

## Title: “Scandal of the Cross”

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John 12:12-43

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**Service Readings:** Isaiah 50:4–9a, Phil. 2:5–11, **John 12:12–43**

*Jesus refuses a path of visible power and authority and instead travels on one that leads to suffering and death. But hidden within this suffering is the most visible work of God for our salvation.*

### Message:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

<sup>17</sup> The crowd that had been with him when he called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to bear witness. <sup>18</sup> The reason why the crowd went to meet him was that they heard he had done this sign. <sup>19</sup> So the Pharisees said to one another, “You see that you are gaining nothing. Look, the world has gone after him.”

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<sup>41</sup> Isaiah said these things because he saw his glory and spoke of him. <sup>42</sup> Nevertheless, many even of the authorities believed in him, but for fear of the Pharisees they did not confess it, so that they would not be put out of the synagogue; <sup>43</sup> for they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God.

Let me begin by asking you a question: In your life, is the cross of Jesus Christ the life support or is it a crutch? Is the cross of Christ the *only thing* that sustains life in you, that keeps you breathing, keeps you living, or is it something you carry around with you because you hope that it will somehow help you achieve your goals and dreams?

Now, let me be clear. I know that we are a Lutheran church. I know that we don't believe in manipulating God for our own prosperity, our own health. I'm not suggesting that as a church we profess that enough faith in Christ will produce those things. Those are unbiblical views and not what I am talking about.

What I *am* talking about is our reliance on God in our own lives. In our Gospel reading today we hear from two different groups. The first group are the crowds who shout Hosanna because of the miracles they saw Jesus perform. They were looking for an earthly king; one who could solve their earthly problems. They sought a king they could cheer for, a king they could crown. They sought... a crutch.

There was a second group of people, those who claimed a life devoted to God, who saw in Jesus something other than an earthly king. They saw someone to confess. But confession would disrupt their earthly lives, and rearrange their earthly priorities. This is not what they sought. Just like the first group, they too sought... a crutch.

So, back to you. Is the cross of Christ your life support or is it your crutch? Now, that question is provocative; I get that. I composed it that way. And your initial reaction might be in the affirmative. You might respond in confidence that Jesus is your life support. And I would agree: there are definitely times in my life when he is for me, too. But there are also times when I wrestle control away from him. And in those times I *turn him* into my crutch. We all do this. It is called sin.

So, even though the question might shock you, the answer to the question is something we confess each and every Sunday: “Most merciful God, we confess that we are by nature sinful and unclean. We confess that there are times this week that you have been our life support, but there are also times when we have not relied on you with our whole heart. Where we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.”

So if he is both, because we are sinners in need of his saving grace, let’s explore this analogy a bit more. There are two points I want to make. The first is this: a crutch is something you can live without. Life might be more inconvenient, life might be more limiting, but life is still livable. You can refuse the crutch. Doing so decreases your quality of life, but little more than that. You might even know someone who did exactly that! I do! It wasn’t a physical crutch for a broken bone, but it was a wheelchair. The person refused one because of the statement it made about this person’s health. They would rather live a degraded life than succumb to the use of something that, on one hand made them more mobile, but on the other announced to the world that they had a health problem. Back to the Gospel passage, can you see how some of the authorities felt the same way about Jesus? We don’t know what they wanted to believe *about* him. Some of them might have eventually saw him as their life support. But on this day, we do know that they saw him as a crutch – as something they would have to rely on. And that something would be visible to others in their community. And that something would change how they lived their lives. This was an ask too far and so they rejected it. How often do we do the same thing?

We so often confess with our lips what Paul writes to the Philippian church. Christ Jesus,  
<sup>6</sup>who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped,<sup>7</sup> but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. <sup>8</sup>And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

We know this. We believe this. But we often times don’t live this out. In the company of our coworkers, friends, even families we suppress the call to *proclaim and live* this good news because we know what it might cause. We are afraid of what our life might look like if we are too bold in displaying Jesus Christ. We are terrified of the choices that we will have to make if we make the crutch too visible.

But I have good news for you: the answer to this problem is *not* to “get over” it. It is not to muster up the courage to proudly live a life where the crutch of Jesus Christ is visible to the world. Because, even if you did that, at the end of the day.... It is still a crutch. It is still something that rests in your decision, something that you *choose* to rely on. And, as good Lutherans we know that eternal salvation rests not in the work that we do but in the work that Jesus did. If Jesus is only a crutch we choose to lean on, then toss that idea away. That’s not what we desire.

That leaves life support. I am going to boldly state that everyone one of you has seen someone on life support – either in person or in a movie. There are two things I want to point out about it. First, no one ever chooses life support – it is chosen for them. The patient is in a state so close to death that there is nothing, absolutely nothing that will save them except for external intervention. And once this intervention has proven successful and the patient is stable, life support is used to maintain that life. The patient’s very life *depends* on these machines. Turn them off and the patient dies. The doctor revives; the machines sustain. The patient does nothing except receive. He is passive in the continuity of his life.

This leads me to the second point: when the patient is on life support, does he care what he looks like? That question is actually absurd, right? It is probably the furthest from his mind. His entire life is attached to machines that are keeping him alive. The very last thing he cares about is what he looks like to others and what others think of how he looks. He is connected to machines that are sustaining him! They are not a crutch! They are life! They are the *only things* that are important! The rest doesn’t matter!

You see the connection of this analogy to our life with Christ, right? Our lives are supposed to look more like the life of this patient. Our lives are supposed to be lived knowing that without the intervention of the doctor, what we would call baptism, we would be dead. And without the continued sustenance of God, his Word, his body, his blood, we would be dead. We know this. And yet how often do we treat it as a crutch instead of the life support that it truly is?

But here is the good news – the *real* good news. The life support of Christ, even when we turn it into a crutch, is still the life support of Christ. Whether we live a life that reflects this or not does not change the reality that through the death and resurrection of Jesus our Christ, he has attached us to himself. *He* is our life support, and he sustains us, even in those times we don't live that way.

So, maybe the question is *not* whether the cross of Christ is life support or a crutch. Maybe, *instead of a question* it is a prayer:

Lord help us to recognize the times in our lives when we treat you as our crutch. We are sorry. Help us to turn back to you, to rely on you for our every breath. Help us to understand, to really understand that what sustains our lives is the cross where you died for us. Through that cross you have attached us to yourself in Baptism. Through your Word and your body and blood you continue to sustain us. You are our life support. Forgive us when we make you our crutch. In your name we pray. Amen