

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

We now live in a global world, and most of us have been exposed to other cultures either by experience or through the media. We have come to understand that people around the world don't always think like us.

- We treasure freedom and independence above all else. Other cultures value security and order above all else.
- We stress individualism, whereas others stress the tribe or the community.
- We recognize now that there are different ways of processing information. The western mind that grew up literate and reading processes information differently than the illiterate person. They also think and rationalize in a different way.
- Different cultures have different languages, different types of dress, different traditions and customs, different holidays, etc.

This increasing recognition of the differences in people and cultures and nations is for the most part a good thing. But it becomes a bad thing when it is applied to the truth of God. The notion that there is absolute truth that is the same for everyone is believed by fewer and fewer people. Instead, most today believe truth is subjective. What's true in the West is not necessarily true in the East. What's true in America may not hold true in Saudi Arabia, or in Russia, or in the South Sudan. This idea can easily take root in us. We can start to adopt this worldview and hardly notice we have. In fact I have heard more than one Christian say, when directly asked, "So is Jesus the **ONLY** way of salvation? Even in India and China and elsewhere?" And they answer, "Well, I don't want to say he's the *only* way."

But Jesus sure said it, didn't he? **"I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."**

For some reason, some people find this to be offensive. Yet when it comes to math, we don't seem to find absolute truth offensive, do we?  $1+1=2$ . Always? Yes, always. But isn't that narrowminded and exclusive? What about the mathematician from India? Might not he calculate  $1+1=3$ ? Or how about the Chinese? Can't we be open minded enough to allow them to believe that  $1+1=1$ ? No, we insist that this mathematical equation be resolved in exactly the same way all around the world.

So let's not apologize when our God says that there is only one way to resolve the problem of sin. There's only one way to resolve the problem of guilt... the problem of a broken relationship with God. There is only one way, and it is God's way... a way that he has made available to everyone on the planet.

In fact, let's not apologize that there is only one way... let's rejoice that there is one way! Because here's the thing. It doesn't matter if you or I are talking to Americans or Russians or Sudanese or Mexicans or even Eskimos... God's holy requirements of man are universal. Man's failure to meet those requirements is universal. And God's solution to our failure is universal. No matter who is the audience, the message is the same: We preach Christ crucified.

We read 1 Corinthians 1:22-25 (NIV)

**22 Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, 23 but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, 24 but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. 25 For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength.**

I don't know who the original source was, but someone once said that man is born with a vacuum or hole in his heart which only God can fill. Perhaps another way to say that is that by nature, we feel that our relationship with the Creator is not right. Every person on the planet has a conscience which tells him he has done wrong, and that God is not happy about it. People, then naturally seek to soothe their troubled conscience. They look to right the relationship with God which they intrinsically know is wrong. They know something is missing, but can't identify exactly what it is. And so they seek. They think. They invent. They try.

Different people in different cultures attempt to fill the "God hole" in various ways. In Paul's time, the Jews looked for signs. If they had enough signs, then they could fill the void. Greeks in Paul's day sought to fill the void with wisdom. Find the right wisdom, and all will be right in your life. When Paul spoke to some philosophers in Athens, their response was, "What is this babbling trying to say?" Upon hearing about the resurrection, some sneered. This teaching didn't sound wise to them.

Trying to filling the void in the heart does have different cultural answers. Having lived in Russia 12 years, I can tell you how they fill the void. In Russia, for 70 years, the communist government tried to stamp out all religion. In many ways they succeeded. But they couldn't successfully fill the "God hole" in the hearts of people. And so people sought their own truth. It's interesting – and sad – the wide range of beliefs, superstitions and philosophies that cropped up. Many read and believe in horoscopes. Various superstitions try to bring good luck. For example, many Russians refuse to shake hands over the threshold of a doorway because it's bad luck. Just like some Americans, some Russians knock on wood after saying something good that has happened (so as not to spoil it.) But more common is to spit. Fortunately, they don't actually usually spit, but they fake spit. A member of our congregation has some chronic health problems, but I had heard she was finally feeling better. So when I saw her in church, I asked her how she was feeling. She answered, "Much better now! Ptoo. Ptoo. Ptoo." At funerals especially is when the superstitions are especially strong. Mirrors in the house must be covered so the person's spirit doesn't see itself and get afraid or angry. At the memorial meal after the funeral, everything must be eaten with a spoon. And 40 days after the funeral, there must be another memorial meal, for it is believed the soul goes up to heaven on that day. Even the Orthodox religion which has remained is more superstition than God's truth. People cross themselves, pray kiss and light candles for icons, wear crosses to ward off bad luck. All this to restore what they feel is lost or lacking. In addition to the superstitions, alcohol is a culturally acceptable way to fill the void. Public drunkenness is common and excused.

We Americans attempt to fill the void too. Superstitions and drunkenness aren't so widespread, but we Americans seek truth and try to find fulfillment in other ways. Self help, quick fix, feel good. But most of all Americans, rather than filling the gap, distract themselves enough that they don't notice the vacuum. Hobbies, internet, movies, TV, iPod, shopping, buying, spending, vacations, Xbox, PlayStation, Game Boy... the distractions are endless, and affordable. Perhaps Americans haven't filled the void with wrong stuff, they just ignore the fact that it's empty!

What about you? I'm sure you've felt that gnawing inside that says your sins have offended the Creator. Have you filled the void with the wrong thing? Sure, you're in church today... and that's a good thing. Yet Satan works to make us forget our Savior, and instead he distracts us. We have succumbed to Satan's tricks too? What is the one thing needed? What will give us happiness, fulfillment, purpose, and belonging? Paul answers the question for all people everywhere:

**“We preach Christ crucified.”** No matter what your culture, language, place in time, the answer is the same: “Christ crucified.” You see the reason a void exists in our hearts is sin. We were born with our backs to God, and with each sin we commit each day of our lives, we walk even further away from him. And as the song goes, we're looking for love in all the wrong places, and we can't find our back to God. We're on the path to hell, and there's not a thing we can do about it! But then we hear the simple message which changes us forever: we preach Christ crucified.

We preach, first of all, **Christ**. From the time Adam and Eve fell into sin, God has made and repeated the promise to send the Christ. Christ was the one specially anointed by God, separated for the special purpose of reconciling the world to God. When the time was just right, God sent his son, born of the virgin Mary as true man, to enter into this world. There was no “God vacuum” in the heart of Christ. His heart was completely full with the love and will of the Father. In fact, he and the Father are one. Whereas we seek, Jesus had found, and was seeking others. Where we are distracted, Jesus was focused on fulfilling the Father's will to accomplish our salvation. This is the Christ whom we preach! ...true God and true man, the anointed one who came to redeem us.

But we don't just preach Christ. We preach Christ **crucified**. God couldn't just write off all our wrong thoughts, words and actions. That wouldn't be right at all, would it? Where would the justice be if he just turned a blind eye to sin? It wasn't enough for Christ to come and live a perfect life. Our debt of sin would still have remained. And so he also removed the debt we owed by paying it himself. Christ took upon his shoulders every sinful thought word and action of every Jew, and Greek, and Russian, and American, and Sudanese and everyone else. His whole being endured the unimaginable agony of a complete God-vacuum. The Father left his Son on the cross of Calvary. Jesus hanged there in hell for your sins and mine.

This is the Christ crucified we preach. Sin is ugly. Christ's death is ugly. The grave is ugly. But the result is something unimaginably beautiful! The ugliness turned to beauty when on the 3<sup>rd</sup> day, Christ rose from the dead. All of our sins remained in the grave, and he rose triumphantly, gloriously, holy.

Search no more! The distractions are no longer needed! We are forgiven! We now have a right relationship with the Creator of the Universe! We are no longer his enemies... we are his family. We belong. We have purpose in life. We have hope now and in eternity. The void is filled. Our heart is no longer empty. It is filled with Christ as we live in him, and he in us.

We preach Christ crucified. We preach it here in Omaha. We preach it in North America. We preach it in Russia, and in Africa, Japan, Hong Kong, China, and many other places. The language and culture change, but **the message remains the same**. The answer to all our deepest question is simply: Christ crucified!

The Apostle Paul reminds us the people receive this message in one of two ways. The first response is rejection. For the sign-seeking Jews, Christ crucified was a stumbling block. They were offended at the teaching and refused to believe. For the wisdom-seeking Greeks, Christ crucified was foolishness. Today too, preaching Christ crucified is met with skepticism by

many. To the sinful mind, the cross is indeed foolishness. We live because of one who died. We are blessed because of one who was cursed. We are justified by a condemned man. He who is last will be first. The humble will be exalted. These teachings are foolishness and offensive to unbelievers! And therefore, unbelievers will often receive this message with hostility.

But the apostle Paul tells of a second reception when Christ crucified is preached: **“to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.”** God’s elect are scattered all over the world. When he calls them through the Gospel, they believe and are saved. This Gospel of Christ is powerful, and it is God’s wisdom.

The word for power here is the same word from which we get our word “dynamite.” I’ve been richly blessed by God to see the powerful, “dynamite” effects of Gospel. I have been blessed to see it change people.

A babushka (grandmother) named Elizavyeta (Elizabeth) started attending our beginning Bible class in Russia. She often put herself down, saying she was not very sharp and wasn’t able remember what she learned. She was apprehensive about taking our 29 lesson Bible instruction course... she didn’t think she was smart enough to understand it. But she came faithfully to the church and the Bible instruction classes. Half way through the course, her ailing husband died. She received much needed support from the other members of the church. She finished the course and became a member. A short time later we started the course again, and she decided to take it again. This time she brought a friend of hers. I was amazed at how she helped her friend understand Scripture. Elizaveta understood and believed in Christ crucified for her sins. And she was an evangelist taking that good news to others! The Gospel is dynamite. It is powerful.

I have seen that same powerful Gospel working here at Good Shepherd. I’ve seen new people come to faith . I’ve seen other grow tremendously in faith. I’ve seen some overcome sin in their lives through the power of Jesus Christ. And I’ve seen our people open their wallets and bank accounts to generously support the ministries here AND a building expansion on top of that! The gospel... the message of Christ crucified for us... is powerful indeed!

Friends, the message is simple: We preach Christ crucified. We don’t preach our own thoughts. We don’t preach our opinions about God. We don’t preach American culture. We don’t preach self-help strategies. We don’t preach current philosophy. Here in this church. In Omaha. In America. In Russia. In Africa. Around the world... we preach Christ crucified. It is the single, cross cultural answer to the question in the heart of every person. It is the key to eternal life. It is the one thing that gives us meaning, purpose and hope. Through the crucified Christ, our sins are forgiven and we are accepted into the loving embrace of our heavenly Father.

To a lost world, to different cultures, to those who are seeking but haven’t found, to all people, dear brothers and sisters, we preach Christ crucified. Amen.