

Ruth Ann Reese

*Cruciform Teaching: Reflections on the Way of Jesus,  
the Challenge of the Cross, and Teaching*

**Abstract:**

Jesus's way of life was one of humility and utter reliance upon God. This way of life ultimately led to the cross and to God's raising of Jesus from the dead. Similarly, Christian teachers are also called to a way of humility and dependance upon God as they pursue the vocation of teaching.

**Keywords:** teaching, cross, humility, vocation

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## Introduction

Many of our classes begin with a roll call or, if online, with an introduction (either synchronous or asynchronous). The teacher reads out names and students reply—often with “here” or “present” but sometimes with a raised hand or even a joking or flippant response. Each response signifies the presence of the student and begins the process of creating a distinctive community of learners. The roll call has often become perfunctory, but it is the place where students begin to announce, “I am present.” *I am present*—the person the teacher sees with their history, their experience, their prior knowledge. This person is present in this space and in this time. For the teacher, it can be a challenge to see the “I” who is present among the community that is beginning to be formed. But even here, we invite the beginning of relationship when we hear a student indicate that they prefer to be called by a middle name or a nickname or a shortened version of their name. And, when we note this, teachers begin the work of listening and responding to the “I” that is present in this learning community. Ideally, in the framework of theological education, the student who says “here” or “present” gives this answer to their name in the presence of Emmanuel—God with Us. It is not only the student who announces their presence but usually the teacher as well. Perhaps, “Hi, I’m Dr. Reese, welcome to Exegesis of 1 Corinthians.” I might even ask, “Are you sure you’re in the right class?” One time, some years ago, I was sitting in my office in the afternoon on the first day of class going over the last details for a class I was going to teach at 4:00 pm. My phone rang, and a student I knew well asked me, “Dr. Reese, what room is your class meeting in?” I told him. He asked, “What time is your class?” I said, “4:00 pm.” He said, “Dr. Reese, your class is at 2:30, and we are all here waiting for you.” I looked at my watch—2:40. I was not present in my class. When I arrived a few minutes later, hot, discombobulated, and now anxious, I opened up my Greek Bible, turned to the student I knew well and said, “Let’s begin reading at chapter 1, verse 1 in Greek. Please start for us.” I sat down and began to listen to the students reading aloud, translating, falling into a rhythm. But I felt that the failure to be present at the very beginning, that failure to set the tone of welcome, that failure to begin together tainted that class (at least in my mind if not in the minds of the students). Presence in the classroom can be a sacred invitation to learning. And so, the teacher and the student gather together. Ideally, they both announce their presence, and in the context of theological education, they gather in the presence

of Emmanuel—God with Us. Such a gathering can be explicit—a song, a prayer, a devotional, a period of thanksgiving or sharing of joys—and can take place each time the class gathers to remind all who are present that we gather for the work of teaching and learning in the presence of Jesus, the teacher, Rabbi.

Today, I begin this set of reflections by inviting you, the reader, to be present. We are gathered together in the presence of Jesus, a man whose very existence is rooted in the communal trinitarian relationship of Father, Son, and Spirit. And what I want us to do is to contemplate what we might learn as both teachers and students from the way of Jesus and the challenge of the cross.

### The Way of Jesus

When I speak of “the way” of Jesus, I’m speaking first about the trajectory of his life. Paul captures this clearly in Philippians 2 when he writes that Christ Jesus,

though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. Therefore, God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the father. (Phil 2:6-11)<sup>1</sup>

On more than one occasion, I’ve heard this referred to as a “v” shaped trajectory—a kind of example of Jesus Christ downsizing from a heavenly mansion to an earthly existence only to have that experience reversed as he is exalted. But let’s pause here to note two things: first, the emptying, the downward movement, if you will, of Christ, is his own action. Christ chooses humility. “He emptied himself . . . he humbled himself.” Second, the upward movement, the exaltation is undertaken by God. Jesus Christ does not exalt himself; his exaltation is God’s doing. In response to (“therefore”) Christ’s actions—including his obedience even to death on a cross, the most humiliating form of death in the Roman world, a form of death usually reserved for slaves and rebels—God highly exalted him. In other words, Paul describes Jesus’s downward trajectory as actions initiated by Christ and

Christ's upward trajectory as actions initiated by God. There is no point at which Jesus ceases to humble himself. Instead, Paul describes the ongoing humility of Jesus Christ and the subsequent response of God the Father. Even as Jesus is raised up, even as the name of Jesus becomes the name to which every knee will bow, Jesus remains a person of humility, a person who does not grasp after the authority of God. He does not exalt himself; he does not make his own name great; he does not demand that his name become the exclamation "Jesus Christ is Lord." This is what God graciously gives (*ἐχαρίσατο*) to the Son who has humbled himself taking on human flesh with all of its mortality. Even at the end of this passage we see that "at the name of Jesus every knee should bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord *to the glory of God the Father.*" When Christ has been highly exalted, when every tongue has confessed that Jesus Christ is Lord, he is still other-oriented. This declaration of Christ's lordship is "to the glory of God." At the beginning, Christ does not "regard equality with God as something to be grasped," and, at the end, Christ's exaltation and the resulting confession that Jesus Christ is Lord is not in service to himself but is directed to the glory of God. Paul, of course, begins this great hymnic description of Christ with the imperative, "have this same mind in you which also is in Christ Jesus."<sup>2</sup>

The trajectory of Phil 2:6-11 is the trajectory of the Christian—the movement toward humility. Any exaltation which one might experience comes solely as a gift from God. This is reflected in various locations in scripture where those who humble themselves before God will be raised up by God (e.g., Matt 23:12; Jam 4:10; 1 Pet 5:6). In other words, humility is not an attribute that Christians take on for a season: it is instead a way of life. And, when God lifts up those who humble themselves, that is not the moment when humility ceases to exist. Indeed, as human beings created by God, we always exist in a relationship of humility before God, and any exaltation that we receive—whether in this life or in the life to come—is a gift of God. It is precisely when we are tempted to think that we have earned or deserve exaltation that there is the opportunity to slip into a space in which our humble posture before God is exchanged for the attempt to stand on our own apart from God (a reminder of one aspect of that sin that took place in a garden at the beginning of time). When I speak of the way of Jesus, I'm particularly concerned with this downward trajectory, with humility, emptying, and obedience. But perhaps one further observation is in order. Jesus Christ is the ultimate example of the one with status and

position who chooses the way of humility; yet over and over, this man raised up the lowly and the humble whenever he encountered them (the widow with the dead son; the woman caught in adultery; the dead daughter raised to life; the man out of his mind and possessed by demons). The man who chose the path toward the cross is also the man who lifts others up, bringing them new life and restored relationship, even as God will lift him up, exalt him, and give him the name above every other name.

### **The Way of Jesus in the Gospel Narratives**

So, if the way of Jesus is characterized by this downward trajectory that leads to the cross and by the exaltation enacted by God that leads to the recognition of Jesus as Lord and Messiah, then we might think of the Gospel narratives as examples of what the humility of Jesus looked like during his earthly life. The whole life of Jesus—his birth, his exile in Egypt, his faithfulness in the face of temptation, his teaching, his miracle working, his disciple making, his sharp rebuke of the temple and the Pharisees, his entry into Jerusalem on a donkey, and his death on the cross—can be understood as humility, as self-emptying, taking on human likeness. This is an important observation, as it helps us to understand that the humble life can take many forms, and it rejects the idea that to be humble is to give up every form of agency. Instead, if humility is characterized as the life lived in full obedience before God, then humility can include both the overthrowing of temple tables and the touching of lepers. If humility is doing the will of the Father, then humility can include both feeding five thousand people and washing feet. If humility is speaking truthfully in light of God's message, then humility can include a rebuke of the Pharisees and an invitation to follow.

Just as Philippians shows Jesus in *both equal and humble* relationship to God, so too we find this relationship in the Gospels, perhaps most prominently in John's gospel. Jesus is both equal to God ("he was in the form of God," Phil 2:6; "the Word was with God, and the Word was God" Jn 1:1), and Jesus is in a relationship of submission to God (Son to Father). As soon as the roles of Father and Son are introduced, we move into a relationship *between* Father and Son. But let us not think of this relationship as the demands of the Father overriding the will of the Son. Instead, the values of kinship in the first century leaned toward trust, familial cooperation toward a common goal "in a common quest to advance the family's honor and ... to advance one another's interests" (deSilva 2000:

168). Harmony among members of the family is highly valued. The Son serves the interest of the Father not because he is coerced, but out of mutual love for one another. And the Father trusts the Son as the one who represents the interests of the Father on earth. Thus, we read in John, “The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand.” We see that the Father and the Son work together cooperatively, “My Father is working until now, and I am working” (Jn 5:17). As we read further in this passage, we see that the Son does the things that the Father does:

Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise. For the Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing. And greater works than these will he show him, so that you may marvel. For as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom he will. For the Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son, just as they honor the Father. Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him. (Jn. 5:19-23 ESV)

The intimacy between Father and Son is one of mutual respect, honor, cooperation, trust, and love. They are together from the beginning and one in purpose: they work together to make life available to believers through the sacrificial death of the Son, the lamb of God, and to invite believers into the intimate eternal life available through the Son (Jn 6:40) and modeled in the relationship of Father and Son. At the same time, we see the Son deferring to the Father. As he says,

For I have come down from heaven not to do my own will but the will of the one who sent me. Now this is the will of the one who sent me— that I should not lose one person of every one he has given me, but raise them all up at the last day. For this is the will of my Father— for everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him to have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. (Jn 6:38-40 NET)

Jesus defers to the will of God, while at the same time Jesus is in complete harmony with this will. In other words, the will of God is not imposed upon Jesus. Jesus retains agency: he chooses to take up the work necessitated by God’s will, and it is Jesus who promises to raise those who have looked to

the Son and received eternal life. Jesus's humility does not obliterate his identity or his agency.

### The Way of Jesus and Teaching

Having shown that humility is a key characteristic of the way of Jesus, there are any number of ways that we might further unpack the humility of Jesus. But this colloquium is focused on teaching in a global context. So, let me make a few observations about Jesus as a teacher. Here, I'm following Pheme Perkins and her little book *Jesus as Teacher* (1990). Perkins begins by observing the various kinds of teachers that existed in the first century: philosophers, sages, teachers of the law, and prophets. Various scholars have presented evidence that places Jesus in one or more of these categories of teacher, but it is likely that Jesus's teaching draws from multiple influences and isn't confined to one type of teacher. Jesus's teaching is directed toward a diverse audience—men and women, crowds and disciples, teachers of the Law and Roman officials, supplicants and lepers. While there are obviously circles of influence (Peter, James, and John; the twelve; the seventy-two; the crowds), one of the most important observations about Jesus's humility as a teacher is that he associates with the lowly. Most of Jesus's time is spent in itinerant ministry. He is not teaching in the Roman equivalent of Cambridge and Harvard (e.g., Rome or Alexandria, etc.), but in the fields and paths of ordinary life. And in his teaching, he uses the ordinary objects of daily life—seeds, pots, meals, weeds, lamps—and the ordinary experiences of daily life in Palestine—encounters with soldiers, growing food, traveling, paying taxes. And Jesus invites his disciples to associate with the lowly. In fact, much of Jesus's teaching presents a deep challenge to the view that those who are wealthy and powerful are somehow favored by God. Instead, Jesus's teaching says such things as "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth." And it will continue with "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 5:3-5, 10). Indeed, this kingdom has been referred to as "the upside-down kingdom" and as a kingdom characterized by "great reversals." This kingdom appears to be populated by the poor, the meek, and the sorrowful. While the wealthy and powerful are not excluded ("all things are possible with God" Mk 10:27), it is clear that entry into the kingdom of God is difficult for those who have wealth (Mk 10:23). Jesus, as

a teacher, uses a variety of teaching styles (questions, parables, commentary on daily life, interpretation of scripture) to communicate with a wide variety of people while associating with the lowly, and he invites his disciples to do the same.

When we turn to Matthew's Gospel, we find a passage that is specifically focused on teaching. Here Jesus draws a contrast between two types of teachers, the scribes and Pharisees, and his disciples. In Matthew 23:2, Jesus begins by talking about the scribes and the Pharisees—groups with whom he has already clashed and with whom he has also debated some of the points of the Law. Despite this clash, Jesus says, "The experts in the law and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat. Therefore, pay attention to what they tell you and do it" (Matt 23:2-3 NET). There is significant scholarly debate on what is meant by the unusual phrase, "sit on Moses' seat," and some have argued that it should be taken ironically (France) or metaphorically (Keener) or as something that happened in the past but is no longer relevant (among other ideas listed by Powell). But I find John Nolland's comment here (based on Powell) helpful. He writes,

So, what is the force intended by 'sit/sat in the seat of Moses'? According to Powell, "Jesus may be simply acknowledging the powerful social and religious position that [the scribes and Pharisees] occupy in a world where most people are illiterate and copies of the Torah are not plentiful. Since Jesus' disciples do not themselves have copies of the Torah, they will be dependent on the scribes and the Pharisees to know what Moses said.... In light of such dependence, Jesus advises his disciples to heed the words that the scribes and Pharisees speak when they sit in the seat of Moses, that is, when they pass on the words of the Torah itself." We might say that the scribes and Pharisees were walking copies of the Law. What they did with it might be suspect, but not their knowledge of it. They could be relied on to report the Law of Moses with care and accuracy. (Nolland 2005: 923)

Jesus's instruction to pay attention to the teaching of the scribes and Pharisees is followed immediately by this instruction:

But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they teach. They tie up heavy loads, hard to carry, and put them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing even to lift a finger to move them. They do all their deeds to be seen by people, for they make their phylacteries wide and their tassels long. They love



the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues and elaborate greetings in the marketplaces, and to have people call them “Rabbi.” (Matt 23:3-7 NET)

While the scribes and Pharisees may have known Torah, Jesus describes them as those who do not practice what they teach. Instead, they pursue prideful recognition. Their actions are for the purpose of being noticed. They want people to see them, affirm them, and give them honor. There should not be a disjunction between teaching and practice, between words and deeds. In contrast to those who seek recognition for themselves, Jesus says to his disciples,

You are not to be called “Rabbi,” for you have one Teacher and you are all brothers. And call no one your “father” on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven. Nor are you to be called “teacher,” for you have one teacher, the Christ. The greatest among you will be your servant. And whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted. (Matt. 23:8-12 NET)

The disciples are to reject the title of “Rabbi”—the title of recognition, of honor, of position in society. Why? Because they all have one Teacher and instead of being in a location where one (the teacher) is elevated over others (the students), they are all “brothers” (siblings); thus, all are members of the same family sharing in the honor they derive from their father and working together to learn and to practice what they learn. Nor are you to be called “teacher.” Although the Greek word here, (καθηγητής) is a hapax not found elsewhere in the New Testament or Septuagint and means a tutor or someone who teaches individuals, the meaning is substantially the same as verse 8, with its rejection of position and status. All those who are disciples of Jesus have one teacher. Because they all have one teacher and are all identified as siblings of one another—thus, as those who work cooperatively together in pursuit of the family vocation—there is no place for self-exaltation, pride, empty words, teaching unenforced by action on the part of those who are all siblings in the same family. Yet, it is obvious both from the history of the church and from our own experience that there are those within the Christian community who do know more than others and who do bear responsibility for sharing their knowledge with others. There is no rejection of the vocation of teaching in this passage; rather, there

is a rejection of status seeking in relationship to teaching, status by means of title. So? What about those titles that all of us in this room either have or are striving toward? Doctor. Professor. When students ask me, “What would you like me to call you?” I usually reply, “Ruth Anne,” but I also realize that just as there are cultural values attached to the title “Rabbi” in the first century, so too there are different cultural values attached to titles like “Doctor” or “Professor.” Some belong to cultures in which it is disrespectful or overly intimate to call teachers by their first name; others want to honor the work that someone has put into education. The use of titles needs to be assessed within individual cultural milieus, but two things are clear. First, the use of titles should never obscure the true Teacher; second, the use of titles should not become a source of boasting.

For several years now, I have included a section in my syllabus entitled “Core Values,” in which I lay out a few of my assumptions about the classroom, teaching, and learning. One of those core values states, “God is our first and best teacher.” In the context of this value, I invite my students to think about what they really want to learn and then to ask God to teach them. I also recognize that whatever teaching I do in my class is (ideally) derivative. At its best it comes from and through God. I also remind my students that all knowledge belongs to God and that God can assist in all of our learning: the biblical text, certainly; original languages, yes; history, of course; the formation of our character to be more like God’s Son. God delights in such teaching. But there’s also a posture of asking. Sometimes students work hard (and even learn) but haven’t asked God to teach them and in so doing may miss the very things God wants to teach.

This passage from Matthew concludes, “The greatest among you will be your servant. And whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted” (Matt. 23:11-12 NET). The disciples take up the same posture as their teacher. This is the one whom Matthew identifies through Isaiah saying, “Here is my servant whom I have chosen, the one I love, in whom I take great delight. I will put my Spirit on him, and he will proclaim justice to the nations” (Matt. 12:18 NET). And again Matthew writes, “Whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first among you must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matt. 20:26-28 NET). The disciples imitate the humility of their teacher.<sup>3</sup> The disciples take on the same life of service and servitude, including service in teaching. Matt 23:12 warns

about the dangers of “exalting oneself.” That way lies humiliation. But those who humble themselves, those who take up the life of service and the way of humility, place their hope in the God who lifts up the lowly, in the God who raises the dead, and in the God who makes the name of Jesus higher than any other name.

### **The Challenge of the Cross**

For Jesus, the way of humility led all the way to the cross. When we look back at Philippians, we are reminded that Christ Jesus was in the form of God, but he chose to empty himself and then chose humble obedience all the way to death on the cross. The cross. So much meaning is located there: redemption, justification, eternal life, new covenant, new creation, new identity, reconciliation, atonement, and so much more. But what I want to take up is the challenge that the cross presents to us as teachers and learners and for that I want to turn to 1 Corinthians.

Let’s stop to remind ourselves of the audience that Paul is addressing in this book. This is a group of Christians just a few years old who have experienced the cleansing work of Jesus Christ (“to those who are sanctified”) and who belong to and participate in the sphere of the Messiah (“in Christ”), where they are being shaped into the community of Jesus. Despite having received abundant gifts from the Lord, the church struggles with a variety of divisions related to both popular teachers (Paul, Apollos, Cephas) and embodied practices (sexuality and religious practice in particular). In the midst of these divisions, Paul writes, “Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the good news, not with clever speech, so that the cross of Christ should not be made empty [vain/void/useless]” (1 Cor 1:17).<sup>4</sup> Paul’s focus is on proclaiming the good news. What is the gospel that Paul proclaims? He delineates it in 1 Cor 15:3-5: “That Christ died on behalf of our sin according to the scriptures and that he was buried and that he was raised on the third day according to the scriptures and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve ...” The good news begins with a proclamation of Christ’s death, the same death that Paul has already associated in 1 Corinthians with the cross where Christ died. This is the starting place for Paul’s understanding of the gospel. It is a death on behalf of our sin, and the good news continues with the affirmation that Christ was buried, that he was raised on the third day, and that he appeared to various people (1 Cor 15:3-5). In 1 Cor 2:5, Paul declares that it is his intention to

focus on Jesus Christ, the one who has been crucified. He indicates that the wisdom that he must share is wisdom rooted in “the message of the cross” (1 Cor 1:18), and he is utterly clear that this message is perceived as foolishness to all those who are perishing but that it is the power of God to those who are being saved (1 Cor 1:18).

The cross is the power of God. In this particular passage, Paul does not locate power in the triumphant resurrection of Christ or in his position at the right hand of God. He locates power in the cross. It is the power of God to those who are being saved (to everyone else it is foolishness). But let us not be tempted to think that the cross is only a means of salvation, a ticket into heaven or some such thing. Paul notes that the wisdom of the world is cast down and destroyed; in contrast, the message that is proclaimed is the scandalous, non-sensical message of Christ crucified; it is this crucified one who is the power and wisdom of God (1 Cor 1:23-24). To locate the power and wisdom of God solely in the resurrection would be to lay claim to the same audacious, triumphalist “wisdom” that the Roman Empire itself was tempted toward with its exaltation of emperors to divine status and its constant striving for status and position. In contrast to this status-seeking drive, Paul indicates that God chose the foolish, weak, and base things of this world in order to shame the wise and the strong: “God chose what is low and despised in the world, what is regarded as nothing, to set aside what is regarded as something” (1 Cor. 1:28 NET). We could debate whether “low and despised and things that are not” refers to people such as the Corinthians or events such as the manger and the cross, but the point is that God does not choose the very people and events that anyone in their right mind would choose, those obviously wise in the eyes of the world—the educated, the rhetorically able—nor does he choose the palaces and government offices of this world. He chooses the low, the despised, the things that are not. And the cross of Christ is the ultimate example of God’s selection of the most despised thing, undoing, destroying, making naught “the things that are.” Why? So that any boasting that anyone is doing is only boasting in what God has done. Among other things, we are reminded that the cross is both the place of Jesus’s ultimate humility, and it is the revelation of God—the God of the lowly, the oppressed, the humble, the God who is present in the midst of suffering. The cross reveals both the humility of Christ and “the identity of God” (Gorman 2001: 18). And what does this lowly, crucified, Messiah Jesus do? He knits together a community in himself (“in Christ,” 1 Cor 1:30) and the lowly one becomes the source of

this community's wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption. In other words, the cross and all the benefits of Christ's wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption that become available through the cross are to shape the life together of Christ's community. Over and over again in 1 Corinthians, Paul will indicate that status seeking is to be rejected and that the wisdom of self-emptying for the sake of the lowly, the weak, and the poor is the way of life for those who are "in Christ." And ultimately in 1 Corinthians 13, Paul will indicate that any action (whether speaking in tongues, engaging in prophetic speech [including teaching], or giving everything away) is completely useless without love. This is followed by descriptions of what love is: patient, kind, not envious, boastful or arrogant, nor irritable or resentful. Love does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth. Love bears, believes, hopes, and endures all things. More than one theologian has referred to the cross as God's love: "The cross is the sacrificial character of love, for love is sacrifice, self-surrender, self-renunciation, voluntary self-depletion for the sake of the loved one" (Bulgakov 2008: 3). Thus, Christians take on a cross-shaped ethic, what Michael Gorman has named "cruciformity."

This is a significant challenge for Christians in higher education because like the larger academic world, we too face the temptations of status seeking and self-promotion. We too are enamored of teaching or lecturing in the best places, of having our work promoted by the most recognized publishers, or of having our scholarship promoted by "influencers." We too can be quick to dismiss knowledge and wisdom that originates outside—in schools deemed "not sufficiently rigorous" or from people labeled "uneducated." And we also can be too easily accepting of knowledge that comes from the "right" schools or the "right" scholars. But that is perhaps a critique of the academy, whether in its secular or Christian iteration, that we can put aside for the moment. Instead, we have seen that the way of Jesus is the way of humility, of self-emptying, and that it leads all the way to the cross, and we have seen that the cross presents a significant challenge to our status seeking, self-promoting ways of engaging the world. But the challenge goes deeper, the temptation is to tell ourselves to "just say no," to "just stop" whatever behavior it is that falls on the self-serving side of the ledger. But we know several things: First, that we may not even be able to identify and rightly analyze our own behavior. We are prone to self-justification. Once we have come to see ourselves as "right," it is extremely difficult to change one's mind (Arinson and Tavis 2013). Second, even if

we identify an area of needed change, “just stopping” isn’t easy. Even if we do manage to “just stop,” we may not be able to maintain that commitment to stop a particular way of being. In fact, the items I have talked about here are themselves a form of striving—the striving toward self-improvement. And here is the challenge of the way of Jesus and the cross. Neither the way of Jesus nor the challenge of the cross are about becoming a better self in our own power or through our own initiation of change. Instead, we empty ourselves under the hand of God, we humble ourselves before the Lord, and we ask to receive more of the love most fully demonstrated in the self-giving Christ on the cross. The agency we have is the agency to open our lives to God. The change in us comes not from our own striving but from the inward filling of our hearts by the self-sacrificial love of God through the cross. In place of our status seeking, in place of our self-promotion, we find the love of God infusing us for the purpose of serving others and glorifying God.

### **Cruciform Teaching**

The cruciform teacher is the teacher whose work is characterized by the humility of cross shaped love. I want to be very clear about this. There is only one pattern for such teaching: Jesus as he is known through the cross and in relationship within the Trinity. Your teaching style may look very different than mine. You may have the opportunity to teach at Oxford. You may teach a small group of students gathered in the shade of a tree. Cruciform teaching is not about where you teach, how you teach, and who you teach; instead, it is about the formation of the teacher. The invitation is to be a teacher who continues to be shaped and fashioned by humility of Jesus ultimately demonstrated in the cross. Such cross-shaped love is always for the sake of others and is undertaken in response to the love of God poured out on our behalf. Christ invites us to take up our cross. We are not invited either to force others to take up their cross (a form of crucifying others) nor are we invited into self-flagellation simply for the sake of looking humble. We are invited into a *life* of humility, in which we have the agency to choose the other-oriented, cross-like way of love that has been lived and demonstrated by Jesus himself. And there we find the same life and the same hope for resurrection and eternal life shared with the crucified and risen Lord.

This has clearly not been a “tips and tricks” teaching paper. But I do have a few suggestions, not about the actual methods of teaching, but

about the way in which teachers see themselves in relationship to students. Cruciform teaching is other oriented. It is characterized by loving attention to our students. This does not mean giving them everything they ask for or doing things for them! But it does mean attending to their needs and concerns as students, and as fellow brothers and sisters in Christ created in the image of God, to the best of our ability.

Cruciform teaching especially in the Christian community is characterized by recognition of the shared identity of all in the classroom (teacher and students) as brothers and sisters in Christ who work cooperatively to hear and respond to the will of the Father in their learning. Teachers may remind Christians of our kinship identity and its meaning in the classroom. For students who have been embedded for decades in a system that demands individual performance without reference to others, such work together requires an undoing of the system of education which rewards individual merit over cooperative engagement. The work of forging a community of learning oriented around the true Teacher is part of the work of cruciform teaching. Those Christians teaching in a secular environment can remember that humanity bears the image of God, and while that image is marred by sin (in every environment), teachers can demonstrate cruciform love and call students, even those who are not Christians, to a shared environment of trust, cooperation, care for others, etc.

Cruciform teaching undertakes teaching as service. In this way, the cruciform teacher is more like a witness to that which is greater than her, so that the teacher in service to students becomes a conduit to growth in knowledge, understanding, and wisdom. One of the challenges of such service is how one attends to students of varying ability. It is easy for the teacher to delight in the student who “gets it” and who tracks with the professor. It is even fairly easy to appreciate the student who comes to the office seeking help and approaches with sincere effort at understanding. It is much more difficult to try to understand and serve the student who thinks quite differently from the professor. Humility seeks to understand such students rather than dismissing them.

Finally, the cruciform teacher is dependent—this is part of the posture of humility, the recognition that life is fully intertwined both with God and with others. In contrast to much of western culture which privileges the free-standing individual, cruciformity—whether of the teacher or the student—is rooted in relationship to God and relationship to other members of God’s family. The teacher who recognizes this dependance is able to



invite others to a similar intertwined life in which learning rests in God's hands, in the hands of the community, and in the hands of the learner. Just as we saw with Jesus in Philippians, there is a subtle dance of agency and emptying, decision making and obedience. There is a type of paradox among the humble, they retain agency even as they depend on the Lord.

I could say more about cruciform teaching—about teaching that speaks the truth, about teaching that asks questions and waits for answers, about teaching that is responsive to seekers without providing all the answers, or about teaching that expects transformation. But cruciform teaching is really a challenge to follow the way of Jesus and respond to the challenge of the cross while living in hope of the resurrection. So instead, let me end with one image that I've been meditating on for some time now: Kosuke Koyama's image of the cross without a handle. In his book *No Handle on the Cross* (2011) he describes how the cross does not come with a convenient handle by which to carry it, nor does it come like a neatly packaged lunch box full of beautiful nourishing food. Because the cross does not come with a handle, those who would pick up the cross are required to stoop down. This is the posture of cruciform teaching. The teacher stoops down.

## End notes

<sup>1</sup> All Bible passages are from the *New Revised Standard Version* unless otherwise noted.

<sup>2</sup> The Greek in Phil 2:5 raises two questions: the referent of *Τοῦτο* and the verb to be supplied in the second half of the clause. Gorman cites two main ways these issues have been resolved. Either a) Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who ... (NRSV and most translators and interpreters) b) Let the same mind be in you that you have in Christ Jesus, who... (NRSV margin and some translators and interpreters). Those (the majority) who support translation (a) normally understand 'this' and 'which' to look ahead to the hymn and believe that the hymn depicts the 'thinking' or 'mind' that was 'in' Christ, that is Christ's attitude of humility.... Those who prefer translation (b) emphasize (rightly) that the Pauline phrase 'in Christ' is a standard term for the community that lives in the sphere of Christ's lordship, not for some inward attitude Christ had. They tend to take 'this' and 'which' ... as general references to the Christian mindset.... Critics of this interpretation, however, point out (rightly) the awkward if not nonsensical translation that emerges when the indicative verb 'you have' is supplied" (Michael Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul's Narrative Spirituality of the Cross*, Eerdmans, 2001, 41). Gorman continues with his own proposal that combines options (a) and (b) into an option (c), also advocated by G. B. Caird. He proposes that "'which' [ὅ] is understood in conjunction with the following word, translated 'also,' and with the missing verb. Together



they produce, with emphasis something like the Greek equivalent of the Latin phrase *id est* ('i.e.') or the English 'that is...' 'Which also' should be interpreted, therefore, as a phrase linking and equating 'in you [plural],' meaning 'among you,' with 'in Christ.' The phrases are parallel.... The resulting (wooden translation is: Think this way **in [en] yourselves**, which also is **in [en] Christ**, who ... A better translation, as suggested above, would be: Have this mindset **in your community**, which is indeed a **community in Christ**, who ... The emphasis in the text is on the reality that life 'within you (all)' is life 'within' Christ" (Ibid., 42-43, all brackets, italics, and bold text are original).

<sup>3</sup> "Throughout his teaching Jesus insists that his followers must be lowly. He set the example himself, for in his whole life he forsook the corridors of power and was content to be a lowly teacher, mostly in the remote rural areas of the province in which he lived. He has earlier taught plainly that his followers must tread the lowly path, and he has linked their service with his own, going on to say that he would give his life a ransom for many (20:26–28). The theme of lowliness is now resumed as part of the contrast with the Pharisees that must mark the lives of the servants of Jesus. If they are seeking to be great, they are not to look for the kind of prominence that Jesus has denounced in this discourse. For them to be great is to take the place of a *servant* (earlier he has taught that they must be like little children, 18:4). It is in giving service, not in receiving adulation, that true greatness consists" (Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, Pillar NT Commentary, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992, 578). My friend Ellen Marmon also reminds me that there must be a cultural awareness and sensitivity in the area of service as well. To force our service onto others is also not truly service. Or, as she put it, "I'll serve you even if it kills you!" The posture of humility is readiness and willingness to serve; how that service takes place must be culturally sensitive and aware.

<sup>4</sup> My translation.

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