

MANY LIVE AS ENEMIES OF THE CROSS OF CHRIST

Second Sunday in Lent

March 16, 2025

The apostle Paul wrote with a broken heart to his spiritual children: My brothers and sisters, I now tell you even with tears, that many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. He was sending a warning to the Christians living in Philippi, telling them that there were many individuals who, through their actions were showing themselves to be enemies of the cross of Christ.

As I spent time on this verse, I found it interesting that Paul did not speak these words of warning to those who were enemies of CHRIST, but to those who were enemies of the CROSS of Christ. Why did he speak directly about the cross? What did it mean to be an enemy of the cross of Christ?

In the letter Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, he said: "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. For it is written, 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.' ...For Jews ask for signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to gentiles," For various reasons the cross of Christ was a stumbling block and foolishness to many. The cross still remains so today. There continues to be many who are enemies of the cross of Christ. And there are times when even you and I are numbered among them.

To understand what Paul meant by being an enemy of the cross of Christ we need to look earlier in his letter to the Philippian Christians. In the previous chapter Paul told the believers to have the same mind that Christ had. He wrote: “though [Jesus] existed in the form of God, [he] did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped, but emptied himself” This word emptied is the Greek word *kenosis*. Jesus emptied himself...” assuming human likeness. [H]e humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.” Jesus poured himself out on the cross; emptied to the last dregs. His greatest act of self-emptying was seen as he hung dying on the cross.

Jesus, the Son of God, lived a life of self-emptying love, of pouring himself out rather than filling himself up, because he was following the example of his Father and the Spirit. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are always pouring themselves out, emptying themselves. While Jesus’ greatest act of self-emptying was seen on the cross, his Father’s greatest act of self-emptying was seen in the incarnation, when God emptied himself fully into Jesus.

Fr. Richard Rohr spoke of the divine self-emptying this way: “The Three [Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,] all live as an eternal and generous *kenosis*, the Greek word for self-emptying...God is constantly outpouring. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit can trust that self-emptying, knowing that the space created will be filled. Like a waterwheel of divine love, the Father empties all of himself into the Son. The Son receives and empties all of himself into the Spirit. The Spirit receives and empties all of herself into the Father. The Father receives and the cycle continues. It’s no good telling people to let go if they can’t be assured they will be refilled, but the Trinity

gives us a model for how that can happen. I can let go, because I trust I will always be filled up again. That is the pattern of reality. If you're protecting yourself, if you're securing your own image and identity, then you're still holding on. Your ego remains full of itself—the opposite of *kenosis*."

Jesus lived a life of divine self-emptying love. It was seen as he touched and healed the one with a skin disease, and as he sat down and listened to a Samaritan woman and spoke words to her of living water. In self-emptying love Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners. In self-emptying love Jesus one day looked across the valley to Jerusalem, and with a broken heart said: "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!" In self-emptying love Jesus chastised the religious leaders, calling them whitewashed tombs full of dead men's bones. In self-emptying love Jesus overturned the tables of the money changers in the temple proclaiming that his father's house must be a house of prayer for all nations. In self-emptying love, Jesus knelt in the Garden of Gethsemane and poured out his fears to his Father.

Cynthia Bourgeault states beautifully what happened there in the Garden: "When surrounded by fear, contradiction, betrayal; when the "fight or flight" alarm bells are going off in your head and everything inside you wants to brace and defend itself, the infallible way to extricate yourself and reclaim your home in that sheltering kingdom is simply to freely release whatever you are holding onto—including, if it comes to this, life itself."

Summarizing Jesus' way of self-emptying love, Cynthia writes: "The most daring gamble of Jesus' trajectory of pure love may just be to show us that self-emptying is not the *means* to something else; the act [of self-emptying] is itself the full expression of its meaning and instantly brings into being "a new creation."

The apostle Paul spoke of those who were enemies of the cross of Christ, who were enemies of this self-emptying way. These individuals act in ways that are more self-filling than self-emptying, contrary to God's ways that are always moving in the direction of self-emptying love. This very same self-emptying love is meant to dwell in all of us as well as God's children.

The self-emptying kind of love that God calls each of us to, is the kind of love that puts the needs of others before our own needs. But this doesn't mean that we are codependent or become doormats or enable others.

When we are not living a self-emptying kind of life; not living in self-emptying love, we are, in those moments, living as enemies of the cross of Christ; as enemies of that ultimate example of self-emptying love. When we fill ourselves and promote ourselves and fight for ourselves, we are living in ways that deny Jesus' very purpose for living, which is our purpose as well.

Jesus' self-emptying way is very rare in our world. He affirmed this reality when he said that we are to "Enter through the narrow gate, for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it." We see many individuals walking through this

wide gate as enemies of the cross of Christ. We see it when leaders promote themselves rather than lifting up others. In this way they are walking through the wide gate of self-fulfillment rather than self-emptying. When a marriage partner pushes for their way rather than working with, and compromising with their partner, they are walking through the wide gate of self-fulfillment rather than that of self-emptying. When someone works hard and expects to be affirmed for their work rather than often working quietly and secretly for the glory of God alone, they are walking through the wide gate of self-fulfillment rather than self-emptying.

In contrast, people walk through the narrow gate of self-emptying love when they care for a spouse or partner who is ill; when they reach out a hand to a stranger, provide a meal to a neighbor, speak of God's love to someone who is struggling and feeling alone. They walk through the narrow gate when they set up a beautiful table display for a church event without expecting to be recognized. They walk through the narrow gate when they step aside and let someone else go first. In these and so many other ways, we have opportunities daily to walk through this narrow gate in kenotic self-emptying love. This is God's way and Jesus' way and is meant to be our way.

May we walk every day in kenotic self-emptying love for all people, not as enemies of the cross of Christ.