

The Boast of Every Christian

Have you ever struggled with telling people about Jesus? You're a believing Christian, but you are unsure how to share your faith with others. Perhaps you tried to tell others, but your words made no impact.

In our secular world, communicating the gospel is enormously difficult. Some people are hardened against the gospel – think of Bill Maher or the late Christopher Hitchens, for example. Others are open to what the gospel offers, but they have many questions, some of which you are unable to answer. Still, others may be open to religion, but find Christianity incomprehensible, especially when they try to understand Jesus as fully human yet fully God.

So, if you are having difficulty sharing the gospel with non-believers, I get it. In today's culture, sharing the gospel is challenging, and even intimidating.

Would you believe that was the case with St. Paul. We think of him as the most successful preacher in Christian history, but he wasn't always that way. There was a point in his ministry when he struggled with how to tell people about Jesus.

Once he found himself in the great city of Athens. Here, in the city which gave the world Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, Paul was brought to Mars Hill to speak to the learned and wise. The speech is recorded in the Book of Acts (17:16-31) and based on the rules of rhetoric it was brilliant. Paul flattered his audience. He paid tribute to their culture. He quoted their poets. He appealed to their reason. It was by all standards a magnificent speech. But it was a failure – a miserable failure! Upon hearing Paul, some scoffed. Others shrugged their shoulders in bewilderment. The Bible says that on that day only a few became believers. At Athens, at least, Paul's gospel had been tried and found wanting.

What went wrong? As he traveled the road from Athens to Corinth, Paul must have asked that question a thousand times. Why did his message lack power? Why was he unable to attract the best and the brightest in the ancient world?

As he approached Corinth, Paul realized his mistake. At Athens he praised the culture, quoted the poets, appealed to reason, followed the rules of rhetoric, and he even mentioned the resurrection of Jesus. But he had failed to mention the cross.

When he arrived at Corinth, there was a new power in his preaching. Listen to his words: "For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (1 Cor. 1:18).

For St. Paul, the power of God was found at the cross. This is what he says in his letter to the Galatians: "May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the

world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.” Here is where Paul found the power to be all that God called him to be – at the cross.

The cross is at the heart of Christianity, but how do we explain it? This is where Christians often stumble, unsure or unable to explain the cross. What is it about the cross that is so defining for a Christian? Let me explain.

For one thing, the cross tells us that Christ knows our situation because he’s been there. Sometimes we think that nobody cares about us. We think no one has ever suffered the way we are suffering. The cross shows that line of thinking to be a tragic error.

I am sure we are all shocked and saddened at the tragic news from Kerrville, Texas about the many adults and children who were swept away by raging waters from the Guadalupe River after a ferocious rainstorm. The death toll has already passed fifty, with twenty-seven girls from a Christian summer camp still missing. I can’t imagine the heartbreak of parents, grandparents, family, and friends must deal with such a tragic occurrence. Or the sorrow of having loved ones swept away in the raging waters. How do we continue to believe in a loving God when such tragedy occurs in our lives?

What we need to keep in mind is that tragedy breaks God’s heart as much as ours. God does not stop rainstorms or tornadoes or hurricanes or fires from occurring. Natural disasters happen all the time. And yet, our God is not some impersonal force who doesn’t care whether we live or die. Our God is someone who entered our human existence, and knew poverty, persecution, beatings and suffering, and eventual death on a cross. This God knows our pain because he’s been there. And while he does not prevent tragedy from happening, he is there to support and comfort us in whatever pain and sorrows come our way. God does not prevent suffering, but he does give us the strength to get through it. God is with us every step of the way in all the pains and griefs we experience in this life.

Back in January 1973, when I was in graduate school at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., a passenger airplane crashed in the Potomac River. Because of the icy cold water, the only way to rescue the passengers was by helicopter. One man on the plane assisted the other passengers in the icy river to grab the lifeline and be pulled to safety. He did this repeatedly, even when others told him to save himself. Finally, as the last of the passengers was pulled to safety, the man was nowhere to be seen. He died saving others even though it meant his own life.

When Christ bore the cross at Calvary, he plunged into the icy rivers of our lives, saving us even at the cost of his own life. Christ knows our pain, our suffering, our distress because he has been there. He walks where we walk. He hurts where we hurt. We boast in the cross of Christ because he is a God who knows suffering because he too has suffered. Yes, life can be tough, and even filled with heartbreak, but Christ is with us every step of the way.

There is another reason we boast in the cross: because Christ has taken away our guilt. Guilt is a pervasive problem in our society, though no one wants to admit it. There are people lying in hospital rooms today because of unresolved guilt. There are marriages that are coming apart because of secrets that are gnawing away at husbands and wives. There are people engaged in all kinds of destructive behavior because they don't know how to heal the past. There are people who do morally reprehensible things but have no sense that what they are doing is wrong.

So, what is needed? We need a savior. A savior does what we cannot do for ourselves. A savior takes all our guilt upon himself as if he were guilty. That is the meaning of the cross, what Christ has done for us. Christ came into our world and took upon himself all our guilt and died on the cross so that we might live, the innocent suffering for the guilty.

Christ did this in the fashion of a prisoner on the Burma Road during World War 2. At the end of the day, the Japanese guards counted the shovels of all those who had worked on the road. One shovel was missing. A guard said, "Return that shovel or twenty men will be shot." No one stepped forward. And the guard said, "Alright, we will now shoot twenty of you." One man stepped forward – and he was promptly beaten to death by the guards. When they got back to camp, they found there was no shovel missing. He was the savior. He took all that guilt upon himself as if he were guilty.

This is the Christian doctrine of redemption – Christ dying on our behalf to save us from our sin and guilt. On the cross Jesus reaches out his arms to embrace us, not in judgment but in love. No one is beyond the loving reach of God, no one. No guilt is too deep, no sin too serious that God cannot forgive us. The cross tells us that Christ has taken away our sins and guilt once for all when he died in our place.

And that brings us to the final reason we boast in the cross: Christ loves us that much. "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son..." says St. John's Gospel (3:16).

The next time you suffer from low self-esteem, or you think your life is worthless, keep this in mind: if you were the only person in the world, Jesus would have still died for you. Why? Because he loves you.

In July 1941, the Nazis selected ten prisoners at the Auschwitz Concentration Camp to die as punishment for another prisoner's escape. One man by the name of Francis pleaded for his life, claiming he had a wife and two sons.

Father Maximillian Kolbe, a Franciscan friar, volunteered to die in his place. The Commandant of the camp agreed, and Kolbe and the other nine prisoners were placed in a starvation bunker. Kolbe survived more than 14 days with no food or water. The Nazis ended Kolbe's life in August 1941 with a lethal injection.

Francis never forgot Kolbe's sacrifice. Here was a man who died for him, who gave his life so that he might live. In recognition of his selfless act, the Roman Catholic Church canonized Maximillian Kolbe a saint in 1982. Francis and his family were present at the ceremony.

Until shortly before he died in 1995, Francis traveled through Europe and the United States giving talks about the saint and laying cornerstones for churches in his name. Francis boasted what Father Maximillian Kolbe did for him. St. Paul boasted because of what Christ had done for him. How can you not boast when someone loves you so much, he lays down his life in your place? Isn't that something to boast about? Christ loves us that much.

That's the good news we need to share with people who do not know Christ in their lives. There is hope for every person because we have a God whose love for us is greater than our sins and shortcomings. Christ takes away our sins and heals our guilt. Christ knows the pain in our lives because he has suffered too. He knows our pain and walks with us through it, by our side, every step of the way.

Boasting about anything is almost always in bad taste. And yet, there is one thing Christians can boast about without any apology. "May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ."

The Rev. Dr. Gary Nicolosi

July 6, 2025

Text – Galatians 6:11-18

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Advent Episcopal Church, Sun City West, AZ