

Ground Zero

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Forest Hill Church, Presbyterian
The Third Sunday after the Epiphany
January 25, 2026

1 Corinthians 1:18

“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.”

None of you will be surprised to hear that I am not inclined to use metaphors drawn from violence when I preach. So I chose the title of this sermon with some reluctance. And to be sure I was saying what I meant—and what I think the apostle Paul meant—I looked up the phrase *ground zero*.

Ground zero can mean the point beneath an explosion. It can also mean a beginning, a place from which everything else proceeds. And it can mean the center of intense, disruptive change. It is those latter two meanings that I have in mind this morning.

For Paul, the cross marked history as *before and after*. What God accomplished in Jesus Christ was not incremental or symbolic. It was decisive. Karl Barth once said that Jesus is “the crater” around which everything else in history is reorganized. Reality itself has been re-formed – literally blown up – by the disruptive message of non-violent divine love crucified by the state-sanctioned violence represented by the cross.

Paul also knew this, and Paul also knew that this way of seeing was not obvious.

To most people, then and now, Jesus' death looked exactly like what it was designed to look like: a public execution, carried out by the state, meant to humiliate, silence, and eliminate a perceived threat. That's why Paul can say so plainly that the message of the cross is foolishness to some and the power of God to others.

This is not abstract theology. It is painfully concrete.

Earlier this month, the killing of **Renee Good** in Minneapolis forced us once again to confront a truth the church must never evade: the modern state, with our Christian consent, still claims—and exercises—the power to kill those it identifies as enemies, threats, or problems to be managed. The mechanisms may be bureaucratic, procedural, and legally sanctioned, but the claim is ancient and the outcome is the same. When order is threatened, the state reserves the right to take life. To take **your** life.

That is not a tragic exception to the Christian story. It is the very context of the cross.

Jesus was not killed by accident. He was not lynched by a mob acting alone. He was executed by imperial authority, with religious cooperation, in the name of security, stability, and the common good. Rome crucified Jesus because he was perceived as dangerous—not violent, but dangerous to a system built on domination, fear, and enforced peace.

The cross, then, is God's exposure of the lie that violence can save us. The lie that we are living with now and have lived with for as long as we have existed as a

species and as a nation. The lie that we Americans vote into office again and again and again.

When the state kills in order to preserve itself, the cross stands as God's refusal to bless that logic. When the lethal force of the powerful against the powerless is justified as necessary, regrettable, or unavoidable, the cross names it for what it is: the last resort of a world that does not trust the power of God – the power of love – to be sufficient.

And it is precisely here—*here*—that Jesus speaks his most unsettling command: “Love your enemies.”

Not manage them.

Not deport them.

Not shoot them.

Love them.

This is not sentimental instruction. It is not naïve idealism. It was spoken by one who knew exactly what embodying divine love – enemy-love – would cost him.

Jesus did not then and does not now command what he himself refused to do. He does not call us to a path he avoided. He loved his enemies and commanded – not suggested as a nice idea, but commanded as a way of life – his followers to follow him in doing so – all the way to the cross. And the state killed him for it.

To love one's enemies in a world organized by fear and force will always look like foolishness. It will sound irresponsible. It will be dismissed as dangerous. And yet Paul insists that this foolishness is the very power of God.

The killing of Renee Good confronts us with the ongoing reality that the powers which crucified Jesus are still very much with us. The cross is not safely behind us in history; it casts its long and chilling shadow into the present. The question is not whether the world still crucifies. The question is whether the church will still tell the truth about it.

The cross does not spiritualize violence. It unmasks it. It shows us what happens when fear is given power at the ballot box. And it declares that God is not found on the side of lethal power, but on the side of the ones who suffer under it.

That is why the cross is not merely a symbol of personal forgiveness. It is God's judgment on every system—political, economic, and religious—that claims the right to decide whose lives are expendable. God does not share our southern border. God does not defeat our enemies on our behalf. God defeats enmity itself by absorbing violence into God's very self – “This is my body, this is my blood, given for you” – and thereby breaking its cycle.

And that is why the cross offends. It challenges not only personal sin, but the public lust for power. It refuses to let us make peace with death-dealing systems simply because they are legal, familiar, or wrapped in the language of safety. It insists that love—not force, not fear, not control—but love is the final truth of the universe. And we

believe that love, God's love, after history, finally, will win. And that is the source of joy about which we will sing in a few minutes.

That insistence will not make us respectable. It will not make us comfortable. And it will not make us safe in the ways the world defines safety. But it will make us faithful.

Paul says the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are self-destructing through their violence—but to us who are being saved by handing our lives over relentlessly, fully, and daily to God's love, the message of the cross is the power of God – the power to welcome the stranger, to provide for all, to reconcile the estranged, to heal the wounded, and to make new what the world has written off.

“There is a balm in Gilead” we sang in the sermon hymn, and that healing balm is the message of the cross. That is why we keep the cross front and center. It is our ground zero. It is the place where the old world is exposed for what it is—and where God's new creation begins.

Thanks be to God.

We end our worship by singing together hymn no. 539, “We Will Go Out with Joy”