power of the cross and letting the chips fall where they may. Paul would say, when we become preoccupied with our own survival, when we start using the language of success and winning and losing, we have lost our way.

“God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world. . . . so that no one might boast in the presence of God.”

While working on this sermon, I was reminded of the musical, *My Fair Lady*, when Professor Henry Higgins and Colonel Pickering and Eliza Doolittle come home from the grand ball where Eliza had spoken and acted so beautifully all night long that everyone thought she was a great lady instead of a formerly uneducated girl who used to sell flowers on the street. Such a smashing success that the Prince of Transylvania asked to meet her and danced with her.

And Colonel Pickering starts to sing to Professor Higgins: “You did it! You did it! You did it! You said that you would do it and indeed you did!” The servants also join in, and everybody gives Professor Higgins all the credit for Eliza’s success, especially Professor Higgins, even though Eliza is standing right there and she obviously had something to do with it, too . . .

In Christ, God did it. God did all of it. God did the saving. God did the losing and God did the winning. There is truly nothing left for us to do except to love God and love each other, and to tell people what God has done for us.

In Christ we don’t have to look at the world—or our church, or ourselves, or our kids--through the lens of winning and losing anymore. We don’t have to compare, or label, or diagnose, or strive anymore. The cross makes all of that an utter waste of time.

In a few hours, most of us will gather around television screens with family or friends, or perhaps on our own, and watch a game where winning will feel like a very big deal. Many of us will wear our Chiefs gear in support of the team we love. And as we do, let us remember who and whose we really are, and what has been done for us and given to us. In Christ, there is no top

or bottom, no winning or losing, no insiders, no outsiders. In Christ, God did it. Thanks be to God!