ABSTRACT

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A String For The Pearls: Preaching The Cross As The Common C(h)ord

Christ crucified, the death and resurrection of Christ to reconcile all of creation to God, reveals the character, nature, and will of God to the world. The cross is the central doctrine of the church, in light of which all other doctrines are understood and interpreted. Preaching without the cross yields a truncated message of the gospel and an incomplete picture of God. Preaching that is rooted in a theology of the cross provides a place to begin theological reflection, an interpretive lens for reality, a point of formation and critique for Christian identity, and an impetus for social transformation. The cross is like a string that holds all the valuable pearls of church doctrine, life, and mission. The cross unifies the good news of God and the work God calls the church to do through the work and revelation of Jesus Christ on earth. This thesis will examine what it means to preach a theology of the cross, and what the form of that preaching looks like in a particular context, United Presbyterian Church of Peoria, through a two-year series of sermons and the responses to those sermons by a representative sample of the congregation. The thesis will demonstrate how preaching a cruciform homiletic in this context resulted in the congregation understanding Christ’s death on the cross in new, more positive ways and understanding and moving toward a worldview rooted in the message and meaning of the cross. Lastly, the thesis will show the effect of preaching the cross as the symbol, event, and theology that unites all the work and ministry of the church on the congregation of United Presbyterian Church. Preaching that is centered around the cross leads to a church that is centered around the cross in its worship, education, mission, and fellowship.
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The form of Christ incarnate makes the Church into the body of Christ. All the sorrow of [human kind] falls upon that form, and only through that form can they be borne. The earthly form of Christ is the form that died on the cross. The image of God is the image of Christ crucified. It is to this image that the life of the disciples must be conformed: in other words, they must be conformed to his death (Phil 3.10, Rom 6.4). The Christian life is a life of crucifixion (Gal 2.19).¹

I. A String For The Pearls

My wife and I took a trip to Myrtle Beach, South Carolina when we were still just dating in college. We were shopping in some of the stores at Barefoot Landing when I saw the chance to get Courtney a pearl right out of a live oyster. I bought an oyster and pried it open and found a nice pearl to give Courtney. It wasn’t the biggest or shiniest pearl, but it was real. Courtney hates anything that’s fake or imitation! I could’ve had the pearl set in a ring or strung on a necklace but they wanted to charge a lot more for that luxury. I always figured I’d go someplace else and have it done. It’s been ten years, and the pearl lies forgotten at the bottom of some drawer, unworn, unused, and unappreciated.

I looked back over my sermons from the past two years at the beginning of my doctoral program and discovered I did not preach much on the cross. I preached a variety of texts on a lot of different topics. I preached social justice sermons, stewardship sermons, pastoral care sermons, and doctrinal sermons. I taught the definitions of commonly used Christian terms like sin, grace, confession, and sacrifice, and I taught about the life of Christ as revealed in the gospels. Each of those sermons had an important message I believe God wanted the congregation to hear. I hope that each of my sermons, and those of my pastoral colleague, was in some way a pearl for the congregation: something genuine, real, and valuable for their lives.

The problem with loose pearls is that they are easily lost and forgotten. Sure, the social justice sermon on Daniel was really moving at the time, but it was forgotten by the next week when my colleague preached on the light of God. Then the congregation heard about being lost and found, which was followed by a sermon on the transfiguration of Jesus. There were no obvious links between the sermons except they all came out of the Bible. We weren’t stringing the pearls together within a theological framework or hermeneutic. It’s easy for those loose pearls to get misplaced.

I asked my Parish Project Group (PPG), a group of a dozen members of the church that worked with me throughout my doctoral studies, about some of the sermons they remembered, and they had trouble articulating the pearls of any sermons. They might remember a story or an illustration, but the central teaching was lost because nothing held that pearl for them. I realized I could preach amazing sermons every Sunday, but I was leaving the congregation with loose pearls that ended up in a bag at the bottom of a drawer: unused, unappreciated, unworn.

I wish I had put the pearl I found for Courtney on a string so it could be worn. One of the interesting things about pearls is that they need to be worn in order to maintain and increase their luster. I needed a string for the pearls of God’s love because the Gospel, like pearls, needs to be worn to grow in beauty.

The good news of the gospel contains an infinite number of pearls, but they are held together by the cross of Christ. The cross is a string for the pearls of the church: its theology, its worship, its mission, and its fellowship. “In short, the Christian worldview, Christian responsibility, and therefore also Christian preaching, encompasses everything that Christ’s death and resurrection have previously embraced, without exception.”

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The cross, Christ’s death and resurrection, which reveals the heart and power of God, is a string for the pearls of God’s Word and Will for us. What Luther found so compelling in Paul’s writings was that “theological reflection begins with the word of the cross.”\(^3\) If we start with any speculative methodology or \textit{a priori} understanding of God’s nature, God’s justice, or God’s grace, our theology will always end in idolatry. It is so easy for preachers to use scripture and shape it to mold God in their own image rather than allowing God to mold them and the church in the image of God if there is no beginning, guiding, or defining reference point to challenge our proclamation. That is why Paul’s epistemology begins “with the message of the crucifixion….the means by which human wisdom is refuted and God’s wisdom and power are made known.”\(^4\)

The cross puts everything to the test, including the church’s theology and preaching.\(^5\) It is not only the starting point for theological reflection and proclamation, it is also the framework for the beautiful stained glass, the margins that hold the text of the confessions, the liturgy, and the sermons; it is the string for the pearls. The cross defines the world and who we are as the church. “The message of the cross functions as the norm and point of critique of the church’s quest for identity.”\(^6\)

I desired the church I serve, United Presbyterian Church of Peoria, to experience the cross as more than an ambiguous symbol of salvation. I wanted the congregation to believe and trust that the good news of the cross is more than the resurrection and more than the promise of eternal life. I wanted the men and women who worship there to be able to see and understand the cross as the revelation of the character and nature of God and how that revelation determines the identity and mission of the church. I hoped the congregation would begin to move toward a

\(^4\) Cousar, 179.
\(^5\) Walther von Loewenich, \textit{Luther’s Theology of the Cross} (Minneapolis: Augsburg Pub. House, 1976), 120.
\(^6\) Cousar, 183.
cruciform spirituality: a life of faith in which the cross informs its understanding of God, the world, and its own identity, and forms the foundation of its mission. I learned that what I described is a cruciform church, and in a cruciform church, the cross must be the common cord.

II. A Cruciform Church

The church in the Middle Ages was very intentional about the physical form of the building. The Bible was not in the hands of individual Christians and church services were not held in the vernacular of the land; therefore, the majority of the people in the pews had neither access to the Scriptures in their own language nor comprehension of the message from the pulpit. The great cathedrals of the medieval church were designed to convey the key doctrines.

Everything about the way a cathedral was built—firm foundations and transcendent towers, storytelling statues of stone, tile mosaics and stained glass windows depicting central biblical stories in full color, and even the way sunlight streamed through those windows—was designed to help folks discern, delight in, and declare the great, biblical doctrines concerning God and the gospel.7

The architects of the great cathedrals wanted the design of the worship space to preach the good news of the gospel, and so they were built in the shape of a cross—cruciform. “The central doctrine the church building communicated was the gospel, the message of the cross.”8

The central doctrine the church should always communicate through the form of the church’s life and ministry together is the cross. “From the Gospels to Paul to most of the other writings, the cross so permeates the New Testament that it stands as the inescapable center and source of Christian life and identity.”9

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8 Ibid., 8.
United Presbyterian Church’s sanctuary was designed with this understanding of the New Testament and Christian faith, but it was the Catholic architect’s design, not an intentional decision by the congregation. The design called for a tall lighted cross behind the pulpit in the center of the chancel and towers over the congregation as well as carved crosses at the end of each pew. Neither of United’s predecessor churches emphasized the cross in its sanctuary, so the tall cross was a very new thing. Members noticed it at first but eventually it just faded into the background and was accepted. After several conversations with members old and new, it became apparent that the congregation lived with the cross in the sanctuary rather than under the cross.

The cross is prominent in United Presbyterian’s sanctuary, but it was not prominent in the church’s proclamation or teaching; it was absent, even though it was so present. The cross is absent from many churches today because many Christians and seekers are not comfortable with the message, symbol, or meaning of the cross.

Paul says the cross is offensive to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles (1 Corinthians 1:18, 21-15). Members of the PPG expressed similar reservations about the cross. “I don’t like the figure of the crucified Lord that is used in the Roman Catholic Church rather than the empty cross signifying that Christ has risen,” said Pat.

“I like the empty cross,” said Debbie, another PPG member, “because it’s a happy symbol that reminds me of eternal life. I don’t like to think about Christ on the cross because it is dark, violent, and scary.” Debbie isn’t the only one who would much rather skip over Good Friday and move right to the joy of Easter.

10 See Appendix A.
11 Pat Wienkauf, e-mail message to author, August 27, 2012.
12 Debbie Hanson, e-mail message to author, August 26, 2012.
Anne Lamott expresses Debbie’s and many others’ sentiments when she says, “I don’t have the right personality for Good Friday, for the crucifixion. I’d like to skip ahead to the resurrection. In fact, I’d like to skip ahead to the resurrection vision of one of the kids in our Sunday School, who drew a picture of the Easter Bunny outside the tomb; everlasting life and a basketful of chocolates. Now you’re talking.”¹³

Churches and pastors are aware of this aversion to the cross, so many make the conscious choice to find ways to avoid it. The Sunday before Easter is now Palm/Passion Sunday, so many pastors pick the parade over the pain. Peter Gomes says that we ignore the Passion, “saving the suffering for the faithful few, those moral masochists who will come to church on Maundy Thursday and on Good Friday.”¹⁴ He goes on to say that many churches do Palm Sunday without even a nod at the Passion story so that Palm Sunday becomes “a dress rehearsal for Easter.”¹⁵

The cross is not merely a tragedy to endure in order to enjoy the resurrection on Easter Sunday. When our complete focus is on the triumph of the resurrection, we are left with a very limited understanding of salvation that is centered on our own self-preservation through eternal life. The good news of the cross is much larger than the resurrection to eternal life. The full good news of the cross needs to be preached, but that means preaching Christ crucified, not just Christ raised.

The problem, according to Fred Craddock, is that, “Any church or any preacher who keeps preaching on the cross is not going to grow. The preacher will not be a success and the church will not grow, because in our culture what we are interested in is success, not sacrifice.”¹⁶

Alexis said in one of our first PPG meetings that she never wanted to really engage the cross and look at it too closely because she was afraid of what kind of God she’d find there.

¹⁵ Ibid.
Perhaps a church looking for success doesn’t want to look too closely at the cross because of what might be found there. “The cross is not a nicety. It exposes humans as always the sinners, unable alone to achieve salvation; it crushes the illusions of transcendence and self-righteousness.”

It’s a message that does not often gain traction in the pulpit because it does not lift humanity up. Yet humanity is saved not when it is lifted up, but when Christ was lifted up on the cross.

I’ve been told that churchgoers just want to be assured that God loves them each Sunday, but God’s love is ultimately revealed and displayed through Christ's death on the cross. “Love is Paul’s shorthand term for a cruciform ethical orientation that consists of seeking the advantage of others rather than one’s own, based on the example of Jesus’s self-offering for the sake of humanity (e.g., 1 Cor. 10:23-24, 33; 13:5; 2 Cor. 5:14-15, etc.)” The love of God is cruciform. We can try to avoid it in order to be attractive, easy, and comfortable, but the proclamation of the gospel will be truncated.

Though the cross is at the center of United Presbyterian’s sanctuary and throughout the worship space and building, it has not been the center of our theological reflection or worship. It had not been the center or ground of my preaching either.

I preach every Sunday at the foot of the cross, but the magnitude of that didn’t hit me for the first few years of my ministry at United Presbyterian Church. I rarely mentioned the cross, except to reference it in a way that assumed the congregation had the same theological understanding of the cross and atonement that I did. I referred to the cross; I didn’t preach Christ crucified.

\(^{17}\) Cousar, 12.

\(^{18}\) Ibid.

7
C. Leonard Allen, in *The Cruciform Church*, describes exactly what was happening at United Presbyterian Church, and what I sense is happening at churches around the country.

Christian people throughout the ages have readily affirmed the centrality of the cross. They have sung its praises, lifted up its symbol, extolled its benefits. But, at the same time, they have most often removed its scandal. They have cherished its symbol, but shunned its discipline. They have lauded its blessings, but sought to remove its burdens. There has always been something deeply disturbing about the cross, something that deeply offends human pride and achievement, something that insults human self-reliance. And so, while confessing the importance of Jesus’ death ‘for us,’ Christians have been tempted in many ways to alter the radical message of the cross into something more in harmony with human reason, human sensibilities, and human wishes (Allen, 126).

United Presbyterian lifted high the symbol of the cross, but we were not lifting high the cross on which Christ died. We were paying lip service to the cross, but we were trying to fit the form of the cross into a more comfortable and less offensive mold. In order to be the church God called us to be, we needed to be cruciform in life and ministry, and not just in architecture and symbolism. We needed to attain a cross-rooted worldview, a way of looking at life and the world through the lens of the cross so that our vision of reality becomes cruciform or cross-shaped. Allen argues that the cross does this in three ways. First, through the cross we see the heart of God revealed most clearly. Second, only through the cross can we see the true nature of human sin and the depths of divine grace. And third, the cross provides the model for God’s new social order, the messianic community.\(^{19}\)

The task of the preacher is to proclaim the God of the cross, so the cross may reveal who God is, who we are, and what it means to follow Christ as a citizen of God’s kingdom under the banner of the cross. The cross is the guide for the church, both in Christ’s death on it and Christ’s triumph over it. “Paul constantly reminds his readers that the risen Christ is none other than the crucified one, whose wounds cannot be removed by exegetical surgery. The crucifixion of Jesus

\(^{19}\) Allen, 145.
is not only a past, datable, verifiable fact in the church’s memory, but also an ever-present reality to guide and determine the church’s life.”

In order to be a cruciform church in more than just architecture, the individuals who make up the church must decide “whether they find their foundation and criterion in the cross even in their everyday life.” Before the members of United Presbyterian Church, or any church can do that, though, they need to have a theology of the cross. They need to know who God is and what the cross reveals to them, demands of them, and does for them. The cross must be proclaimed for God in Christ to be known because “[t]he preaching of [the cross] is the occasion of God’s self-revelation. Here God’s intentions and purposes are made known.”

If a cruciform church, or spirituality, is a “spiritual vision essentially shaped by Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection,” then United Presbyterian Church needed to discover, together, what a theology of the cross really is so that our church and lives could be shaped by the cruciform nature of God.

III. A Theology of the Cross

Though Martin Luther first used the phrase *theologia crucis* (theology of the cross) in 1518 as part of a series of statements prepared for the Heidelberg Disputation, the inspiration and idea behind the language is found in the canonized letters of Paul. Paul’s ministry of proclamation “articulates a Jesus-centered spirituality that can best be described as ‘cruciform,’ a spiritual vision essentially shaped by Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection.” Paul recognizes that the cross is offensive to many and is contradictory to usual religious thinking (1 Cor. 1:18-25),

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20 Ibid., 4.
21 Ibid., 11.
22 Ibid., 35.
23 Knowles, 15.
24 Ibid.
but Paul believes the power of God is revealed in the narrative of the cross. The power of God turns the scandalous crucifixion of Jesus as a criminal into the reconciliation of all creation to God (Col 1:20). The power of God transforms our own humiliation and death into opportunities for grace, resurrection, and new life.

Based on an understanding of Paul, Luther “maintained that it is only ‘through suffering and the cross’ that God can be known at all…The ‘theology of the cross,’ then, designates a theology of revelation and not a specific view of the atonement. It is not to be thought of as one doctrine set alongside other doctrines, but as a theological method, a way of doing all theology.”

A theology of the cross is a way of doing theology, writes John Dillenberger, that, “makes it possible to live with a dimension of trust which leaves unanswered the mystery of [one’s] own life, but also…does not reduce [one’s] life to meaninglessness.”

Pastors are not charged with preaching away the mysteries of life. The temptation for many pastors is to preach a theology of glory, or triumphalism. “Triumphalism refers to the tendency in all strongly held worldviews, whether religious or secular, to present themselves as full and complete accounts of reality, leaving little if any room for debate or difference of opinion and expecting of their adherents unflinching belief and loyalty.”

A theology of the cross keeps the church under the authority of God while reminding us that we do not possess truth. Truth is revealed to us in the person of Christ (John 1:14) and through the cross. The cross illustrates that what we consider wisdom God may consider foolishness and vice versa (1 Cor. 1:18-2:5). The cross requires us to look at the world

25 Cousar, 8.
27 Ibid., 17.
differently and have our own thoughts, desires, beliefs, and wisdom judged. In order to combat triumphalism, churches “must permit doubt and self-criticism to play a vital role in the life of faith.”

Faith is not simply assenting to a set of doctrinal propositions. Faith is a relationship built on trust. I often have preached against the idea that doubt or anger at God makes one a bad Christian. Doubt and anger are part of most relationships and they are found throughout scripture, including the passion narratives. Sometimes the best answer a pastor can give is, “I don’t know.” There are mysteries in life that we cannot just preach away.

When the cross is proclaimed each week as the common cord for all of life through a theology of the cross, it allows pastors and congregations to engage the difficult questions and mysteries of life while affirming the truths revealed in the cross: God understands our suffering, God is compassionate because God is with us in our suffering, and God has ultimately defeated the powers of sin and death in order to reconcile us to God and be with us forever. These truths can be relied upon because they are expressed throughout the pages of scripture and are ultimately demonstrated and confirmed through the cross. Therefore, “The theology of the cross provides a basis of trust and courage enabling faith to enter more deeply into the sphere of the negative, and to engage it—engage, not conquer.”

Preaching a theology of the cross is a homiletic that is theologically rooted in the cross. It is preaching in which the cross reveals and interprets the acts and identity of God in scripture and history. It allows for questions, mysteries, and doubt, but it also reveals the God who is with us in suffering, takes on our suffering, and attacks sin so one day all suffering might end.

28 Ibid., 18.
29 Ibid., 30.
I needed to change the way I preached to effectively preach a theology of the cross, a cruciform homiletic. I needed to develop my own style of preaching that could teach doctrine in a way that connected with the congregation and was relevant to the lives of those in pews that still allowed me to preach in my own voice. I also needed to carefully think about a progression of sermons that would help the congregation come to the cross, see the world through the cross, and then live united by the cross.

IV. The Form of Preaching a Theology of the Cross

Daniel Patte says, “Preaching announces ‘the power of God for salvation’ (Rom. 1:16) that is manifest not only in the death and resurrection of Jesus, but also ‘in the process of preaching the message’ and ‘in the experience of the hearers.’” Preaching a theology of the cross does not just describe or proclaim the cross; it announces the good news that the cross reveals. It is the task of preaching to announce that good news and help others see how that good news and how “the power of God for salvation” is at work in their lives. Patte believes preachers should have a cruciform worldview in which they see patterns and situations in life that include both a cross-like experience and resurrection-like experience. Preachers are called to recognize that pattern and recognize those patterns for themselves so the power and good news of God can be identified and experienced.

I tried to locate in my own life a cross and resurrection-like experience that could be in conversation with the narrative of each scripture preached on, so I could better connect the cross with the lives of congregation members so that it could be the common cord they needed to

31 Ibid.
string all the pearls of their lives together. The journey to be able to do that effectively started with my first year in the ACTS D.Min in Preaching Program.

I began the program with the goal of preaching sermons that would help the congregation become more theologically minded and rooted. My first year’s project, *Preaching a Christian Vocabulary*, defined twelve commonly used Christian terms that were chosen by the congregation. Each sermon defined the term through the proclamation of the gospel. I had to develop a way to teach theological doctrines that still engaged the congregation and proclaimed good news. My work on the first twelve sermons helped me develop a way to preach theologically rich sermons that were relevant, engaging, and transforming.

In *A Cross-Shattered Church*, Stanley Hauerwas compiles a series of sermons theologically centered around the cross that are “determined attempts to show that sermons can develop strong theological claims and yet be existentially compelling.” Hauerwas hopes the problem for his readers won’t be that they do not understand what he is saying but how what he says challenges the way they live. Hauerwas hopes, “that these sermons gesture toward what it might mean for us to be a church shaped by the cross of Christ.”

After reading Hauerwas, I determined that his goals were similar to mine. I wanted to preach compelling sermons that proclaimed a theology of the cross in such a way that everything the church believes and does is seen and understood within the framework of the cross, the common cord.

How Hauerwas and I accomplished that goal is very different, thanks in large part to my PPG and my first year’s project. When the PPG looked at some of Hauerwas’s sermons in *A Cross-Shattered Church: Reclaiming the Theological Heart of Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2009), 9.

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Cross Shattered Church, they recognized that the sermons had important things to say and were very informative, but they said nothing in the sermon really resonated with them. They said there wasn’t a point of connection at which the sermon stuck into their lives and went with them through the week. Many in the PPG felt Hauerwas was speaking over them and not to them. The context of Hauerwas’s sermons was often an academic setting, but it was clear that that kind of proclamation would not be most effective at United Presbyterian Church.

My first year’s project helped me determine that our congregation responds and relates best to sermons that weave illustrations of different personal, cultural, and biblical stories with the scripture readings. The PPG has greatly aided my understanding of what stories and illustrations best resonate with the congregation and help them reflect on the theological claims. The congregation particularly appreciated and connected with sermons that used multimedia presentations and some form of visual learning. This came in the form of video clips from television shows or movies, comic strips, audio recordings, pictures of places or activities, artwork, or props I could use.

We should preach Christ crucified in a way that reflects the context of the congregation. For my context, this meant connecting the revelation and act of the cross with the lives of worshippers through stories that they could relate to and allowing worshippers to interact with the sermon. When the congregation interacts with the sermon during the proclamation event, they are more likely to continue interacting with the message after worship on Sunday. Therefore, one of my goals for all the sermons throughout this project was not only to explain what the text ‘means’ or help members of the congregation apply a specific truth about the text and the cross to their lives but also to moderate a conversation between the congregation and the events of Scripture, like Paul. Nancy Lammers Gross observes, “Paul was a moderator in the
conversation between the Christ event as pointed to in the Hebrew Scriptures and testified to by apostolic witnesses, and the situations in which the hearers of his letters found themselves.”

I attempted to moderate a conversation among the texts and the cross event and the lives of those in the congregation in each sermon. One of the new things I tried in the sermons was eliciting conversation from the congregation in response to a specific question.

For example, one Sunday I asked the congregation to share memories they have of playing in trees when they were children, and one Sunday I asked the congregation to think of unexpected people in Scripture who God used to do great things. I was pleasantly surprised by the number of people who readily responded to the questions each Sunday and by how their answers contributed to the preaching event. I also tried to use multiple stories from life: my own life, historic events, cultural references from stories, music, movies, and television, and examples that the PPG mentioned in our studies together. The stories helped add humor, drama, and suspense to the sermons and provided natural break points to help reengage the congregation throughout the sermons. These stories and points of contact with the lives of worshippers were a key component in how I preached Christ as the common cord, a string for the pearls in people’s lives.

Preaching to the context also means proclaiming the good news of Christ crucified and the good news of Good Friday without glossing over the darkness of the crucifixion. Preaching a theology of the cross represents “a thin tradition that [has] tried to proclaim the possibility of hope without shutting its eyes to the data of despair.” The preacher must not only proclaim the glory of the cross but also account for the suffering inherent in the cross and inevitable in the world.

I began my new series of preaching a theology of the cross following a difficult summer for United Presbyterian Church of Peoria. During the summer and first week of September, the congregation experienced the deaths of thirteen members, plus additional deaths in immediate and extended families. An elder’s son attempted suicide. Several members, including a young mother of three, were diagnosed with cancer. The congregation had been praying fervently for one of our most loved and active members to receive good news about the possibility of a treatment for his lymphoma, but the news came back bad. Families had experienced inner turmoil and broken relationships, jobs had been lost, transfers far away from home had been handed down, and new hospitalizations and surgeries seemed to happen every other day.

There is suffering in the world, and the church is not immune. There is no shortage of the data of despair. The congregation needed a word of hope that transcended the suffering but spoke within the suffering. The church needed good news in the cruciform pattern that pointed to a resurrection event following the suffering of a crucifixion event. The church needed the good news of the cross that proclaims that “the risen Christ is none other than the crucified one,”37 and that believers are able to share in the pattern of Christ’s death and resurrection or of humiliation followed by exaltation. The faith that we, too, can rise from humiliation, setbacks, suffering, sorrow, and even death to new life and glory is the essence of cruciform hope. “The power of the resurrection operates in the present as the power of conformity to the death of Christ, which in turn guarantees a place in the future resurrection.”38 God doesn’t transform our present struggles immediately into glory, but the process begins in the present.

It is always God’s process, though. When preachers proclaim Christ crucified (the Word of God revealed), we do so with scripture (the Word of God written) and with our own voices

37 Cousar, 4.
38 Knowles, 17.
(the Word of God proclaimed), but it is not our message. We may preach in our own unique styles in unique contexts with our personal stories and flair, but the “quality of the Christian message derives from its ultimately non-human origin, and its function as divine revelation.”

We preach a divine word in human language: a message of Christ, about Christ, and from Christ. How we preach a theology of the cross, Christ crucified, is always fundamentally more about Christ’s voice than our own. Knowles argues, “On the one hand, revelation does not call human voices into a partnership of dialogical equals, but insists its own voice prevail. Yet it does so in the most paradoxical manner possible, by initially allowing even its own voice—that of Jesus of Nazareth—to fall silent at the cross in order to be heard anew under terms and conditions determined by God alone.”

The preacher’s voice is not sufficient for proclaiming God’s revelation, but God does make it necessary. Preachers, “present Christ to all who see and hear them, as they are seized, shaped, and inspired to speak by the lethal, life-giving dynamic of Jesus’s cross.” Preachers preach Christ crucified by the power of the cross, the grace of the cross, and always with the hope of the cross. That is how Christ crucified is preached: through the power, grace, and hope of God.

V. Preaching Atonement

Theologians are discussing the death of Jesus more and more, but preachers are talking about it less and less. Sally Brown argues that Christ’s death has been one of the most important and debated topics in theological circles, but over the same period, “sermons that focus on the cross have become rare in many pulpits, particularly those of the traditionally ‘mainline’

39 Ibid., 24.
40 Ibid.
41 Ibid., 25.
denominational churches.” There is no shortage of books on the death of Christ for Christians to read, but rarely are pastors willing to interpret the cross for their congregation. Brown goes on to say:

Preachers I talk with consider the death of Jesus crucially important, yet a surprising number admit that they find themselves at a loss for words to interpret its significance to twenty-first-century congregations. They believe that the long ago, violent death of Jesus of Nazareth was integral to God’s redeeming this broke world, but communicating that claim in a world filled with violence, often religiously motivated, is a challenge. Others, alert to the way certain traditional ideas of atonement have sometimes functioned in damaging ways for sufferers and abuse victims, are uneasy about using traditional language about sacrifice or saving death in the pulpit.43

This lack of preaching on the death of Christ on the cross has led to the displacement of the cross as the focal point of Christian life, even as it remains the focal point of many sanctuaries and church buildings. When the cross isn’t proclaimed in church, it forces churchgoers to either hold onto the traditional understandings of the atonement they grew up with or get that information from somewhere else. Preachers may be nervous about preaching on a hotly debated topic like the death of Christ, but silence only creates more questions and misunderstandings.

In one of my first meetings with my PPG, we discussed the cross and what the members of the PPG believed about why Jesus died and how that meant our salvation. Several members of the PPG said their first reaction to the cross is that it is an implement of torture and execution. The cross reminded them of how God killed God’s own son because God was mad at humanity and demanded a death in order to appease God. This simplified version of the traditional penal substitution model of the atonement is a common stumbling block for Christians and non-Christians. Unfortunately, “a form of penal substitution theory, with elements of sacrifice and

42 Brown, 1.
43 Ibid.
Anselmian satisfaction motifs thrown in, comprises what amounts to a nearly unassailable atonement orthodoxy in the west.  

We are left with either a view of the cross as sad, tragic, and dark that is best avoided lest church become gloomy and somber, or an atonement theology that characterizes God as angry and wrathful against humanity and sacralizes innocent suffering.

This understanding of the atonement is the exact issue many preachers hope to avoid having to tackle by choosing not to preach Christ crucified. Members of the PPG realized for the first time that the language used to proclaim Christ crucified had negatively affected their faith and understanding of God. 

Preachers need to heed authors like Sally Brown and think carefully about the language used to preach about the death of Christ on the cross, but the answer is not to avoid the cross. The answer is to preach the full counsel of God using all the rich biblical language about the cross. I grew up hearing one sermon on the cross, that Jesus Christ died taking my place to appease the wrath of God. The cross was presented to me as a series of basic truth statements: humanity is sinful, sin must be punished, God is just, Christ took the necessary punishment for us. That is how I was expected to understand the cross, and anything less was unchristian. The problem with this is that it makes God’s redemptive action in Jesus appear motivated by God’s anger at sin, rather than God’s love for humanity.

Neither the New Testament nor the cross can be contained or explained in a series of doctrinal facts. The cross is not just a historic fact that we should believe and respond to, but we often preach the cross that way. “The New Testament, however, conveys the significance of the atonement primarily through narrative and rich metaphor. The New Testament writers do not

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44 Brown, 56.
45 Sally Brown’s Cross Talk is just one example of recent works that challenge our language and proclamation of the cross. Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering and the Search for What Saves Us by Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker Beacon exposes the dark side of substitutionary atonement and Denny Weaver’s The Nonviolent Atonement attacks the model in favor of a narrative Christus Victor approach.
primarily offer formal dogmatic assertions or definitions.⁴⁶ A wide range of New Testament images and metaphors about the cross have largely been lost in favor of a single Medieval metaphor that has become the de facto doctrine.

My goal was to engage all the biblical language about Christ’s work on the cross, as well as traditional and contemporary atonement theories, without boiling down what happened on the cross to a simple doctrinal statement.

I began the twelve-sermon series, United Under the Cross, with four sermons that engaged classic atonement theories and wrestled with some of the PPG’s concerns and issues with the cross. For the cross to frame all of scripture and reality, the congregation needed a basic understanding of why Christ was crucified, what the cross accomplished, and how Christ’s death on the cross accomplished it. These sermons laid out the themes that would appear in subsequent sermons: looks can be deceiving, we are sinners in the hands of a loving God, and Christ condemns and battles sin and death for our liberation and victory.

The first sermon, Looks Can Be Deceiving on Mark 15:25-39, challenged some of the traditional understandings of scriptural interpretation as well as atonement theory.⁴⁷ The sermon focused on one of the most important principles of the cross, that looks can be deceiving.

The crucifixion may have looked like another zealot’s death or a time of extreme humiliation for Jesus, but what was really happening was the death of death itself and the glorification of Jesus. We are able to see and to know beyond the appearances of life’s circumstances, sufferings, and trials when God gives us the eyes of faith. “Faith…sees behind

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⁴⁶ Allen, 130.
⁴⁷ The sermon information and the story of the sermon’s formation through work with the PPG can be found in Appendix D.
and beyond the brutality and ugliness of the crucifixion as such; it sees the glory ‘hidden beneath its opposite’” (Luther).  

The worldview of the cross is that looks can be deceiving: what may seem like foolishness is the power of God; what looks like defeat is a great victory; what looks like acting in weakness is acting with great strength; the person who looks like they couldn’t or wouldn’t help is the future deliverer; and the person who doesn’t look anything like a messiah and king, is the messiah and king of all creation.

This sermon emphasized Christ’s victory through what looks like defeat. I used Gustaf Aulen’s work *Christus Victor*, in which he argues that seeing the cross as a victory over the forces of evil was the early church’s model of atonement. The Christus Victor model of atonement draws upon some of the military metaphors found in the New Testament, like Colossians 2:15, and emphasizes themes of captivity and deliverance. In this view, the work of the cross is the climax of a dramatic struggle between God and the forces of evil in the world, personified by images of water and the leviathan in the Old Testament, and the devil and death in the New Testament. “Christ appears to fall prey to death’s clutches, yet ultimately overcomes the devil, taking humanity with him.”  

*Christus Victor* emphasizes that looks can be deceiving, and that there is victory in what appears to be defeat.

The good news is Christ defeats the forces of evil in our lives. The good news is also that God never abandons us. Theologians like Jurgen Moltmann in his work *The Crucified God*, argue that Christ’s cry of dereliction represented God’s abandonment of Christ on the cross. William Stacey Johnson, however, argues, “It is precisely because God was united with Jesus in

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48 Hall, 93.
49 Brown, 15.
his agony and refused to abandon him that we can be assured of God’s refusal to abandon us.”\textsuperscript{50}

Christ’s cry may look like Christ is crying against God because God has abandoned him, but Christ, quoting Psalm 22, is really crying to the God he knows is there and can deliver. The grace of the text, beyond the first look, is that Christ wins a victory on our behalf and is always present with us.

One member of the PPG who had particularly struggled with the substitutionary and sacrificial language of atonement responded after the sermon, “The cross always challenges me in some way, because it is such a violent image but today it was a challenge to look at the cross as victory even when Jesus suffered so much on it. I think the sermon helped me be able to view the cross in that way, if only for those twenty minutes, which was a great thing for me.”\textsuperscript{51}

This first sermon in the series created a foundation on which to build a new understanding of the cross utilizing all of the scriptural language and imagery. It helped the congregation see the cross in a new way, and for many, a new positive way.

The sermon remained with the congregation long after the Sunday it was preached in large part due to the repeated refrain “looks can be deceiving” and the video clips from the Pepsi Uncle Drew campaign. Many members of my congregation are visual learners, so video clips that can connect to the scripture and proclaimed message in a creative and unexpected way cause the many members to remember the sermon and think about it more.

The most challenging sermon I preached was when I dealt directly with the substitutionary model of atonement. I couldn’t discount some of the biblical and theological language and metaphors around the traditional substitutionary model, but I also


\textsuperscript{51} Alexis Maloof, e-mail message to author, September 13, 2012.
didn’t want to legitimize the ways it has been damaging, not only to people’s faith, but to their whole lives. After five attempts, I finally ended up with the sermon *Sinners in the Hands of a Loving God*.52

I emphasized that the primary motivation for Christ dying on the cross was not God’s wrath, but God’s love. Christ is not our substitute at the gallows or guillotine, à la Sydney Carton in *A Tale of Two Cities*. The penal substitution theory sets the necessity of violent punishment in the heart of the being of God. “Divine wrath emerges more strongly than divine love as the triggering motivation for Jesus’ death, for God appears to be ‘satisfied’ only by inflicting suffering and death on a helpless (divine) child.”53 Jonathan Edwards’s famous sermon *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* is built on the idea that God is rightfully angry and that anger has to fall on someone. Preachers have used this idea to lift up the example of Christ taking our place as the example of true love. Christ takes the anger on himself so we don’t have to feel the wrath of God, but as a volunteer and not as a victim. I heard this as a youth and felt extremely guilty that Christ had to die in such a horrible manner because I made God angry, and so I gave my life to Christ more under emotional distress than out of a loving and faithful commitment to God. There are much worse consequences of this kind of cross talk than feeling emotionally bullied into giving one’s life to Christ. Sally Brown points out that “in too many homes, children have ‘volunteered’ to become the target of a parent’s fury to protect someone else in the household.”54

I needed to re-interpret the classic understanding of the sacrificial and substitutionary language of the cross in order to help the congregation understand not only the character and nature of God, but also their own value and worth.

52 The sermon information can be found in Appendix C.
53 Brown, 57.
54 Ibid.
Theologian Kathryn Tanner suggests that we can make sense of the substitutionary aspect of the cross when we reenvision it within a radical understanding of incarnation. In Jesus, the Word made flesh, God assumes our humanity, taking as God’s own the place of the radically “other,” the sinful human being. Taking on flesh, God “takes our place,” incorporating into God’s own self everything that our humanity includes and implies, including our sinful estrangement from God. Taking and bearing this brokenness within God’s very self, God bears its deadly consequences within God’s own being at the cross. As God enfleshed, God taking our place, Jesus is our “substitute.” Jesus is also our “substitute” in the completeness of his humanity, including his utter obedience, which becomes ours. In other words, God unites with us in our sinfulness and in our death in order that we might be joined with God in the fullness of the life of the Three-in-one.\(^{55}\)

*Sinners in the Hands of a Loving God* stressed the value God places on each of our lives. God values us so much that God became our representative and defeated death for us. God, in Christ, took all of human nature into the place of death, but when God raised Christ, God raised humanity with Christ, leaving sin behind. Paul writes, “For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his” (Romans 6:5).

*Sinners in the Hands of a Loving God* was the most difficult sermon I preached, but it was the most rewarding. Through the process of writing it, I felt I gained a better understanding of my own theology of atonement, and the congregation came away from the sermon with some important new thoughts and understanding about who God is and why Christ died on the cross.

One of the members of my PPG, Craig, was not a member of my church and admitted he was not a Christian, but wanted to learn more about it. He believed the cross was merely a symbol of human torture, but after this sermon he said, “My view of the cross as merely a symbol of human torture is beginning to change. At the very end, when you stated that the cross is meant to symbolize that God will do anything to save us, and express our love towards us,

\(^{55}\) Brown, 60.
casted the cross in a very different light.”

Craig said the *Lord of the Rings* video clip at the end of the sermon really helped him understand the cross in a new way. After two years of sermons in this project, his favorite sermon remained this one in large part due to the video clip because it really helped him connect to the sermon and understand Christ’s victory over death through Gandolf’s fight with the Balrog.

Laurie is a new member to our church who had just left a church that was deciding to leave the denomination. She and her husband were tired of hearing about how angry God is and longed to be directed by the love of God rather than the wrath. Following the sermon, Laurie wrote:

> Christ is the perfection of God’s love, a love that doesn’t depend on fear. Everything about Christ reveals that love to us – even his death on the cross. You hit a lot of the gray areas that I have with your exploration of substitutionary atonement and its relationship to God’s love, not his anger. You gave me ways to look at these issues with clearer eyes. I liked your statement about Christ being our representative, not our substitute. I also liked the dissection of “atonement” to mean the cross makes us “at one” with God.

At the end of the twelve sermon series I asked what one thing from all the sermons stood out, and Alexis replied, “That we are sinners in the hands of a loving God. God was angry at injustice and hate and Jesus’ death on the cross executed God’s wrath on sin, not on us, until God’s love was satisfied.”

In all my sermons tackling atonement theology, I wanted the congregation to be able to understand the cross as God’s radical act of love that defeats death, assures us that God is with us in our suffering, and condemns sin and injustice. I built upon those ideas in the subsequent sermons to help move the congregation toward a cross-rooted worldview.

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56 Craig Heilman, e-mail message to author, September 18, 2012.
57 Laurie Hartshorn, e-mail message to author, September 17, 2012.
58 Alexis Maloof, e-mail message to author, February 7, 2013.
VI. Toward A Cruciform Worldview

The end goal and purpose, or *telos*, of proclaiming a theology of the cross “is to engender a movement—a people—that exists in the world under the sign of the cross of Jesus Christ: a movement and people called into being by his spirit and being conformed to his person and furthering his work. A cruciform people.”

The *telos* of a cruciform homiletic is a cruciform church. A cruciform church is a gathered body of believers whose lives are shaped, directed, and built upon the cross of Christ. The goal of preaching a theology of the cross is for the church to find its mission, identity, and hope in the cross. In other words, the goal of proclaiming a theology of the cross is for the cross to be the common cord for the church, a string for the pearls.

The first three sermons focused on understanding what the cross teaches us about God and how we are reconciled and forgiven through the cross. The next sermons built on that understanding using texts that did not specifically address the cross in order to build a cross-rooted worldview by first learning to read and understand all of scripture in light of the cross. The practice of reading and interpreting all of scripture through the cross is a necessary step toward seeing and understanding the whole of the world and life through the cross, a cruciform worldview.

A questionnaire PPG members filled out at the beginning of the series helped me assess how their current worldviews were formed and their beliefs about key concepts such as power and wisdom.

The PPG’s thoughts on power and wisdom come from their experiences of them at work in the world. I wanted to provide a different vision and definition of power and wisdom, through

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59 Hall, 137.
60 Examples of the questionnaire filled out by PPG members can be found in appendix E.
the experience of Christ crucified, that puts the worldly conception of both to the test. “For Paul, the message of the cross, and the cruciform spirituality that it conveys, constantly contradict the expectations of his hearers.” The word and experience of the cross often contradicts the lessons we have learned from the world.

“According to Paul, ‘the word of the cross….is the power of God’ (1 Cor. 1:18 RSV). Not only is the cross itself the paradoxical manifestation of God’s ‘power-in-weakness,’ but ‘the message about the cross’—that is, the proclamation of a crucified messiah—announces the cruciform nature of divine power.” We cannot preach the nature of power or the power of God without preaching Christ crucified because God’s power, God’s wisdom, God’s very life is cruciform. Preaching toward a cruciform worldview means letting the cross provide a new vision and understanding of the world rooted in how God interacts with the world rather than in how we act.

The sermons preached in this part of the project focused on concepts like power, wisdom, judgment, joy, and pain. I preached on a variety of texts in both the Old and New Testaments, familiar and unfamiliar, but each time the word of the cross was proclaimed whatever the Word of God was that morning, because the Word of God is the Word on the cross.

An Unlikely Deliverer on Judges 3:31, the story of how Shamgar also delivered Israel by killing six hundred Philistines with an oxgoad, is an example of preaching toward a cruciform worldview while preaching a text that at first glance has nothing to do with Christ crucified. Members of the PPG selected this sermon as the one that stuck with them and made them constantly rethink choices and actions in the weeks and months after the sermon.

61 Knowles, 24.
62 There are many great examples of preaching a new understanding of key elements in life from wisdom, to pain and suffering, to power by proclaiming the cruciform nature of God, without necessarily preaching on a crucifixion text. Examples of sermons can be found in God in Pain: Teaching Sermons On Suffering by Barbara Brown Taylor, and in A Cross Shattered Church: Reclaiming the Theological Heart of Preaching by Stanley Hauerwas.
63 The information for the sermon as well as how the PPG and I worked together on it can be found in Appendix F.
Through our study of Judges 3:31, the PPG came to the conclusion that we have to be careful who we judge and how we judge because we never know who or what God will use to deliver or bestow a blessing on us.64

I asked what all this has to do with the cross, what the cross has to say about this text. Don suggested, “The cross itself is an unlikely deliverer because it represented all these bad things like death and torture and Rome, but through it we are saved. That was probably as shocking to the Jews as having the son of a Canaanite goddess deliver them.”

The cross, which had always been seen as a curse, became a blessing through the death of Christ. Samuel Giere argues, “The cross of Christ, then, is transformed from a means of execution into the world-tree whereby God reconciles all things on heaven and earth to God’s self.”65 That which had caused death and separation is now an instrument of reconciliation and an unlikely deliverer as much as the man who hung from it.

The PPG was making connections to the cross without my having to prompt them, something that didn’t happen when we first began this project. After listening to the sermon, my professor, Dr. Samuel Giere, commented, “Who would have [thought] that Judges 3.31 and the unlikely deliverer Shamgar would be figural of the crucified Christ!”66 Neither I nor the PPG probably would have thought about Shamgar in light of the cross before, but through the course of this project we were seeing scripture and the world differently. We were beginning to see all of Scripture through the lens of the cross, and we were also beginning to interpret more of life in light of the cruciform nature of God.

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64 More information on the Bible Study can be found in Appendix F.
66 Samuel Giere, e-mail message to author, December 8, 2012.
The PPG study helped lead me to a story about being an unlikely deliverer in an elevator and to a story of how I judged someone wrongly but came to a new understanding and appreciation of him, the power of God, and the feebleness of my own judgments.

The story of Shamgar is so interesting because it is so confusing. Who was he and why did he deliver Israel? As we explored this throughout the sermon, I think more questions were initially raised than answered. When Shamgar’s identity is revealed, it becomes even more confusing that he delivered Israel. How and why would a Canaanite prince deliver Israel? The story doesn’t make sense, but then many of the stories in our lives don’t make sense. Why would a German risk his life for an American soldier, why would enemies stop fighting each other to play a soccer game, and why would a grumpy truck driver come to the aid of a preacher he never seemed to like?67

The message of the cross is the root of a worldview that can explain these otherwise unfathomable things. “That is why our task is not to explain ‘the meaning’ of the text, but rather show how our lives are unintelligible if Jesus Christ is not the Lord.”68 If Jesus is Lord and can use a cross to show his lordship and defeat death and reconcile enemies, then Jesus can use other unlikely deliverers and reconcile warring parties. Life only makes sense when it is rooted in the cross: the life, death, and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The challenge of the good news is that “the word of the cross reveals God as a free, sovereign God, not bound by human categories and expectations.”69 A cruciform worldview means seeing beyond the human-made categories and expectations in order to see things through the eyes of a God for whom nothing is impossible. God is able to bridge the gap between

67 These are all stories from history and my own life that were told in the sermon. The sermon can be found in Appendix C.
68 Hauerwas, 16.
69 Cousar, 35.
Canaanite and Israelite, German and American, Republican and Democrat, sinner and saint, humanity and divinity. “The beauty of the cross is meant to beckon us into friendship with God. God through the cross, refuses our refusal of friendship…And by claiming us, Christ makes friendship with one another a possibility and, perhaps, even friendship with ourselves.”

Christ on the cross is the ultimate deliverer and reconciler who heals the wounds of creation.

Changing someone’s worldview is not a one-sermon process, which is why I dedicated so many sermons to it over the course of two years. I hoped the sermons would build on each other to help the congregation move toward a cruciform worldview. One member of the congregation confirmed my hopes after An Unlikely Deliverer:

Hearing about Shamgar, relegated to a single verse, reminded me of another sermon where you mentioned how we think we will have big moments of standing up for Christ (like the firing squad reference you made) but we do our Christian duty in the small, understated moments. As you said, we make our sacrifices not in thousand dollar bills donated in grand gestures, but in small, even tedious, sacrifices, a quarter and dime at a time.

I was really excited that someone who wasn’t a PPG member made a connection between a cruciform stewardship sermon on Hebrews 12:1-3 and this sermon on Judges. After six sermons, members of the congregation were beginning to view the cross in new ways and were allowing that view to affect how they view the world around them. The congregation was using the sermons to reflect on the message of the cross in their own lives. Craig shared that his girlfriend’s mother doesn’t seem to like him, in part because he isn’t a Christian. He said this has been difficult for him and his girlfriend, and in turn he hasn’t seen his girlfriend’s mother in a very positive light. He said, “This sermon has urged me not to write her off, like maybe she could be the one to stick up for me, or in some way become a great blessing in my life.”

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70 Hauerwas, 65.
71 Betty Pugh, e-mail message to author, November 12, 2012.
72 Craig Heilman, e-mail message to author, November 14, 2012.
an example of how a cruciform worldview changes thinking and guides us in new directions based on the criterion of the cross.

The last sermon that brought all the sermons preached in this series together was *The World Tree and Our Worldview*. This sermon series was about moving toward a cross-rooted worldview in which God’s revelation on the cross informs our understanding of and interaction with the world. A worldview rooted in the good news of the gospel, symbolized by and encapsulated in the cross, will never topple. The last sermon makes the case for the cross as the center of our worldview, summarizes and concludes the *United Under the Cross* series, and looks forward to continued focus on what it means to live a cruciform life.

The foundation of the sermon was the “Practice of Being Rooted in the Gospel” by Samuel Giere. The sentence that inspired my reflection was, “Like Yggdrasil, the cross of Christ frames the whole of reality for Christians. There is nothing outside of Christ’s world-tree, and all reality—people, places, histories, the visible and invisible, earthly and heavenly—is framed and supported by God’s all-encompassing act of reconciliation.”

Giere’s article helped frame my initial theological understanding of Ezekiel 31 and Colossians 1:15-20. The PPG Bible study helped me make my theological understanding, informed by Giere, relevant and accessible to the congregation.

The sermon explored the image and concept of the cross of Christ as a world tree. In a world tree, all the worlds are united, and in Christ all things are reconciled to God. In a world tree, earth and heaven are connected, and in Christ heaven and earth meet in one person who is fully human and fully God.

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73 The sermon information and how the PPG and I worked together on the formation of the sermon can be found in Appendix G.
74 Giere, “Practice of Being Rooted in the Gospel,” 319.
God raises up the cross to be another world tree, because through the cross God reconciles all things and so everything and everyone can find a home in the cross. Samuel Giere argues, “In a real sense, with Christ’s death on the cross, this “tree” rooted at Golgotha takes all the world into its branches, into Christ’s outstretched arms, and its roots extend even to the depths of hell (1 Pet 3:19–20). There is nothing outside of the scope of this cruciform world-tree.”

Everything we truly need is found in this tree to live. It is our judgment and yet our grace. It is our condemnation and yet our forgiveness; it is our despair and yet our hope; it is our death and yet our life. It is our world tree, holding our past, present, and future, holding all the world, inviting us all to live united under the cross.

The end of the sermon tied the past sermons together to show that all of these things we’ve talked about over the past several months, together, are the beginnings of a cruciform worldview and life. It’s important for sermons to build on one another and use elements from past sermons, whether that be phrases, illustrations, scripture, or key points, in order to keep those ideas fresh and because you can always build higher when you build on a foundation. If each sermon is a “one and done” you can never reach too high or dig too deep in fifteen to twenty minutes, but a series over the course of a year allows you to go a little higher or dig a little deeper each week. A string of pearls is much more valuable than a single loose pearl in a pocket. The feedback from this sermon helped me determine if the pearls were being strung or just left loose to be forgotten.

Over the course of the year attitudes were changing about the cross and how the cross affects faith and daily life. Craig experienced this kind of change:

| 75 Ibid. |
This sermon has helped me to cement this idea of what it means to view the cross as the center of my worldview. Viewing it as a tree to gather and commune under helps me visualize it. Just like I can sit under a tree for shade and protection from rain, and lean against it for rest, I can seek the cross as a sort of protection from the harshness of the world, and lean on it emotionally for support when things get rough.\textsuperscript{76}

Craig used to have only a negative view of the cross, so this was a big step for him. Many members of United Presbyterian have grown in their understanding and relationship with the cross. One visitor to our church wrote me, “I thought the message was very good and relevant, in the sense that like the strongest tree can be blown over, but if our roots are in Christ in the Cross, then our roots are secure no matter what happens.”\textsuperscript{77}

That is exactly the goal of this project: for the church, for all of us, to be rooted in the cross. PPG member Pat said, “The cross should be the center of who we are and not just the center of the church. The cross should be the center of who we are–our actions-choices–how we think and speak. It has the power to change us.”\textsuperscript{78}

The congregation and the PPG were changed. At the conclusion of the series, the PPG answered the questionnaire from the beginning of the series again, and I saw a lot of changed responses.\textsuperscript{79} Through all of the feedback, I identified key areas of growth for individual members of the congregation, and for the church as a whole, that marked movement toward a more cross-rooted worldview and cruciform faith.

Alex had a view of the cross as negative and shameful that stemmed from his past experiences in churches. Those feelings, coupled with what he felt was the over-commercialization of the cross, made him not want to have much to do with the cross at all.

Following this sermon series, Alex said the cross was transformed for him and became a positive

\textsuperscript{76} Craig Heilman, e-mail message to author, January 2, 2012.
\textsuperscript{77} Christina Difato, e-mail message to author, January 22, 2012.
\textsuperscript{78} Pat Wienkauf, e-mail message to author, January 22, 2012.
\textsuperscript{79} Appendix H has examples of the PPG’s answers to the questionnaire at the end of the series.
and welcoming symbol that was also difficult and challenging. Alex now wants to claim the cross proudly as the root of his life and challenge others to do the same.

We celebrated Easter a couple months after *The World Tree and our Worldview* was preached. We had finished meeting as a PPG, but Alex emailed me a few days after Easter to tell me a story of how he had not worn a cross of any kind for twenty years until that Easter. He had too many negative connotations of the cross and couldn’t bring himself to wear that symbol. His thoughts on the cross began to change because of the sermons. He said, “On Easter I wore an olive wood cross from Israel my Aunt had given me several years ago. I had always liked it, but never wanted to wear it until now. I’m so thankful that the PPG and the sermons led me back to the cross and strengthened my faith.”

Alexis admitted that she was afraid to look too closely at the cross for fear of what she might find there. In her final response to the questionnaire she wrote:

I think for a long time I tried to separate what Jesus did in his ministry on Earth versus what he did by dying on the cross. I think I had experiences that made me associate “the cross” with a kind of evangelism that didn’t jive at all with the image of Jesus I had from reading the Gospels. So I shied away from it and didn’t engage it. I think I told myself that I didn’t really need the cross—after all, I had Jesus. I’ve really had to carefully interrogate those feelings during this series and it has been really fruitful for me. I was afraid that if I had to look too long at the cross that I might see something about God that I didn’t like. I think that fear goes back to the idea that I’d heard in churches in college that made the cross seem like a penal substitution. At the center of this cruciform worldview however, is a loving God not an angry God.

Alexis’s experience is not unique. United Presbyterian Church has a diverse mixture of members from all kinds of religious backgrounds. Many of our members come to our church with a negative church history, and they have a difficult time getting past the images of an angry judgmental God who had to kill God’s own son to be appeased and be willing to forgive us.

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80 Alex Marshall, e-mail message to author, April 9, 2012.
81 Alexis Maloof, e-mail message to author, February 7, 2013.
Craig, who had never confessed faith in Christ, said, “I admit I did go into this series seeing the cross as a symbol of God’s need for punishment, but I see it now as a sign of a selfless act, and the depths to which God will go to save humanity.”

Feedback from the PPG showed that the church’s members were beginning to see and understand the cross in new ways that strengthened their faith and changed their view of God, themselves, and the world. In my final question to PPG members, I asked them to share how they thought the series changed their understanding of the cross, God, and themselves. Their answers are why preaching a theology of the cross toward a cruciform worldview is vital for the church today. Their lives and faiths were changed. The cross, which is the centerpiece and focal point of our sanctuary, has moved closer to the center of each one of their lives, with its full range of meanings. They may not know all of what the cross stands for or be able to articulate it in theological language, but they know the cross is more than a death for a life, and they know God is more than a punisher. Whatever else they may continue to learn about the cross, they know fundamentally that the God who died on the cross is a God who is for them, who is with them, and who loves them.

VII. The Cross As The Common C(h)ord

When we begin to see that the cross is what holds together all parts of our own lives, like a world tree, then we can apply the same principal to the church. The larger organization cannot make the change first and then influence the individuals who make up that organization. The people will change the church because the church is the people.

I’ve found that in our church we sometimes make decisions based on what is the most financially prudent or beneficial solution, what would attract young people most, what would

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82 Craig Heilmann, e-mail message to author, February 7, 2013.
83 A sample of their responses can be found in Appendix I.
make the least people upset, or what everyone else is doing. Our church was basing decisions on a cruciform worldview, but there were other competing worldviews. It seemed easy for the leadership of the church to base worship decisions or theological decisions, such as who should be allowed to be a member of the church, on a cruciform worldview, but decisions about organizational infrastructure, finances, and growth seemed better handled through business or other worldviews.

We were separating out areas of the church by what seemed more “churchy” and what would be better handled by growth experts, advertising experts, or financial experts. I knew we couldn’t change that way of thinking for the church until we changed that way of thinking for the individuals.

Therefore, I preached a new series of twelve sermons on different areas of personal and church life using a variety of texts from the Old and New Testaments, but I always ended by showing how the cross shines new light on and has the final word on that subject. Each sermon explored a concept like identity, stewardship, mission, wounds, challenges, and justice through a text, but the cross always added a new wrinkle and a new understanding. The cross proclaimed the ultimate truth about each concept through the cruciform nature and actions of God.

Week after week, the congregation heard about how God’s love, presence, power, and wisdom through the cross affects their true identity, or how they can use their personal wounds for healing, or how they are called to cast out the demons of society. The cross was proclaimed every Sunday no matter what the scripture or what the topic. The cross always had the final word. As in the previous series, sermon built upon sermon, and soon members of the PPG and congregation were beginning to think about things differently. Actions began to mirror the new cruciform worldviews. The PPG and the congregation were looking to the cross for answers,
guidance, wisdom, and examples for how to live and how to be the church. If a sermon didn’t go back to that central revelation of who God is and how God loves us, the teaching of that sermon felt disconnected from the others, a loose pearl in a drawer. The cross is what makes the worship, education, mission, and fellowship come together to be something beautiful. Every sermon and text was connected to the cross because theological reflection begins and ends at the cross. The cross is the common cord for the theology and life of the church. In musical terms, it is also the root, or home, chord.

In western common practice music, each chord and even each tone within a given key has a similarity or an attraction to certain other chords, tones, or types of movement. The strongest movement is that of the dominant (the major triad built on the 5th scale degree) to root chord. This has, to western ears, a sound of finality and of literal resolution. The movement away from and back to the root chord of a piece is a foundational concept of our music. This gives our music structure and form. The root, or home, chord is like home base. When playing tag you run around a lot but you have to end up back at home base. In baseball, you start at home plate and the goal is to end there. If a runner is left on another base, it’s considered a missed opportunity and a failed inning. Music that does not return to the root, or home, chord sounds unfinished and incomplete. In fact, progressions of chords that do not return to the home chord are often called “deceptive cadences.”

All my sermons, no matter the text, returned to the root of the gospel, the cross, so that the true harmony of the gospel could be heard. I always ended with the cross to give the sermon that note of finality and completeness. The cross sometimes confirmed the promises of God, challenged our actions and decisions in relation to the message and text that morning, or reminded us of the character and nature of the God we worship. My theological reflection on the
text always began with the God revealed on the cross and ended there as well, so my preaching would never be a “deceptive cadence” preached out of my own desires and ideas rather than the revelation of the cross that puts everything to the test.

One of the first sermons I began to see the change after was *Where Are All The Exorcists?*, preached on Mark 9:38-40.84

Christ exorcises the demons and the forces at work in the world that are contrary to God’s will. “This is what happens on the cross. Jesus exposes the powers, and by exposing them, as we read in Colossians, he ‘disarms’ them and frees us from their grip.”85

When Jesus asks his disciples to, “‘take up your cross and follow me,’ he is calling us not simply to bear the burdens of life or to practice ascetic self-denial but to take up the way of resistance to the Domination System.”86 The Domination System is the manifestation of the demonic forces at work in our world. Demonic forces are not just spirits that inhabit bodies; demonic forces are the attitudes, compulsions, and actions that destroy human life and dignity. We, as members of Christ’s church, as his disciples, as his hands and feet, are given the power to, and sent out to, resist, expose, and exorcise those forces. So the question in the sermon was, “Where are all the exorcists?”

In his life, Jesus cast out demons, but he did that even more so in his death on the cross. On the cross, Jesus put death in its place, stripped sin of its power, and exposed the unjust powers of the Romans and the priests. Taking up our cross means becoming an exorcist because that’s what Jesus did with his cross.

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84 The sermon as well as my work with the PPG that led to the sermon can be found in Appendix J.
86 Ibid, 64.
Members of the PPG filled out a four-question response form to all my sermons in this series. The questions focus on what the PPG heard in the sermon and how the cross interprets and connects the sermon to their lives and to the life of the church. Their answers gave me insight into whether the aims of the sermon and project were being met. Most importantly, however, it gave the PPG a chance to think about how the cross informs their understanding of what being a follower of Jesus is all about. The sermon isn’t just about the mission work of the church or the justice ministry: it is fundamentally about what it means to follow Jesus. The answer is found in the cross and in Christ’s command to us to take up our own.

The PPG felt the sermon challenged their church membership, action, and faith in a way that extended well beyond Sunday. The Mission Committee on the following Tuesday discussed the sermon and how it should affect the budget and mission plans for the next year that they were organizing that night. The committee has now begun reading a book together on faithful mission work, and have started new projects to address some of the demons mentioned in the sermon.

One example is a new ministry to some of the nursing homes in Peoria in an effort to cast out the demons of loneliness that plague many residents of the homes. They often feel neglected and forgotten, but a member of the committee referenced another sermon I had preached earlier this year. She said, “It doesn’t matter if they can’t come to church, don’t have any money, or can barely understand what you’re saying, they are beloved in God’s sight and ought to be beloved in ours.” Therefore we started to provide worship services at nursing homes that did not have any kind of opportunity for worship. At Christmas, members of the congregation sponsored residents of nursing homes to buy the gifts, much like many churches do for children. The new mission to nursing homes is just one example of how missions has changed since the committee put mission

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87 A sample of the PPG’s responses to Where Are All The Exorcists? Can be found in Appendix K.
work on the common c(h)ord of the cross. That’s the purpose of these sermons: to affect the way we think about, and do, the ministry of the church.

The cross provided a new way to think about biblical texts and a part of our lives and the life of the church in each sermon in this series. One of the congregation’s favorite sermons, *The Side of The Road*, helped churchgoers think about the story of the Good Samaritan in a brand new way by proclaiming the good news that there is always help for those at the side of the road. 88 Christ ministered at the side of the road and Christ died at the side of the road so that we could get off the side of the road to walk the narrow path through the gate of life. The sermon gave the congregation the opportunity to place themselves in the shoes of the man beaten on the side of the road with Christ being the neighbor who came to the side of the road to heal, but he healed with a cross instead of with wine and bandages.

There have been several excellent sermons preached on this parable that have comforted, inspired, and called Christians to new action, but when the sermon returns to the home chord of the cross, it connects the message of the parable to the larger message of the gospel. Much of Christ’s ministry happened along the side of the road, both literally and metaphorically, including his death on the cross. The parable helps us understand Christ’s death in a new way, but it also helps the congregation see how Christ’s death on the cross was for us sinners who were left on the side of the road, as well as how Christ’s death on the cross calls us to minister to those in our midst who find themselves on the side of the road today. The cross unites these understandings and challenges us to be the neighbor while comforting us with the knowledge that there is indeed help at the side of the road in our own times of need.

88 The sermon as well as my work with the PPG that led to the sermon can be found in Appendix L. The feedback received from the PPG using the four question worksheet can be found in Appendix M.
When each sermon has a common point of reference, the congregation sees that all the church believes and does is held together in the cross. The cross challenges us, but even in those challenges there are celebrations. The cross is the assurance of the promises the text proclaims. The cross is the assurance that the resolution in the text is the resolution for the trouble in our lives, too. The cross is the ultimate celebration, and preaching the cross as the common c(h)ord allows the congregation to see the celebration in the midst of any challenge, any mission, any program, any sacrament, and any sermon in the church.

Many members of the PPG moved from a negative view of the cross as only an implement of torture and death, or a difficult thing Christ had to go through in order to provide the real celebration of Easter, to seeing the cross in and of itself as a message of good news. The good news of the cross doesn’t erase the pain, injustice, and darkness of the cross, but neither do the negative aspects of the cross erase the good news about Good Friday.

Debbie was one of the PPG members who wanted to skip past the cross in order to get to the resurrection at the beginning of this project. The cross represented darkness and suffering to her, but now she says, “The cross represents hope for me.” Debbie went on to say that the hope isn’t just hope for an afterlife, but hope for this life when she finds herself “at the side of the road” in trouble, hope for when she feels alone, hope that God can use even the unexpected people and things in her life to be a blessing, and hope that no matter what, God loves her. “Everything in our lives should go back to the cross,” Debbie said. “It is the reason for our existence, the foundation of our lives, and the promise of our future in heaven. The cross is everything to me, I just never realized it until now.”

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89 Debbie Hanson, e-mail message to author, December 2, 2013.
90 Ibid.
Preaching the cross as the common c(h)ord is not just about changing people’s attitudes or perceptions about the cross and God. Preaching the cross as the common c(h)ord is about a life of discipleship with a cross, following the cruciform God. A cruciform church does not just experience a change in attitude; it experiences a lifestyle change.

Bill just joined the church and the PPG in the last year of the project, but he could see how lifting up the cross each week has made a difference in the life of the church. “I think the cross is a ‘call to service’ at UPC, and I have seen so many new examples of that service in the last several months.”

Donna is another new member of the church who served on the PPG in its last year. She echoed Bill’s thoughts about the way the cross has affected the ministry of the church. “Being new to the church, I have seen new missions and activities or a different focus on the way the work of the church is presented since everything comes back to the cross. I have looked for new ways to interact with others and to grow as a Christian.”

The church’s vision for sharing the love and grace of God has expanded. Since the whole world lives in the world tree of the cross and the cross reconciles all creation to God, we are called to be similarly inclusive. Pat said, “I now realize that the whole world is our neighbor and that we are supposed to love and help all. I used to think we should spend our money to help those here in Peoria and not all over the world.”

Craig helped me to understand just how important centering the preaching message and life of the church around the cross truly is when he decided to join the church. Craig is the member of the PPG who was not a member of the church. He had several questions about the cross and God that kept him from church and from being a Christian. Throughout the series,

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91 Bill Hall, e-mail message to author, December 3, 2013.
92 Donna Selling, email message to author, December 2, 2013.
93 Pat Weinkauf, email message to author, December 5, 2013.
Craig has experienced a major shift in his belief and attitude about the cross and God. “[The series] has helped take me from the position of agnosticism to one of a follower of Christ, and has given me a loving example of what that means to do so.”

My cruciform homiletic did not only affect new Christians in significant ways. Carla, a long-time Christian, shared that “the cross has forced me to look beyond myself and to search for ways to be Jesus' hands and feet in ways I've never before thought about. Your ability to tell stories and then relate thembibically and personally to me has been an inspiration to me to try to be the whole Christian that Christ dying on the cross has called me to be.”

Carla touched on the main reason I did this project. When I began to study the cross, I found that the cross was calling me to something much greater than my salvation. The cross was showing me who God was and the “whole Christian” God wanted me to be. This emphasis on the cross in my ministry isn’t just a series for a doctoral program, it is now the life of my ministry discovered through the doctoral program. It is the center of my personal faith and I have discovered why it needs to be the center of the church’s faith and life together.

VIII. Conclusion

Rooting my faith in the cross has challenged me, encouraged me, and transformed my discipleship. I wanted the church to experience the full joy and life found in the cross that I had found, and I believe it is on its way to doing so. This is not a project that is now complete with the writing of this thesis. It is becoming a lifestyle of United Presbyterian Church of Peoria. The cross is our common c(h)ord; without it our worship, education, mission, and fellowship are just random homeless notes, just loose pearls without a string.

94 Ibid.
95 Carla Hall, e-mail to author, December 3, 2013.
My cruciform preaching journey began with learning how to preach sermons that taught theological words to my specific context. The method of preaching I developed, and continued to develop throughout my cruciform series, is just one way to preach a cruciform homiletic. I found that weaving personal and cultural stories, such as movies, television, novels, and news, in with the biblical story helped my congregation connect and better understand the biblical text and how it is understood through the lens of the cross. I also discovered other homiletical practices that engaged my congregation and helped them connect to the sermon, such as preaching away from the pulpit more, beginning the sermon with a story or illustration and then reading the scripture, and memorizing the scripture. All of these were helpful practices for my preaching journey, but they are not necessary to preach the cross as the common (h)ord.

Every preacher has different gifts, and each context has different needs, but the cross can be preached in each one. The cross, for Paul, was the root of his ministry and the grounding of his faith. A cruciform homiletic proclaims a cross-shaped gospel, because there is no other gospel. The good news will always remain cross-shaped, and preachers can help congregations fully embrace the gospel of Christ by proclaiming, living, and teaching a theology of the cross. This isn’t one method among many: the cross is the beginning of theological reflection for the church, and as such, it needs to be the beginning point for the proclamation of the good news of God.

We are a cruciform church: born of, rooted in, united under, saved by, loved through, and held within the cross of Christ.
Bibliography


APPENDIX A
APPENDIX B

PPG Members 2011-2012 Project “Preaching A Christian Vocabulary”
Don Baker
Mark and Debbie Hanson
Alexis Maloof
Christi and Alex Marshall
Kim Ross
Pat Weinkauf
Peggy Zibert

PPG Members 2012-2013 Project “Preaching Toward a Cross Rooted Worldview”
Don Baker
Mark and Debbie Hanson
Don and Laurie Hartshorn
Craig Heilman
Alexis Maloof
Christi and Alex Marshall
Kim Ross
Pat Weinkauf
Peggy Zibert

PPG Members 2012-2013 Project “Preaching the Cross as the Common Chord”
Don Baker
Jason Carr
Mark and Debbie Hanson
Carla and Bill Hall
Don and Laurie Hartshorn
Craig Heilman
Alexis Maloof
Christi and Alex Marshall
Kim Ross
Donna and Gordon Selling
Pat Weinkauf
Peggy Zibert
APPENDIX C

Sermons From 2011-2012 Project “Preaching A Christian Vocabulary.”

Title: Faith
Scripture: Mark 4:35-41
Synopsis: Defined faith as a relationship of trust built on knowledge and experience by interweaving personal stories, the Biblical Story, and a cultural story (a video clip of an All State Commercial) within the context of preaching on the 10th Anniversary of the September 11th attacks.
YouTube Link: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FZU4c_gdTFs

Title: Sin
Scripture: Luke 15:11-21
Synopsis: Defined sin as separation from God and the resulting consequences through interweaving personal stories, the biblical story, and a cultural story (a clip from the movie Blood Diamond).
YouTube Link: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cvxjMq9sFls

Title: Confession
Scripture: John 4:3-19
Synopsis: Examined the three definitions of confession (praise, statement of belief, and admission of fault, guilt or blame) through the interweaving of personal stories, the Biblical story, and a cultural story (a Calvin and Hobbes comic strip).
YouTube Link: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZtxZ44FCEVQ

Title: Grace part 1
Scripture: Matthew 20:1-15
Synopsis: Defined grace as the gift of a relationship that has more to do with who God is than who we are by interweaving personal stories, the biblical story, and a cultural story (a clip from the television show Seinfeld).
YouTube Link: NA

Title: Grace part 2
Scripture: Galatians 1:11-16a
Synopsis: Examined how we can and should live in response to the gift of grace using personal stories, the biblical story, and a cultural story (clips from the move Les Miserables).
YouTube Link: NA

Title: Revelation
Scripture: Luke 2:8-18
Synopsis: An Advent sermon that defined revelation as God showing who God is through the gift of knowledge and experience given by God that imparts a new understanding we are then called to share. The sermon used personal stories, the biblical story, and a cultural story (video clips and the story of the church preschool’s Firetruck Project).
YouTube Link: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3PSKSOZtS4g
Title: Incarnation  
Scripture: John 1:1-14  
Synopsis: An Advent sermon that celebrated the incarnation as God’s primary revelation and the beginning of our relationship with God, which is a the foundation of faith.  
YouTube Link: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sLuQHX7YVn8

Title: Sacrifice  
Synopsis: A sermon that defined a sacrifice as a gift or meal meant to maintain, improve, or reconcile a relationship through interweaved personal stories, Biblical stories, and a variety of communion breads baked by members of the PPG that they believed represented themselves.  
YouTube Link: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_sF90PhKDBw (part 1)  
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jtaWcxbiwbG (part 2)

Sermons From 2012-2013 Project “Preaching Toward A Cross-Rooted Worldview.”

Title: The Nature of God  
Scripture: Luke 4:14-20  
Synopsis: A sermon on the authority of scripture that wove personal stories, the biblical story, and a cultural stories (the story of James Reeb and a story of a prejudiced preaching in North Carolina) to show that scripture has and can be used for a lot of purposes, but fundamentally one has to know the character and nature of the God they worship in order to make sense of a lot of scripture. The cross reveals the nature of God and so all scripture should be seen in the light of the cruciform nature of God.  
YouTube Link: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sZXZT6itmAI

Title: Looks Can Be Deceiving  
Scripture: Mark 15:25-39  
Synopsis: A sermon on the death of Christ which engages the Christus Victor model of atonement and reinterprets the centurion’s last words as ironic rather than an expression of faith. “Looks can be deceiving” is a principle value of the cross because Jesus was really a king when he looked like a criminal, he was the victor when it looked like he was defeated, and God was always with him though it looked like he was abandoned. The sermon wove the Biblical story, personal stories, and a cultural story (A Pepsi Commerc) together to accomplish the purposes of the sermon.  
YouTube Link: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EHTvSHiX4ZQ
**Title:** Sinners in the Hands of a Loving God  
**Scripture:** 1 John 4:7-10, 17-19  
**Synopsis:** A sermon on the death of Christ which engages the Penal Substitution model of the atonement and the concept of God’s wrath being satisfied on the cross. The sermon claims that God was angry and sin and death and not humanity, and that love, not anger, was God’s primary motivation on the cross. The sermon used an audio clip from *Sinners in the Hand’s of an Angry God* and a video clip from *The Lord of the Rings* movies.  
**YouTube Link:** http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DjpGnif6QM8

**Title:** Down in the Valley  
**Scripture:** 2 Corinthians 1:3-5 and Psalm 23  
**Synopsis:** This sermon proclaims the good news that we have a God who can understand our sufferings and trials because God has been there and is also with us. It challenges the hymn “Jesus Walked This Lonely Valley” to assert that we do not have to walk the valley on our own, because God is a God of compassion, which literally means “with suffering.” Christ died on the cross so we wouldn’t ever have to walk that valley alone. The sermon used hymns and personal stories to shine light on the texts, and ended with Psalm 23 as the last word.  
**YouTube Link:** http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PVEyi0EUsB0

**Title:** Fool’s God  
**Scripture:** 1 Corinthians 1:18-25  
**Synopsis:** A sermon that challenges the worldly definition of wisdom through the revelation of the wisdom and power of God on the cross. It contrasts a theology of triumphalism with a theology of the cross. Part of the message affirmed that doubt is not the opposite of faith and that “I don’t know,” is sometimes the wisest answer. The sermon featured a story from my childhood about finding fool’s gold.  
**YouTube Link:** http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PJ9j6-OLAfC

**Title:** Running with Joy  
**Scripture:** Hebrews 12:1-3  
**Synopsis:** A stewardship sermon that looks at what discipleship and giving to God means through Christ’s example on the cross and his command to us to take up our own cross. I used a personal story of one of my high school wrestling matches as a bridge between life of the text to our lives today.  
**YouTube Link:** NA

**Title:** An Unlikley Deliverer  
**Scripture:** Judges 3:31  
**Synopsis:** A sermon that challenges our judgments and prejudices of other people and things and proclaims the good news that if God can use a cross to bring life and hope to the world, then God can use anyone and anything for God’s good purposes. I used personal stories and stories from history, particularly stories of soldiers at war since it was Veterans’ Day, to help mediate the conversation between the text and the life of churchgoers today.  
**YouTube Link:** http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vT0brUophuo
Title: To Never Be Hungry  
Scripture: John 6:25-35  
Synopsis: This sermon used the cross to challenge what it is we really thirst and hunger for. The cross stood in condemnation of our actions and attitudes, but also stood in truth, forgiveness, and reconciliation. Through the cross we see that God is a God of abundant grace who supplies us what we truly need. A cruciform worldview helps us to see and long for those things in contrast to what the world tells us we should hunger for.  
YouTube Link: NA

Title: And Peace on Earth… Of Course  
Scripture: Isaiah 2:1-4 and Matthew 2:1-12,16  
Synopsis: An Advent sermon that challenges our worldly ideas about power in light of the power God shows through Christ’s death on the cross. The cross is what allows for true peace. A cruciform worldview has different ideas about power and peace, and how and why to achieve both than typical secular worldviews.  
YouTube Link: NA

Title: Reconciling Joy After Sandy Hook  
Scripture: Isaiah 2:1-4 and Matthew 2:1-12,16  
Synopsis: An Advent sermon in the wake of the shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary that deals with how Christians can light the candle of joy on the Advent Wreath in the midst of such pain. The cross is the promise that even in darkness, there is a light that the darkness cannot overcome, and that God is with us even in death, and beyond death. A cruciform worldview has a different understanding of what joy is than the typical secular definition in which joy is a synonym for happiness.  
YouTube Link: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZhI5tHDk9ao

Title: It’s A Must  
Scripture: Matthew 16:21-23  
Synopsis: This sermon deals specifically with what it means to take up our cross and follow Jesus, and how Christ’s words are a command, and not a suggestion. The good news though is that God gives us strength beyond what we know to live a cruciform life. I used personal stories and a video clip from a college football bowl game that year.  
YouTube Link: NA

Title: The World Tree and Our Worldview  
Scripture: Ezekiel 31:1-12 and Colossians 1:15-20  
Synopsis: The last sermon in the series explores what it means to have a cruciform worldview so that all of life is known, understood, and lived within the cross of Christ. Stories from the PPG, my own life, and illustrations from culture all served to help mediate a conversation between the text and the life today.  
YouTube Link: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b32bGeHCmXw
Sermons From 2013 Project “Preaching the Cross as the Common C(h)ord.”

**Title:** You Did It To Me  
**Scripture:** Matthew 25:31-46  
**Synopsis:** The first sermon in this series explored the common parable of the sheep and the goats in conjunction with a personal story from my childhood and a current story about the burial of one of the Boston bombers. The cross helped us understand the parable and think about what we have done to Christ and what Christ has done to us (reconciled us to God, forgiven us, died for us). The cross challenged us to live in such a way towards other people that we will not be ashamed when Christ says, “You did it to me.”  
**YouTube Link:** [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3ZcaNOBx0HY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3ZcaNOBx0HY)

**Title:** In the Tomb  
**Scripture:** Mark 5:1-12  
**Synopsis:** This sermon looks at all the demons in our lives that are often at war within us and fight to define who are and just as Legion defined the man in the tombs. Christ cast out all those demons on the cross. The cross lets us know our true identity is “Beloved.” We never have to live in the tomb of death or the tomb of our own demons because Christ went into the tomb first and set us free from sin and death.  
**YouTube Link:** [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o9P1Lq6NJqs](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o9P1Lq6NJqs)

**Title:** Of Super Heroes and Saviors  
**Scripture:** Rev. 5:1-14  
**Synopsis:** This sermon proclaims the good news that wounds can be transformed into power. Many super heroes gain their powers from physical or emotional wounds. Christ’s wounds on the cross are what make him worthy to open the Book in Revelation. Christ’s wounds healed our souls and healed the broken relationship between humanity and God. We can use our wounds and disappointments to heal others. Our wounds can be the source of our power to be a gift to the world. I used stories of super heroes and a play by Thornton Wilder to help connect the world in the text to the world today.

**Title:** Where Are All The Exorcists?  
**Scripture:** Mark 9:38-40  
**Synopsis:** This sermon looks at the disciples’ failure to exorcise a demon while an outsider was able to. Christ calls us to be exorcists and the cross is ultimate place of Christ’s exorcising activities. The power of the cross cast out the demons of sin and death then, and the cross still has power to cast out the demons in our society today.  
**YouTube Link:** [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9xQf_df6U1I](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9xQf_df6U1I)

**Title:** The Hills Have Eyes  
**Scripture:** Psalm 121  
**Synopsis:** This sermon looks at Psalm 121 in a new way in that when the Psalmist refers to lifting his eyes to the hills, he is remembering the danger that lurks in the hills. Whenever we are in trouble, we can know our help comes from God because Christ defeated all that can trouble us
on a hill called Golgotha. Christ is king of all the hills, and so whenever we face troubles in life we can know Christ died on a hill so we could get through the hills in our life and make it home.

**YouTube Link:** http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6psgnyBOdRe

**Title:** A Basin, A Water Pitcher, and a Towel  
**Scripture:** John 13:1-5  
**Synopsis:** This sermon is based on an idea preached by Dr. Frank Thomas and proclaims that Christ came to be a servant and the church is called to be a servant church. We see Christ’s example of servanthood when he washed his disciples feet, and ultimately on the cross. The cross is an act of servanthood, and whenever we carry or own cross, we are living as servants, too.

**YouTube Link:** NA

**Title:** Through Christ We Can  
**Scripture:** Philippians 4:10-13  
**Synopsis:** This sermon was our main stewardship theme sermon during our stewardship campaign. The sermon looked at how stewardship is a principle of the cross, but also how the cross isn’t just a symbol of salvation. The cross is a symbol of possibilities. We can do all things through the cross of Christ. Stewardship is the right use of all the possibilities the cross opens to the world.

**YouTube Link:** http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=53kM1A5Pohw

**Title:** Living on the Servants’ Bones  
**Scripture:** 2 Kings 5:1-19  
**Synopsis:** The sermon highlights the servants in the story of Naaman because it is the servants who change the story. God always uses the servants to change the story especially on the cross when Christ, who took the form of a servant, changed the story for all humanity. Our lives are lived on the work and sacrifices of servants and we are called to be servants, too.

**YouTube Link:** NA

**Title:** The Side of the Road  
**Scripture:** Luke 10:30-37  
**Synopsis:** A sermon using Frank Thomas’s method of celebration which proclaims the good news that there is always help for those at the side of the road. The cross reminds us that Jesus has been on the side of the road and it’s on the side of the road that we are saved. It also calls us to be sent to the side of the road for others.

**YouTube Link:** http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R_a-A5HnwZg

**Title:** We Have No King  
**Scripture:** John 19:1-15  
**Synopsis:** This sermon, using several clips from The Lord of the Rings movies challenges our ideas of independence and defines what our role is as steward in comparison with God’s role as king. The cross is the Christ’s coronation and the defining moment of Christ the King.

**YouTube Link:** NA
APPENDIX D

Sermon: Looks Can Be Deceiving
Scripture: Mark 15:25-39
YouTube Link: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EHTvSHiX4ZQ

The PPG Study Before the Sermon

The first sermon that preached atonement engaged Mark’s narrative of Christ’s crucifixion (Mark 15:25-39). I wanted the whole church to engage the suffering and death of Christ in the midst of the bad news, the suffering, and the death experienced by United Presbyterian Church over the very difficult summer.

The PPG and I first read the passage individually and highlighted phrases, words, and images that stuck out. The PPG noticed that Mark’s Gospel doesn’t have many positive images, people, or language like the other Gospels; there is no repentant thief, no beloved disciple, no mother of Jesus, and no faithful, sympathetic bystander. It is a very negative scene, with everyone mocking Jesus and challenging him. One PPG member remarked, “It reminds me of Christ’s temptation by Satan because all these people are telling him what he needs to do in order to prove himself.”

Jesus’ cry from the cross also stuck out to PPG members because the Aramaic was written too, and because it sounds so defeatist. One PPG member said, “It sounds like a like a last burst of humanity.” The PPG’s conversation centered on the very human tendency to ask why, to assume the worst, to complain, and pass blame. The idea of the cry revealing Christ’s humanity was particularly powerful to one PPG member who, wrote:

This is a very interesting change in position from his other famous quote "Forgive them father, they know not what they do". His demeanor seemed to go from selfless to helpless and filled with despair right before his death. Not that selflessness and despair are necessarily mutually exclusive, but it is indicative of how he is vulnerable to suffering in human form and all the emotional repercussions of that. On its surface it seems like a blasphemous position to believe that God has
abandoned him, but it seems instead to tell a story about how even he in human form is vulnerable to desperation and fear.\textsuperscript{96}

I asked the PPG what they might have thought about Jesus and his death if they had no prior knowledge of Jesus but witnessed the events as Mark records them. The PPG shared some very honest answers, including:

“What an impotent loser!”

“It looks like an example of extreme bullying where everyone jumps on the weakest and most helpless person.”

“This guy must have done something really wrong for all the religious and civic leaders to be so adamant that he should die.”

“Here’s just another guy Rome wanted to kill.”

“I’d feel sorry for him, but wouldn’t be convinced he was divine.”

I then showed the first video clip of the Pepsi Max \textit{Uncle Drew} campaign, and I asked what people were thinking and feeling as they watched this old man struggle to play basketball. PPG comments ranged from feeling sorry for him, feeling afraid he’d have a heart attack, and wondering what made him think he could play with those guys. But a couple people said they kept waiting for him to suddenly get good or throw off his clothes to become a younger man and dominate the game. I asked why they thought that. They said, “Just a feeling I had. That’s how the story goes doesn’t it? You wouldn’t show it to us if there wasn’t some reversal.”

As we watched the rest of the clip, the PPG laughed and cheered and said, “I knew it!” They wanted to see the victory come from what looked like defeat.

\textsuperscript{96} Craig Heilman, e-mail message to author, August 30, 2012.
Finally, I asked them how they’d read the centurion’s famous line. Almost everyone read it like John Wayne did in *The Greatest Story Ever Told*, full of reverence and awe. One PPG member read it sarcastically. The PPG said they’d always heard that the centurion was making a confession of faith. They wanted some happy moment, something to show that God was somewhere at work in this otherwise dark story. I challenged them based on how their previous answers. What in all that happened would have made the centurion make that confession of faith? The PPG had no answer except that God could reveal the truth to the centurion, which is a reasonable belief. Another PPG member thought it showed that the only one who understood what was happening was an outsider, and so it is ironic. That is also a respected theory. I presented the PPG with another possibility, the possibility that the centurion was just one more mocker of Jesus.

Sharyn Dowd argues that, “On the level of the story it is a sarcastic comment on the lips of a jaded professional executioner who has just watched one more Jewish peasant die calling on his God.” The irony is that the reader is the only one at the cross who really knows what is going on because the reader knows the beginning and the end of Christ’s story. The reader of the gospel knows that the centurion’s statement is true, whether or not the centurion meant it. “In Mark 15, the religious authorities, the political authority, the soldiers in charge, the crowds present at the cross, and even convicts contribute to a collective denial of what readers have known to be true about Jesus since 1:1 and know to be true even upon the humiliation and death of Jesus on the cross.” This is the key to understanding Mark’s passion narrative: looks can be deceiving. It may have looked like another zealot’s death or a time of extreme humiliation for Jesus, but what was really happening was the death of death itself and the glorification of Jesus.

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98 Ibid.
The Preparation and Delivery of the Sermon

The opening of any sermon is important because it can set the tone for the whole sermon. It can pique interest, show relevancy, and either invite listeners in or turn them away. I opened simply with, “Looks can be deceiving. What it looks like may not always be what it is.” The PPG thought this opening connected with the congregation because most people have had an experience of looks being deceiving, and the opening made people wonder and question what would come next. My goal was to engage the congregation’s intuition with the video of Uncle Drew. In the PPG Bible Study, the PPG indicated they just “had a feeling” there was going to be some kind of reversal. The PPG had a hunch that not all was as it seemed. “Hunches come from we know not where; and ‘where’ is human intuition.”

In doctoral class, Preaching as Performance, I was challenged to engage Henry Mitchell’s method of preaching holistically. Mitchell charges: “Western culture has for centuries preached primarily to the cognitive or mental faculties, emphasizing the appeal to reason, to the virtual exclusion of other gifts.” I realized I most often engaged hearers on a cognitive level to the detriment of the emotive and intuitive. Therefore, in this sermon I wanted to appeal to all three levels of knowing because, “Reason may make straight the highway or prepare the path, but God the Holy Spirit brings faith to us through the intuitive and emotive sectors of consciousness.” I wanted people’s hunches to start working before I delivered the scripture reading. Members of the congregation shared that the video connected well to the sermon. One member wrote, “I knew there had to be some twist to the video, but was surprised he wasn’t an

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100 Ibid, 129.
101 Ibid. 136.
One member of the PPG really enjoyed hearing the “ohs” when the second video was played. Some members of the congregation guessed it really was not an old man, and a few had other theories, but most felt something surprising was going to happen.

For the first time I chose to memorize the scripture so I could better embody the word and connect with the congregation. I knew my interpretation of the centurion’s statement as sarcastic would catch many people off guard. While the story appears to be a story of defeat and mocking, I hoped listeners’ intuition told them that there was something more. PPG members in our post-sermon reflection agreed that the opening of the sermon, video, and scripture reading tapped into their intuition.

Honestly, I was very nervous because I was afraid I would mess up this important scripture. Some of the members were impressed that I memorized it, but that really was not the effect I was going for. Several responders appreciated that I “performed the scripture rather than read it,” and that they heard the scripture differently and could picture the scene better because the story was freed from the page. The PPG agreed that hearing the centurion’s statement in a different way was something they appreciated about the way the sermon challenged their understanding of the cross.

After the video and scripture, I wanted to set up what things would have looked like to the centurion by emphasizing all the negatives that Mark writes about in his passion narrative. I wanted to embody the centurion’s ambivalence to Jesus and potentially touch on some of our own. I knew this would be a hard section of the sermon for the congregation because of the deeply engrained belief that the centurion was faithful. I wanted to start working on the listeners’ emotions, emphasizing the anger and the sarcasm of the centurion, in order to lead into our own.

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102 Carla Hall, e-mail message to author, September 10, 2012.
103 Laurie Hartshorn, e-mail message to author, September 12, 2012.
The next section dealt with our own disappointments, sufferings, and trials. This is where I engaged the listeners’ emotions to help them remember those times in their own lives that they begged God, pleaded with God, and asked God why. Perhaps they have had times they doubted God’s presence or desire to help. Those times are particularly heartbreaking and therefore engage our emotive intelligence. This is where I really hoped I was authentic and inviting.

The trouble in the text and in our lives is clear. There is suffering, there is despair, and there is distress, and it can look like God isn’t listening, isn’t working for our good, and isn’t winning a victory for us, but hangs dying on a cross or is dead in heaven. That’s the trouble of the text, but there is also grace in the text that may not be readily seen. The grace is that looks can be deceiving.

Uncle Drew’s triumph sets the stage for the reversals and good news of the text and the good news for our lives. The grace that is found in Mark’s passion narrative lies behind and around the text that faith allows us to see. Mark’s readers are privileged to hear the beginning of the Gospel that lets us in on the truth: that this, “is the good news of Jesus Christ, the son of God” (Mark 1:1). We know from reading Mark’s gospel that death does not have the final word, because Christ is raised to new life. Through the good news of the Word of God written we know that “death has been swallowed up in victory” (1 Cor. 15:54).

My goal was for people to be able to hope and trust in God’s presence and ultimate victory and goodness despite present situations that may seem to point to the contrary. The good news is that God is with us even when we may feel like God isn’t. I chose to tell the story of buying my mom the “Footprints in the Sand” poster because I felt the poem illustrated the point well. In our Bible Study, the PPG said they were all familiar with the poem and now will look at
it in a new way and remember the cross. The PPG thought the story would connect well with the congregation. Many members of the congregation did cite the poem as something they really appreciated about the sermon because it had special significance in their lives.

I hope the end result of the sermon is three-fold. I hope listeners learned that the cross can represent God’s victory over death and evil, that God is always with us even in our worst suffering, and that looks can be deceiving. I particularly hope the theme of “looks can be deceiving” sticks with the congregation throughout our series because it is one of the fundamental components of having a cruciform worldview. As we continue to study the cross, we’ll continue to see how the cross confounds our expectations and makes us look at and engage the world in new ways.
APPENDIX E

A Sample of Initial PPG Answers to Worldview Questionnaire

PPG Questionnaire- Alex Marshall

A worldview is a commitment, a fundamental orientation of the heart, that can be expressed as a story or in a set of presuppositions (assumptions which may be true, partially true or entirely false) that we hold (consciously or subconsciously, consistently or inconsistently) about the basic constitution of reality, and that provides the foundation on which we live and move and have our being.

1. How would you describe your worldview? How do you determine what you think about the world around you, how you act, how you define yourselves and others, and is the foundation of your being in this world?

   My view has been formed by my experience and lessons taught by family. I believe in love, forgiveness, and understanding. I try to portray these traits and not let the cynical world override me.

2. When you have to make tough decisions about how to act in a certain situation, what to believe, or what your opinion of something is, what factors come into play? Where does your mind go first?

   I believe in not judging, but trying to understand others. This does not mean I always agree, but I try to see both sides before trying to decide where I stand. I put first what I believe is right or wrong and how it will affect others.

3. Please share your thoughts, ideas, emotions, and experiences you have with the cross in church, in conversation, and in seeing it as a symbol.

   I understand the cross is the foundation and symbol of Christianity. I try to see it as hope and love to give me peace when I need it.

4. What about the cross are you uncomfortable with (how people talk about it, specific theologies of the cross, how it is used)?

   How it is used by people to justify their point of view and push their beliefs, not God. I know people who when they see the cross go the other way because they have had bad experiences with Church, myself included. It makes it a reminder of the bad not the good it represents.

5. Can you share what you heard about the cross in the last few sermons that the cross was mentioned and played a fundamental role in? How was the cross mentioned, why was it important to the sermon, what did you learn about it?

   ...
The cross can be used to represent positive and negative in the world. You mentioned how the Pastor who preached about beating the gay out of children uses the same cross as we do. It was important to the sermon because it showed you have to use your own mind and not just follow blindly because something shows itself as “Christian”. It made me mad knowing someone is to me using the cross as a shield to show hate and not love.

6. How would you define power? What does power look like to you?

Power is having the knowledge, personality, and means to influence people. To me a person that can sway people with their charisma, for good or bad is power.

7. How would you define wisdom? What does wisdom look like to you?

Wisdom is knowledge gained through experience. To me wisdom not always the smartest person but the person who uses experience, common sense, and knowledge to give advice or live life.

8. What are the primary factors that shape your identity and critique that identity? In other words, what helps you share who you are and who you want to be?

My family and the way they live their lives showed me what I wanted to be like. But I can be my own worst enemy in trying to get to that happiness.

9. What was your experience of last year’s series that brought teaching theological concepts and preaching together? What is one thing that you heard or learned that has really stuck with you and made a difference in your faith, relationship with God, or life?

I had a very positive experience. It made me listen & think better to the message being presented. The one thing that stuck with me is everything we did always pointed back to having a relationship with God as the foundation. It proved to me why I need Church.

10. What is the cross to you?

To me it is a symbol of God’s love, forgiveness, and acceptance for everyone and myself.

PPG Questionnaire- Alexis Maloof

A worldview is a commitment, a fundamental orientation of the heart, that can be expressed as a story or in a set of presuppositions (assumptions which may be true, partially true or entirely false) that we hold (consciously or subconsciously, consistently or inconsistently) about the basic constitution of reality, and that provides the foundation on which we live and move and have our being.
1. How would you describe your worldview? How do you determine what you think about the world around you, how you act, how you define yourselves and others, and is the foundation of your being in this world?

I think of my worldview as a place of intersection, where many theories, beliefs, values, and epistemologies connect to make up my identity. My worldview comes from all the cultures I’m a part of and the effects they have on me, the intensity of which depends on my level of participation in those cultures/contexts. I think I have a postmodern, Protestant, liberal, people-centered worldview that informs how I act and think. Under that general umbrella are certain values that have a big influence of how I look at the world around me, particularly feminism and my ideas about social justice that lead me to be critical of systems of powers and to interrogate my (and those around me) complicity in forms of domination and oppression. So, inextricable to all these other aspects of my worldview, are the realities of my white, middle-class position that is the foundation of my privilege in this world and influences how I act, how others act towards me, and how I define myself and others relative to my own position. Often our worldviews go un-interrogated and unexamined, so I think because of that there are a lot of assumptions that we make about the world and about other people that we aren’t even aware of- I’ve recently realized that not everyone shares my belief that everything people do/say is rhetorical and performative. When I write it out, it sounds stupid that I ever would have assumed everyone else had my same views about that, but that is the just the thing about our assumptions- we rarely are aware of them until we make them visible. I need to say that this is like THE hardest question, ever. To sum up- my worldview privileges values of respect, kindness, collaboration, reflexivity, pacifism, transparency, diversity, and justice.

2. When you have to make tough decisions about how to act in a certain situation, what to believe, or what your opinion of something is, what factors come into play? Where does your mind go first?

In general, I guess I have two filters- my mind and my heart. They are connected, of course, and inform each other but the process of making decisions is different for each. Typically, I go through the process of questioning, doubting, and verification using logic and evidence. But I also try and make the decision that aligns most closely with my values and that makes “soul-sense” even if it’s isn’t logical or common sense. I think that going with what is in my heart is what other people might call listening to that still, small voice of God or the Holy Spirit. I understand why people use that kind of language, though it isn’t necessarily the language I use but I certainly believe that God is present in any and every situation, difficult or not.

3. Please share your thoughts, ideas, emotions, and experiences you have with the cross in church, in conversation, and in seeing it as a symbol.

The rhetoric surrounding the cross is something that I have never really connected with to be honest. I connect and identify very strongly with Jesus’ life as told in the Scripture, but it is difficult for me to talk about any real positive emotions that I have with the cross as a symbol or
otherwise. The cross sometimes reminds me of things about certain strains of Christianity that I don’t like—the idea that suffering is good and purifying and that sacrificing one’s life is the best form of faithfulness or what not. The cross probably doesn’t play too much into my “spiritual life” except on Good Friday. To me, the cross has more significance historically and rhetorically.

4. **What about the cross are you uncomfortable with (how people talk about it, specific theologies of the cross, how it is used)?**

I hate how commercial the cross is in our culture. I think it’s become trivialized as people put it on t-shirts, bumper stickers, etc. It reminds me of the kind of nationalistic sentiment that I associate with the American flag and the idea of American exceptionalism. It’s so weird to me that the instrument of torture and death that was used to kill so many people is now seen on the back of people’s cars next to stickers of a perfect little nuclear family with Mickey Mouse ears on. So weird. Theologically—well, there are plenty of theologies of the cross that make me uncomfortable as well. I am uncomfortable when the idea of the cross as sacrifice isn’t connected to its roots in the Old Testament. I am uncomfortable when the idea of the cross isn’t situated contextually and historically.

5. **Can you share what you heard about the cross in the last few sermons that the cross was mentioned and played a fundamental role in? How was the cross mentioned, why was it important to the sermon, what did you learn about it?**

I honestly can’t remember. Whether or not that is my own poor memory or the fact that perhaps I was more involved in other aspects of the sermons, I’m not sure. But I’m not surprised that I wouldn’t remember it, because as I’ve mentioned above, apparently I’m not too keen on it which was never something I really thought too hard about until this questionnaire.

6. **How would you define power? What does power look like to you?**

I’m not really sure what sense of the word “power” this question is referring to, but this is what I think of. One its first level, power operates over people, denying them access or opportunity, dehumanizing and oppressing them. On a deeper level, power also works to normalize and make invisible the benefits of privileges of those who hold power. Power also works at the subconscious level, to socialize “un-powered” groups into acceptance/obedience to the rules of the powerful have set up in order to preserve their power. Power to me looks like institutions (like the church), systems of thought, (like theologies) and the dominant society.

7. **How would you define wisdom? What does wisdom look like to you?**
Wisdom is never cliché. It is neither common nor sensible. Wisdom is revelatory and transformative. These aren’t definitions but it’s the best I can do. Wisdom looks like my dad to me- something/one you can trust to tell the truth even if it hurts.

8. What are the primary factors that shape your identity and critique that identity? In other words, what helps you share who you are and who you want to be?

There are some aspects of my identity that I have chosen, and some that I am marked with because of the context I was born into. But truly, I think identities are fluid and contextual- we all perform our identity for certain effect, in particular situations. So I don’t think I have an “identity” as much as “identities,” though my worldview, as explored above, does contain a core set of values and discourse communities through which I communicate and share those values with the world.

9. What was your experience of last year’s series that brought teaching theological concepts and preaching together? What is one thing that you heard or learned that has really stuck with you and made a difference in your faith, relationship with God, or life?

It was a really interesting experience and it made me think a lot about the different ways people define theological concepts, and the different experiences that shaped the way people connected or didn’t connect with the concepts. I think the sermon series led people towards a particularly useful set of definitions and connected us as a community through the commonality of these new definitions. It made a difference to my faith b/c it is one of the few times I’ve experienced people being able to share different ideas about theology and faith without judgment and where people have been open to learning and sharing from and with one another.

10. What is the cross to you?

I’ve just realized that I’m not really sure. At the moment, it’s mostly a historical event and a comment on the way humans treat each other. Maybe as we go through this study and sermon series that will change.

PPG Questionnaire- Laurie Hartshorn

A worldview is a commitment, a fundamental orientation of the heart, that can be expressed as a story or in a set of presuppositions (assumptions which may be true, partially true or entirely false) that we hold (consciously or subconsciously, consistently or inconsistently)
about the basic constitution of reality, and that provides the foundation on which we live and
move and have our being.

1. How would you describe your worldview? How do you determine what you think about
the world around you, how you act, how you define yourselves and others, and is the
foundation of your being in this world?

I consider my worldview to be pretty open and accepting, looking for ways I am the same
as another group rather than focusing on differences. I respected the way my parents had
many different types of friends and that anything was fair game around the dinner table.
We were a family that valued conversation, discussion, and the written word. I look to
their example (perhaps sometimes unconsciously) of how they looked at their world and
how they described it.

2. When you have to make tough decisions about how to act in a certain situation, what to
believe, or what your opinion of something is, what factors come into play? Where does
your mind go first?

I probably try to decide what is morally right and base that on what I have been taught,
what I have read, and what I have observed. A book that I really like is How to Find
Your Mission in Life and the author uses the simple test “does it make the world a better
place or not.” Of course, I don’t always do the hardest things as I am kind of a people
pleaser and hate to upset anyone.

3. Please share your thoughts, ideas, emotions, and experiences you have with the cross in
church, in conversation, and in seeing it as a symbol.

I can remember reading Jim Bishop’s The Day Christ Died at an impressionable age
(maybe 12 or 13) and being both fascinated and appalled by his description of the way a
cross was designed to kill. I also loved the shape of the Celtic cross that seemed
particularly Presbyterian to me. When I see someone wearing a cross as a necklace or a
cross in a home, it reveals a Christian connection. I find myself rarely wearing a cross,
maybe from so many years working in public institutions which are to be non religious.

4. What about the cross are you uncomfortable with (how people talk about it, specific
theologies of the cross, how it is used)?

When people use the cross as a universal symbol for piety and religion, I find myself
uncomfortable. For example, I noticed in recent picture coverage of the shootings in
Aurora, CO that someone had fashioned 12 crosses which were surrounded by flowers,
pictures, messages, etc. It just seemed so presumptuous to assume that all 12 were
Christians and that the cross was meaningful to their families.
5. Can you share what you heard about the *cross* in the last few sermons that the cross was mentioned and played a fundamental role in? How was the *cross* mentioned, why was it important to the sermon, what did you learn about it?

I found it interesting that you pointed to the large illuminated cross behind the pulpit and were talking about how all Christians somehow assume that the cross and the Bible mean the same thing to all of us as well as believing their own interpretation is the “right” one. Your illustration of the concentration camp for gays under the rubric of the cross and the Bible stood out in my mind.

6. How would you define power? What does power look like to you?

Isn’t power supposed to be the ultimate aphrodisiac for women? I think there are various kinds of power, ruthless and iron-fisted as well as power wielded for good. I guess I would define power as having the ability to get the results one wants. Some power is earned (steps up the corporate ladder), some is inherited (royalty), and some is taken (political overthrows).

7. How would you define wisdom? What does wisdom look like to you?

I think of wisdom as something that takes time, knowledge, and life experiences to develop. I think it comes slowly, sometimes from searching for answers and sometimes by observation and deep thinking. Wisdom has a positive, even a kind connotation to me.

8. What are the primary factors that shape your identity and critique that identity? In other words, what helps you share who you are and who you want to be?

Family, education, work experiences, friendships, church, books, nature, probably lots more. Sharing who I am and want to be takes trust in those with whom I share. Some things about me I don’t want anyone to know, and those things shape my identity too.

9. What was your experience of last year’s series that brought teaching theological concepts and preaching together? What is one thing that you heard or learned that has really stuck with you and made a difference in your faith, relationship with God, or life?

10. What is the *cross* to you?

It’s a symbol of the Christian faith, a reminder of suffering, a beacon of hope, a cruel instrument of torture in a barbaric society. We were in Richmond, VA for Easter one year, and the church we attended with friends had the tradition of flowering the cross. It was wonderful to see that bare, wire-covered cross come alive with beautiful blooms.
PPG Questionnaire- Pat Weinkauf

A worldview is a commitment, a fundamental orientation of the heart, that can be expressed as a story or in a set of presuppositions (assumptions which may be true, partially true or entirely false) that we hold (consciously or subconsciously, consistently or inconsistently) about the basic constitution of reality, and that provides the foundation on which we live and move and have our being.

1. How would you describe your worldview? How do you determine what you think about the world around you, how you act, how you define yourselves and others, and is the foundation of your being in this world?

Frankly, I think the world is in a mess and only God will be able to straighten it out. If everyone would follow the 10 commandments given by God we would have a much better world.

I believe all people are created to God’s image and for the purpose of glorifying Him. It is difficult sometimes but I try to treat others keeping this fact in mind. I try to love others as He would love them.

2. When you have to make tough decisions about how to act in a certain situation, what to believe, or what your opinion of something is, what factors come into play? Where does your mind go first?

Discussion with people I feel are informed with the actual facts. Pray. My own judgment. I don’t feel that most TV or newspapers give us the full facts I pray to see if God will show me what is right or wrong. I gain insight through my daily devotions, Pastor Saxon’s bible study on Thurs. mornings and Connecting Points which gives me a basis for how God would have me make decisions.

My mind goes first to past experiences and then to my husband who spends a lot more time watching TV and the news and is therefore more informed about what is going on.

3. Please share your thoughts, ideas, emotions, and experiences you have with the cross in church, in conversation, and in seeing it as a symbol.

The cross, as a symbol, is a very important part of a Christian church. The empty cross is what defines us as followers of Christ. In my opinion, it has lost its symbolism in society because many people wear it as jewelry when it really holds no meaning for them.

4. What about the cross are you uncomfortable with (how people talk about it, specific theologies of the cross, how it is used)?

The figure of the crucified Lord that is used in the Roman Catholic Church rather than the empty Cross signifying that Christ has risen.
5. Can you share what you heard about the cross in the last few sermons that the cross was mentioned and played a fundamental role in? How the cross was mentioned, why was it important to the sermon, what did you learn about it?

I don’t really remember the cross being mentioned much except when Randy occasionally spreads his arms out and says, “God loves you this much.”

6. How would you define power? What does power look like to you?

Power is having the authority to control situations, conditions and other people.

7. How would you define wisdom? What does wisdom look like to you?

Good judgment- having knowledge. In some cases wisdom comes with age. You have had many life experiences and this often changes how you look at things. Experience also helps you to make wiser decisions.

8. What are the primary factors that shape your identity and critique that identity? In other words, what helps you share who you are and who you want to be?

Being interested in what is going on in the lives of other people and trying to make things better and easier for them. I believe in treating everyone the way I would like to be treated. I am an affectionate person and have a lot of love to share.

I want to be a better Christian, Wife, Mother, Grandmother and Friend. I want to be a blessing to all I meet and I pray for this everyday.

9. What was your experience of last year’s series that brought teaching theological concepts and preaching together? What is one thing that you heard or learned that has really stuck with you and made a difference in your faith, relationship with God, or life?

I now realized how much time and effort goes into preparing a sermon. It takes a lot of study and thought to make the message interesting to all age groups so it will keep people engaged through out.

You have to really know someone and have a relationship with them before you can have faith in them and know what they expect of you. Many of the problems we encounter in life are because of a lack of a relationship with God.

10. What is the cross to you?
A symbol to remind us that Jesus died that horrible death so that we might have eternal life and that he stretched out his arms in love for us. Jesus took our place and took our punishment for us.

PPG Questionnaire- Peggy Zibert

A worldview is a commitment, a fundamental orientation of the heart, that can be expressed as a story or in a set of presuppositions (assumptions which may be true, partially true or entirely false) that we hold (consciously or subconsciously, consistently or inconsistently) about the basic constitution of reality, and that provides the foundation on which we live and move and have our being.

1. How would you describe your worldview? How do you determine what you think about the world around you, how you act, how you define yourselves and others, and is the foundation of your being in this world? I feel my worldview may be a little narrow. I many times do not question why things are the way they are. I can be very naïve and am too trusting (my husband calls me a “Pollyanna”). I am the way I am based in large part on how I was raised and the challenges I lived through as a young child. I was influenced greatly by my life experiences, both good and bad.

2. When you have to make tough decisions about how to act in a certain situation, what to believe, or what your opinion of something is, what factors come into play? Where does your mind go first? When making the tough decisions, I first go to a conversation with God through prayer- just what is the right thing to do in a given situation? My opinions were formed by life experiences and in communications with all of the people I have encountered in my life. I draw on my basic knowledge of the situations.

3. Please share your thoughts, ideas, emotions, and experiences you have with the cross in church, in conversation, and in seeing it as a symbol. Until Pastor Randy explained his view of the cross (“I love you this much”), I really never thought of it as arms outstretched. It has always been a symbol of faith in God. I feel at peace with my cross necklace around my neck..it is always there. I feel protected with it on.

4. What about the cross are you uncomfortable with (how people talk about it, specific theologies of the cross, how it is used)? The only discomfort I feel about the cross is visualizing how Jesus was crucified on it and the pain and anguish he must have felt.

5. Can you share what you heard about the cross in the last few sermons that the cross was mentioned and played a fundamental role in? How was the cross mentioned, why was it
important to the sermon, what did you learn about it? Due to our traveling for the past few months, I have missed more Sundays than I would like. I really have nothing to draw on for this answer.

6. How would you define power? What does power look like to you?

   Power is the ability to get things done; to move people to act; to change things and make a difference. “Power” looks like a large group of people going in different directions…not knowing what to do…totally out of control. In steps an individual with confidence and the knowledge to take control of the situation. He calms the crowd and offers direction so that each and every one has a goal and a course of action to get there. This – all through the power of a man.

7. How would you define wisdom? What does wisdom look like to you?

   Wisdom is not necessarily smarts or book learning. It is the culmination of experiences of a life well lived using the results of those experiences as a basis for moving forward and helping others to do the same. “Wisdom” looks like an elderly sage surrounded by children of all ages who are thirsting for the knowledge and guidance he can share with them simply because he has lived and learned.

8. What are the primary factors that shape your identity and critique that identity? In other words, what helps you share who you are and who you want to be? My identity is shaped by upbringing….I have learned from the choices I have made in my life. I do tend to worry too much about what others think of me. My belief in God and my love of people are the impetus for me to share with others who I am and what life has taught me.

9. What was your experience of last year’s series that brought teaching theological concepts and preaching together? What is one thing that you heard or learned that has really stuck with you and made a difference in your faith, relationship with God, or life? Being part of this group has taught me to question things more. I know that you cannot believe something just because someone says it is so. I need to dig deeper to discover the basis of the belief and then apply it to my own life. This will help to broaden my somewhat narrow worldview.

10. What is the cross to you? I now see the cross as arms outstretched to take the full weight of our sin preventing us from toppling over and encouraging us to grow. The cross will always remind me of what sacrifices were made for all people.
The sermon is a product of the environment of judgment, categories, and division that I have witnessed growing among in the church, city, and nation. Christians have felt victimized and have victimized others. There are internal disagreements within the Church over a range of issues, with each side thinking the other side is leading the church away from the Bible and God. In the Presbyterian Church (USA), the 2012 General Assembly and the 2012 election have intensified this environment of division. Church members have made more and more judgments about individuals, positions, and groups that appear void of grace, hope, or love. In my presbytery, the Presbytery of Great Rivers, five churches have left the denomination in the past year, including a large church just five miles from the church I serve.

The PPG Study Before the Sermon

I emailed the twelve members of my Parish Project Group (PPG) the scripture we were going to be studying a couple of days before our scheduled meeting time and asked them to think about where Judges 3:31 and their lives intersect. I also asked them to come to the study with any questions the verse raised for them that might help us understand what God was saying through this text to the original audience and to us today.

The majority of the group came to the study with the same response: “Why are we studying this verse? What are we supposed to get out of it?” One member of the PPG, Mark, said, “I got out of it that there really are insignificant verses in the Bible!” Many of the PPG members agreed with Mark. So many other judges illustrate the pattern of Israel’s sin and God’s
deliverance that leaving out this one verse really wouldn’t matter much. I said, “It looks like Judges 3:31 is an easy verse to skip over, but looks…” and the PPG filled in the rest, “can be deceiving.”

PPG members shared a time when it was easy to know who was on whose side, who was good and who was evil, what was right and what was wrong. The PPG started sharing examples, too many to name, but many were from childhood, such as: GI Joe vs. Cobra, the cowboys who had the white hats versus the cowboys who had the black hats, the good witch Glinda versus the Wicked Witch of the West, Autobots and Decepticons, and many more. It was easy to categorize the heroes and villains by what they wore and even by their names.

We then talked about other groups and people we tend to categorize as good and evil. PPG members shared about the time after 9/11 when all Muslims were categorized and judged as enemies. Someone shared how Obama has been portrayed both as a great savior and as an evil enemy of the United States and all godly people. Some shared how they even judged other Christians as bad, like those of Westboro Baptist Church and many Southern Baptists. We all admitted to placing people into categories of good and evil, smart and dumb, sophisticated and classless, and many more. We shared judgments on a large scale and small ones we tend to make in our daily lives with neighbors, coworkers, and even other church members. We judge people’s qualities and their worth, especially their worth when it comes to how they affect us.

After establishing that we all judge people, we turned our attention back to Judges. I asked what questions the PPG had about the Shamgar and the verse after reading it. The PPG had some really great questions. Did he kill all six hundred philistines at once or over time? What is an ox goad? Who else delivered Israel?” Who was Anath? And who was Shamgar?

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104 The first sermon in the series was called “Looks can be Deceiving” and set up a principle of the cross that has carried through all the other sermons.
Some of the PPG had done research in commentaries and on the Internet, and they offered possible answers to some of the questions. One member read a definition of an ox goad he had found after another member asked what it was. Another member shared that she read that Shamgar was probably a paid mercenary.\(^{105}\) Then another person said he read that Shamgar might have been oppressed by the Canaanites and that was why he wanted to fight for Israel.\(^{106}\)

This was the first PPG meeting that people had done research on the scripture before the meeting, and it was really great to see. When I sent the email out about studying Judges 3:31, several emailed back to say there were anxious to see how this was going to tie to the cross or how a whole study could come from one verse. One member wrote, “This ought to be good!”\(^{107}\)

The study really got interesting when we talked about Anath. Three members of the PPG had learned that Anath was a Canaanite goddess and that Shamgar wasn’t an Israelite name. In my own research, I learned that Shamgar could have been something like a Canaanite prince.\(^{108}\) We talked about who the Canaanites were and how strange it was for a Canaanite Prince to deliver the people who had defeated his own people and taken their land. After those discussions, Laurie said, “So Shamgar was an unlikely deliverer.”

I said, “exactly,” and found the title for my sermon.

The best part of the study came as we talked about what it meant for Shamgar to be an unlikely deliverer. Don H. made the point that having to use an unlikely weapon and being an unlikely person showed how it was all God’s grace that truly delivered the people. He said, “It’s not about our own strength. You never know how the deliverance will come, whether it’s


\(^{107}\) Don Hartshorn, e-mail message to author, October 30, 2012.

\(^{108}\) McCann, 47.
trumpets around a wall or an ox goad. With God it seems like it’s never what you expect. You would expect the biggest warrior to go up against Goliath, but it was little David.”

Then the PPG began to think of other unlikely people in scripture. Every single person named at least one figure. The PPG listed Joseph the son of Jacob, David, Esther, Joseph of Arimathea, Rahab, the Persian King Cyrus, Gideon, Mary the mother of Jesus, Saul, Moses, the disciples, and a baby born in a manger named Jesus.

The PPG came to the conclusion that we have to be careful who we judge and how we judge because we never know who or what God will use to deliver or bestow a blessing on us. One member quoted scripture to add, “With God all things are possible.”

The PPG was pointing to a clear direction the sermon should go, so we began to unpack the concept of unlikely deliverers and not judging. PPG members began to share cultural references that illustrated the point ranging from Wicked to The Hobbit to Home Alone. We then moved from fictional illustrations to historical ones and personal examples.

As we finished our study, members kept thinking of other examples from scripture and literature that illustrated unlikely deliverers, like Boo Radley in To Kill a Mockingbird and Elijah to the widow of Zarephath. It was great to see people so engaged with the concept of how God can use anything and anyone. We concluded by agreeing that God is always bigger than our categories and any judgments we could make about anyone or anything. The PPG said it challenged them not to judge others and assume too much, but it was also comforting to know that God could be at work in anything or anyone.
APPENDIX G

**Sermon**: The World Tree and Our Worldview  
**Scripture**: Ezekiel 31:1-12 and Colossians 1:15-20  
**YouTube Link**: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b32bGcHCmXw

**The PPG Study Before the Sermon**

We started the PPG Bible study with trees. “Did you ever have a tree house or a special tree you played in as a child?” The PPG members shared memories of the important trees in their lives from the fig tree Christi climbed, to the giant oak that was always the base in tag for Mark, to the tree house Alex built for his son Neill. Alexis shared a story about how she and her siblings pretended to live in the trees in her grandparents’ back yard. They pretended to live in trees that were densely packed together and sustain themselves with only the things the tree provided: water collected in the leaves and empty stumps, food from the nuts, fruits, and eggs from the nests, and the shelter of the canopy. The idea of the trees providing everything we need was brought back up later in our discussion and became a theme for the study.

The PPG then talked about examples of the central role of trees in fiction: the tree in *Avatar*, the White Tree of Gondor in *The Lord of the Rings*, the tree house in *The Swiss Family Robinson*, the tree the Keebler elves bake cookies in, the tree in the movie *Fern Gully*, and many examples of characters from television and movies that live in trees. I used some of these examples in the opening of the sermon.

We transitioned from the important role trees play in works of fiction to the important role of trees in cultural and religious mythology. PPG members mentioned examples like evergreen trees in winter festivals and trees in Scripture, like the Tree of Life that is mentioned in Genesis, Psalms, and Revelation.
The PPG then began expressing their ideas on why trees have been, and still are, such important symbols in religion and culture. Laurie made an interesting point that trees are like time portals because they can be so old and have seen so many things. Kim, who had a smart phone, found that the oldest known tree is over 5000 years old and in California. I shared my experience of being in the Garden of Gethsemane with trees that were alive when Jesus was there praying, and what a profound experience that was.

Peggy said trees were a symbol of strength, Craig said trees reminded him to slow down, and Don said that Jesus died on a tree and that the Kingdom of God was compared to a tree that started out as a small seed.

I talked about the concept of a World Tree that is present in many cultures and religions. I focused on Yggdrasil, the tree in Norse mythology that connects and shelters all the worlds.

The PPG immediately recognized the connection between Yggdrasil and the text they read in Ezekiel 31. They knew Ezekiel was describing a world tree, but one that fell. We discussed the historical context of Ezekiel’s prophetic announcement against Egypt and the situation of Assyria.

“Why do you think God compared the kingdom of Assyria to a world tree?”

Laurie answered, “Because kingdoms can rise like trees and then fall like trees. They can seem sturdy, but then fall.”

That concept became a theme of the sermon: what can seem strong can still fall. The PPG listed other strong empires that probably considered themselves to be like a world tree, thinking the whole world ran through it: Rome, the dynasties of China, Alexander the Great’s empire, and modern ones like the British empire. All the empires have fallen.
The PPG also knew of people who thought they were the center of the world, but one way or another the world always seemed to bring them low again, like Lance Armstrong and Tiger Woods.

I asked the PPG if anything had ever happened in their lives that toppled and brought down how they thought they understood the world.

Don mentioned 9/11 first. He, like many others, thought we were safe in the USA from those kinds of terrorist attacks. He couldn’t think that way anymore. Christi talked about all the recent school shootings and how she always assumed when growing up that school was a safe place. Peggy mentioned the assassinations of JFK and MLK. She said she remembered where she was when she heard about each of those. As a child, she didn’t think something like that could happen to such good men.

I told the story of the first time I learned about death, which led others to share stories of how they learned that humans were so frail and how loved ones were not always going to be there with them. This was a powerful moment for the group, so I thought I should put it in the sermon.

So many things fall: people, empires, and worldviews. We want the stability that we think of trees having, but we know that trees fall too. Is there nothing that can stand the test of time and provide us with that sturdy foundation of life?

We turned to Colossians 1:15-20. The PPG noticed the language was similar to language about world trees like: how all the world is held together in him, the world was created through him, and all things are reconciled through him.
In a world tree, all the worlds are united, and in Christ all things are reconciled to God. In a world tree, earth and heaven are connected, and in Christ heaven and earth meet in one person who is fully human and fully God.

God raises up the cross to be another world tree, because through the cross God reconciles all things and so everything and everyone can find a home in the cross. Samuel Giere argues, “In a real sense, with Christ’s death on the cross, this “tree” rooted at Golgotha takes all the world into its branches, into Christ’s outstretched arms, and its roots extend even to the depths of hell (1 Pet 3:19–20). There is nothing outside of the scope of this cruciform world-tree.”

This is where the PPG brought back Alexis’s story of pretending to live in her grandparents’ trees. Laurie said, “The same way a tree can provide everything you need, Christ gives you everything you need.” In the cross of Christ, we have everything we need and are invited to live in Christ. Alexis said that idea reminded her of the statue, Christ the Redeemer, which stands over Rio de Janeiro in Brazil. She said, “The statue is Jesus standing there inviting all to live with him. All can live under his arms like the open arms of a cross, like the canopy of a tree.”

The study was very helpful in the formation of my sermon. I had examples with which to start the sermon, stories to share, and key concepts to focus on. I used Alexis’s story of playing in the trees at her grandparents house, the statue of Christ in Brazil, and a pop quiz tying in all the cultural references to trees the PPG mentioned in my sermon.

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APPENDIX H

A Sample of PPG Questionnaires Members Filled Out After the Series

PPG Questionnaire- Alexis (2\textsuperscript{nd} Time)

A worldview is a commitment, a fundamental orientation of the heart, that can be expressed as a story or in a set of presuppositions (assumptions which may be true, partially true or entirely false) that we hold (consciously or subconsciously, consistently or inconsistently) about the basic constitution of reality, and that provides the foundation on which we live and move and have our being.

11. How would you describe your worldview? How do you determine what you think about the world around you, how you act, how you define yourselves and others, and is the foundation of your being in this world?

I don’t know if I’d change my original answer about my worldview, though I might amend to add more detail about how my faith informs my worldview. I think I was perhaps overly careful in my first answer to show how my worldview (and I think all worldviews) are made up of lots of different intersecting “beliefs”, cultures, values, etc. Certainly my worldview finds a lot of value in what I’d umbrella label as “spirituality.” What I mean by this is that I think a big part of my being on this world is my journey towards understanding why I’m here and what is important to do while I’m here- and I find those answers in my belief.

12. When you have to make tough decisions about how to act in a certain situation, what to believe, or what your opinion of something is, what factors come into play? Where does your mind go first?

I can’t with any honesty say that the first place my mind goes when I’m making a decision is “what would Jesus do?” This is despite those little wristbands that were suuuper popular in the 7\textsuperscript{th} grade. I just don’t legitimately believe we can always know the answer to that question. But I think I can say with more clarity now that my beliefs about what the cross teaches me about who God is have a clear impact on the person I am trying to be.

13. Please share your thoughts, ideas, emotions, and experiences you have with the cross in church, in conversation, and in seeing it as a symbol.

I have really enjoyed our PPG bible studies where we’ve talked about the cross. It’s cool when we get into real conversations about things and go beyond just answering the questions Stephen gives us. It’s helped me see the cross as a symbol of my faith in a more positive light, for sure.
14. What about the cross are you uncomfortable with (how people talk about it, specific theologies of the cross, how it is used)?

There’s still theologies of the cross that cause me problems. I am not down with the way evangelical Christianity uses the cross and I probably never will be.

15. Can you share what you heard about the cross in the last few sermons that the cross was mentioned and played a fundamental role in? How was the cross mentioned, why was it important to the sermon, what did you learn about it?

It was brought up in all of the sermons you preached as far as I heard. Really more than anything that was actually said, the frequency of which the cross has been talked about in the sermon has forced me to re-consider the centrality of the cross to my beliefs as a Reformed Christian.

16. How would you define power? What does power look like to you?

I don’t think my answer to this has changed.

17. How would you define wisdom? What does wisdom look like to you?

I don’t think my answer to this has changed.

18. What are the primary factors that shape your identity and critique that identity? In other words, what helps you share who you are and who you want to be?

I have thought about who I want to be in light of the cross and it’s something that I need to continue to explore. I want to be a person who understands that looks can be deceiving and the delivers can come from unexpected places. I want to understand that God united us in a new humanity under the cross and that it covers us all in a sacred canopy (that is from Peter Berger, not me).

19. What was your experience of last year’s series that brought teaching theological concepts and preaching together? What is one thing that you heard or learned that has really stuck with you and made a difference in your faith, relationship with God, or life?
No change.

10. **What is the cross to you?**

The cross was not the punishment Jesus took on because of human sin but an act of radical love by God towards us, God’s children. This is the new story I’m telling myself based on this sermon series and while it is still a struggle, I think more often than not, I believe. I mean, I understand it intellectually, but I am working on believing it while I’m washing the dishes and while I’m praying and while I’m at work and when I’m going to bed. That kind of re-thinking and re-imagining takes more time to sink in and really stick I think.

**NEW QUESTIONS**

11. **Please share your overall thoughts on this series. How do you think it has changed your understanding of the cross, God, yourself, and how you interact with the world?**

I think for a long time I tried to separate what Jesus did in his ministry on Earth versus what he did by dying on the cross. This is because I didn’t want to be one of those Christians who went around all “do you believe Jesus died on the cross for your sins blah blah blah you’re going to heaven!” I think I had experiences that made me associate “the cross” with a kind of evangelism that didn’t jive at all with the image of Jesus I had from reading the Gospels. So I shied away from it and didn’t engage it. I think I told myself that I didn’t really need the cross—after all, I had Jesus. Yeah he died and came back, but I had his life and his teachings and his love so that was probably the most important part, right? I’ve really had to carefully interrogate those feelings during this series and it has been really fruitful for me. I think a cruciform worldview is not at all at odds with my own. Exploring the cross throughout this series didn’t make me worry or have to re-think my image(s) of God—I think that might have been a fear of mine, that if I had to look too long at the cross that I might see something about God that I didn’t like. I think that fear goes back to the idea that I’d heard in churches in college that made the cross seem like a penal substitution. At the center of this cruciform worldview however, is a loving God not an angry God. I think there is such magnitude and enormity to the ideas that Stephen expressed in his sermon that I paraphrase in the next answer. It adds a new dimension to God’s love for humanity and it adds a new dimension with how I look at humanity.

12. **What one thing stands out the most from any of the sermons that has really stuck with you and made an impact on your faith?**

That we are sinners in the hands of a loving God. God was angry at injustice and hate and Jesus’ death on the cross executed his wrath until God’s love was satisfied.

PPG Questionnaire- Craig Heiman (2nd Time)
1. How would you describe your worldview? How do you determine what you think about the world around you, how you act, how you define yourselves and others, and is the foundation of your being in this world?

I try to look at the world with love, in short. This is very difficult given many of the stresses of day to day life. I try to challenge myself to be more patient and not be quick to judge. As a result of trying to look through the lens of love, I try and base my actions on the golden rule. I try to see myself as an agent of this love and try to be a positive influence on the world around me. I often see others as a chance to have fun, I like to joke around a lot and I like to have fun with others. I see this as spreading joy.

2. When you have to make tough decisions about how to act in a certain situation, what to believe, or what your opinion of something is, what factors come into play? Where does your mind go first?

My mind first goes again to the golden rule. I try and evaluate all options and make the one that would be easiest to explain if someone came to me and asked "why did you make that decision?" I try not to get too caught up in overanalyzing, like I have a tendency to do, but try and feel it out, like which decision is most loving. As far as what my opinion of something is, it comes down to personal tastes i.e. in music I like quicker music with more percussive elements, and values i.e. sometimes I get annoyed by rap music because it is highly shallow, to say the least.

3. Please share your thoughts, ideas, emotions, and experiences you have with the cross in church, in conversation, and in seeing it as a symbol

This has undergone a big transformation. I no longer view it as a mere torture device, but rather a symbol of God's love and the great lengths he'd go to demonstrate this love for us. Sounds kind of silly, but it's almost like the horizontal bars are like God's arms, reaching out to welcome us. Of all examples in the whole series, watching Gandolf vs the flaming dragon helped illustrate this point very well and did a great deal to cement it in my mind.

4. What about the cross are you uncomfortable with (how people talk about it, specific theologies of the cross, how it is used)?

This is similar to the examples I used before, people using it as a badge or to indicate they are part of the "saved" crowd, or wearing it in a flashy showy manner. However now that my view of it has changed, I also think it's sad that many Christians do not have this same understanding because it's impact is lost without having and understanding as to why it is important. It is a sacred symbol, and while I don't think it is something to be ashamed of, I feel it becomes cheapened if overused.

5. Can you share what you heard about the cross in the last few sermons that the cross was
mentioned and played a fundamental role in? How was the cross mentioned, why was it important to the sermon, what did you learn about it?

Most recently it was used as a symbol of a world tree, something we can all gather under to experience community and share in the gifts of the world. Early in the series, "looks can be deceiving" was very foundational for the series too. It may have been necessary to lay the groundwork for the transformation of my view of the cross away from "torture device" to "symbol of God's love".

6. How would you define power? What does power look like to you?

Power, setting aside the physics and strength definitions, is simply the ability to influence the world around you. This can take many forms like someone who is naturally influential, to people who have important positions. More fundamentally, I think that power is also the ability to do great things. I think that my two example come together in that idea. A powerful explosion in space can take a great big star and explode it into a cloud of dust, a powerful weightlifter can deadlift 400 lbs, a powerful leader can influence others and make good decisions taking all relevant factors into consideration, and a powerful savior can defeat death. All of these things are extra-ordinary things. So I think that is what makes someone, or something, powerful.

7. How would you define wisdom? What does wisdom look like to you?

It is a kind of intelligence that comes with experience. I remember answering somewhat similarly before. I'd say that someone who is wise also has the courage to assert their own position and remain calm. But, sometimes true wisdom may look like foolishness if your wisdom is based on what God has done or calls you to do.

8. What are the primary factors that shape your identity and critique that identity? In other words, what helps you share who you are and who you want to be?

My identity is to try to be helpful to all. I think knowing how much God has done for me on the cross has shaped my identity to be a help to others.

9. What was your experience of last year’s series that brought teaching theological concepts and preaching together? What is one thing that you heard or learned that has really stuck with you and made a difference in your faith, relationship with God, or life?

I answered this question for the preaching a christian vocabulary series last time, but I suppose I'll go ahead and answer it for this year's series this time. I suppose, as stated above, the one moment that really was transformative to me, was watching Gandolf defeat the flaming dragon, and having that used as an analogy to explain Jesus' actions on the cross. I admit I did go into this series seeing the cross as a symbol of God's need for punishment, but I see it now as a sign of a selfless act, and the depths to which God will go to save humanity.
10. What is the cross to you?

To me, the cross is like I said in the last question. It is a symbol of self sacrifice and love. I'm somewhat struggling for an answer for this one if only because I have answered it already i.e. it is on it's surface a symbol of torture but in the context of Christianity it is a symbol of self love and sacrifice. It almost takes "inside knowledge" to get past this surface understanding, not "inside knowledge" in any conspiratorial sense but in a sense of learning the back story and why it is used. One thing I may not have said is it is a symbol of hope. Times can get tough, either on a personal level, or with some horrible national news (911, sandy hook) and the cross can be there as a symbol that there is a loving God who is ready to go through anything to help us through.

11. Please share your overall thoughts on this series. How do you think it has changed your understanding of the cross, God, yourself, and how you interact with the world?

I appreciated this series ability to offer a corrective for many misconceptions within Christianity, most notably the substitutionary atonement theory that has gotten so popular, and the idea that God is a God of punishment, not love. This has drastically altered my view of God for the better, and to put it simply it is a more beautiful, elegant, and simple view of God and Jesus. As far as how I interact with the world I have made more of an effort to act in love with the world around me, but with the hostility I deal with on a day to day basis (working in customer service), it's unfortunately hard.

12. What one thing stands out the most from any of the sermons that has really stuck with you and made an impact on your faith?

I wish I had a good answer for this one that I didn't already give above, twice nonetheless, (Gandolf vs dragon) but it was a very important moment for me. The "looks can be deceiving" sermon laid the groundwork, that sermon caused the shift in thinking, and subsequent sermons fleshed out the idea a lot more.

**PPG Questionnaire- Laurie Hartshorn (2nd Time)**

A worldview is a commitment, a fundamental orientation of the heart, that can be expressed as a story or in a set of presuppositions (assumptions which may be true, partially true or entirely false) that we hold (consciously or subconsciously, consistently or inconsistently) about the basic constitution of reality, and that provides the foundation on which we live and move and have our being.

1. How would you describe your worldview? How do you determine what you think about the world around you, how you act, how you define yourselves and others, and is the foundation of your being in this world?
I am fundamentally optimistic in my worldview believing that God is in charge and wants good for us. I determine what I think about the world around me partly from past experiences, from new information (newspapers, media, books), and from interactions with others. I define myself and others by my own family history and, ideally, by how I would want to be defined and judged. I believe that a beneficent God is foundational for me and for everyone else. I can see glimpses of his love, mercy, and goodness in the best traits of others.

2. When you have to make tough decisions about how to act in a certain situation, what to believe, or what your opinion of something is, what factors come into play? Where does your mind go first?

I think of how others I admire would handle the situation as well as what is the right (moral) thing to do. Would my actions make the world a better place, or not? Maybe the WWJD question comes in there a bit. That is not to say that I always take the high road. Prayer is helpful too.

3. Please share your thoughts, ideas, emotions, and experiences you have with the cross in church, in conversation, and in seeing it as a symbol.

We were staying at a motel in Clearwater in December, and the front desk staff and owner, men and women, (probably Pakistani) all wore cross necklaces. Interesting! Obviously they thought that would make guests more comfortable. But then I remembered the “Unlikely Deliverer” sermon and thought about how I was judging them. They might have been very devout Christians, yet I was judging them as just using Christianity for business.

4. What about the cross are you uncomfortable with (how people talk about it, specific theologies of the cross, how it is used)?

I don’t like the way the cross is paraded about to lend validity and unassailability to causes from wars to sporting events. It has been used to justify all kinds of horrible things (and still is used that way, unfortunately).

5. Can you share what you heard about the cross in the last few sermons that the cross was mentioned and played a fundamental role in? How was the cross mentioned, why was it important to the sermon, what did you learn about it?

The “In the Valley” sermon made me really think about pain and suffering in life and God’s intimate knowledge of it as well as his compassion and willingness to be with us in those dark places. The “Unlikely Deliverer” sermon reinforced Christ’s humanity and physical suffering as well as how unexpected he was as a redeemer, not what we thought at all. I think “The World Tree” sermon gave me the most comfort in terms of the cross contributing to the way that Christ serves as that world tree for us all, providing all we need, even our salvation.

6. How would you define power? What does power look like to you?
In my original response I equated power with status and sometimes money. Especially in a year of endless political campaigns, this was somewhat reinforced. But power can also be quiet and understated, with its roots in compassion, sacrifice, and kindness. Oftentimes these powerful heroes come to the fore long after their work is complete.

7. How would you define wisdom? What does wisdom look like to you?

Wisdom can have several roots: intelligence, thoughtfulness, compassion, and the ability to see the big picture. Sometimes it is a positive arising from negative circumstances or experiences. I think it helps to be smart, but that’s only one component. It’s also possible to be wise in some areas and foolish in others.

8. What are the primary factors that shape your identity and critique that identity? In other words, what helps you share who you are and who you want to be?

Family background, education, interpersonal relationships, education, and life experiences shape my identity. What I read, listen to, watch, and talk about with friends and family contribute to and sometimes change who I am and who I want to be. I would also say that being healthy and well-rested make it easier for me to be my “best” self.

9. What was your experience of last year’s series that brought teaching theological concepts and preaching together? What is one thing that you heard or learned that has really stuck with you and made a difference in your faith, relationship with God, or life?

10. What is the cross to you?

The cross is a real and horrible killing device devised by the Romans to control their subjects by fear and intimidation. Christ’s death on the cross transforms it to one of the world’s most powerful symbols of triumph and compassion.

NEW QUESTIONS

11. Please share your overall thoughts on this series. How do you think it has changed your understanding of the cross, God, yourself, and how you interact with the world?

I thought it was a powerful series that helped me to progress in my thinking about this ubiquitous but misunderstood Christian symbol. I have grown in my understanding of the cross’s meaning in scripture and in contemporary life.

12. What one thing stands out the most from any of the sermons that has really stuck with you and made an impact on your faith?

I think maybe two things – the idea of one’s changing worldview and the symbol of the world tree from Old to New Testament.
PPG Questionnaire- Don Hartshorn (2\textsuperscript{nd} Time)

A worldview is a commitment, a fundamental orientation of the heart, that can be expressed as a story or in a set of presuppositions (assumptions which may be true, partially true or entirely false) that we hold (consciously or subconsciously, consistently or inconsistently) about the basic constitution of reality, and that provides the foundation on which we live and move and have our being.

1. How would you describe your worldview? How do you determine what you think about the world around you, how you act, how you define yourselves and others, and is the foundation of your being in this world?

1\textsuperscript{st} Survey answers are italicized: I’m not sure I have a world view. I’m really a fairly shallow person. But, I read a number of newspapers and magazines and am a faithful listener to NPR. I have a number of erudite friends and lately, I’ve heard some pretty good sermons. More basically, I suppose my world view is based to a large extent on my upbringing. My parents were hardworking, honest Christians. I went to church every Sunday and participated in youth group—it was Methodist, but nonetheless, pretty good. I also think my years in the Boy Scouts helped form my character and hence my worldview. I have grown to see God in nature, from the vastness of the universe to the beauty and incredible diversity of his creations from shells, flowers, birds and mankind.

I think perhaps I see a more connectedness to myself and the world as a result of the sermon series. I at least try to see world events in light of the cross and our discussions. There may be more sameness in people from culture to culture than I had previously considered. I still interpret world and local event through the eyes my parents and others around me growing up, with major impact coming from my own experiences as a student, teacher, attorney and parent.

2. When you have to make tough decisions about how to act in a certain situation, what to believe, or what your opinion of something is, what factors come into play? Where does your mind go first?

Does it seem “right.” Is it fair or just to all concerned? I suppose all of my life experiences factor in, and being honest, “How does it affect me?” How would I feel? What would Jesus do? What would my mom and dad think of my decision?

I don’t think this has changed much.

3. Please share your thoughts, ideas, emotions, and experiences you have with the cross in church, in conversation, and in seeing it as a symbol.
I think the cross is probably the most powerful and meaningful symbol there is. I prefer the empty cross as a symbol over the “Christ on a cross” of the Catholics. Suffering and dying for us was amazing, but the hope offered by his rising from the dead was the ultimate gift. As the parent of a single child, John 3:16 is particularly meaningful to me and the cross is the symbol of that love.

I have come to appreciate the “centralness” of the cross in the sanctuary at UPC. I think about the meaning of the cross more in my daily life than before, and more as a way of living than of Christ paying a price for me.

4. What about the cross are you uncomfortable with (how people talk about it, specific theologies of the cross, how it is used)?

Praying to the cross as an icon disturbs me, as does the disturbing number of businesses that use it commercially. The cross or the flag as a sales tool is crass and tawdry.

I have come to notice more often the use of the cross in literature and popular culture, and I am not amused. It tends to be used for shock value, a part of some cult torture in a way that does not indicate the users place any other value on it.

5. Can you share what you heard about the cross in the last few sermons that the cross was mentioned and played a fundamental role in? How was the cross mentioned, why was it important to the sermon, what did you learn about it?

Sorry, nothing specific, but nothing that conflicted with my prior conceptions.

For one, the cross is symbolic of how God can work through unlikely heroes or saviors. How remarkable that Jesus, from a little jerkwater town could become the savior of all. Makes me realize or appreciate that all sorts of unlikely people who at first glance may have no great qualities of leadership can rise to accomplish great good. The old don’t judge a book by its cover. The cross was not the death of Jesus, but the birth of us all. The importance of viewing the cross not as a symbol of death but as the basis for a world view that provides support, comfort, direction and all we need in life.

6. How would you define power? What does power look like to you?

The ability to make happen what one wants to happen, whether on the world stage or on a local level. I don’t think of power as a physical force. Too often, it looks like money or bombast.

I would have to add that in light of recent uprisings, revolts and tragedies, I see power also as the ability and willingness to inflict pain, damage and turmoil as a part of what power looks like.
7. How would you define wisdom? What does wisdom look like to you?

The ability to make rational, reasoned decisions from a storehouse of character, knowledge and experiences and that transcends self-interest or gut reactions. Personified, maybe Billy Bob Boudreaux.

8. What are the primary factors that shape your identity and critique that identity? In other words, what helps you share who you are and who you want to be?

My background, learning, life experiences, friendships, who and what I love.

I would add: what I do and have done; the institutions to which I belong, like the church and Rotary; the groups that I support such as the church, Rotary, the Salvation Army, the Center for the Prevention of Abuse; etc. A little like: you are what you spend your money on. On reflection, I find way too much of that is on me. I want, I buy. Not a very positive critique.

9. What was your experience of last year’s series that brought teaching theological concepts and preaching together? What is one thing that you heard or learned that has really stuck with you and made a difference in your faith, relationship with God, or life?

10. What is the cross to you?

A powerful symbol of God’s love for us and of our hope for salvation.

And now, a symbol of a way to live, a way to view the world.

NEW QUESTIONS

11. Please share your overall thoughts on this series. How do you think it has changed your understanding of the cross, God, yourself, and how you interact with the world?

I have found the series and the preparations for each sermon to be very thought provoking. I see the cross more broadly than before. I have determined to try to avoid snap judgments about the value of people who perhaps don’t have the trappings of power. I can see the hand of God in more than I did before, even though I still like to think sometimes that I’m in charge of my life.
12. What one thing stands out the most from any of the sermons that has really stuck with you and made an impact on your faith?

That the cross is not just a symbol of Jesus dying for our salvation, but serves as a guide for living, a world view.
APPENDIX I

In the PPG’s last meeting following the “Preaching Toward a Cross-Rooted Worldview Series,” I asked members of the PPG to share how they thought the sermons changed their ideas or perceptions of God, the cross, and themselves. Some of their answers are below.

The cross was not the punishment Jesus took on because of human sin but an act of radical love by God towards us, God’s children. This is the new story I’m telling myself based on this sermon series and while it is still a struggle, I think more often than not, I believe. I mean, I understand it intellectually, but I am working on believing it while I’m washing the dishes and while I’m praying and while I’m at work and when I’m going to bed. That kind of re-thinking and re-imagining takes more time to sink in and really stick I think.\(^\text{110}\)

I appreciated this series’ ability to offer a corrective for many misconceptions within Christianity, most notably the substitutionary atonement theory that has gotten so popular, and the idea that God is a God of punishment, not love. This has drastically altered my view of God for the better, and to put it simply, it is a more beautiful, elegant, and simple view of God and Jesus. As far as how I interact with the world, I have made more of an effort to act in love with the world around me, but with the hostility I deal with on a day-to-day basis (working in customer service), it’s unfortunately hard.\(^\text{111}\)

To me, the cross has new meaning after this process. Before, I was almost ashamed about the cross. Now I see how it is the foundation of the church and it can, and must, be used to deliver God’s message of the Gospel…. I see the cross as a whole, not just just Easter [empty] cross, but also [the] Good Friday cross. Both were needed, and you can draw faith and inspiration from both.\(^\text{112}\)

Knowing that God can turn what looks like defeat into victory (Jesus’s death on the cross), can use anyone or anything to deliver the good news, and reconciles all things through Christ, has helped me see that my actions, however small they may seem, do have meaning in how God is perceived through me….I now believe that the cross is at the center of everything in the sense that Jesus’s sacrifice radiates out to show me that God is with us in all that we try to accomplish.\(^\text{113}\)

I see the cross more broadly than before. I have determined to try to avoid snap judgments about the value of people who perhaps don’t have the trappings of power. I can see the hand of God in more than I did before, even though I still like to think sometimes that I’m in charge of my life…. [The cross is] a powerful symbol of God’s

\(^\text{110}\) Alexis Maloof, e-mail to author, February 7, 2013.
\(^\text{111}\) Craig Heilmann, e-mail to author, February 7, 2013.
\(^\text{112}\) Alex Marshall, e-mail to author, February 7, 2013.
\(^\text{113}\) Mark Hanson, e-mail to author, February 7, 2013.
love for us and of our hope for salvation. And now, a symbol of a way to live, a way to view the world.\textsuperscript{114}

[The cross] should be the center of who we are, our actions, choices, thinking and speaking not just at church but always….I think this series was very worth while. There are many crosses around the church and people should now realize what they stand for and not just see them as a symbol of the church or pretty jewelry. The cross is not a symbol of death, but a symbol of God’s love, and should be the center of our faith. Our worldview should be rooted in the cross.\textsuperscript{115}

I know look at the cross in a more positive way. I try to lead a more positive life. The cross was always negative to me before this series.\textsuperscript{116}

\textsuperscript{114} Don Hartshorn, e-mail to author, February 7, 2013.
\textsuperscript{115} Pat Wienkauf, e-mail to author, February 7, 2013.
\textsuperscript{116} Debbie Hanson, email to author, February 7, 2013.
APPENDIX J

Sermon: Where Are All The Exorcists?
Scripture: Mark 9:38-40
YouTube Link: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9xQf_df6U1I

The PPG Study Before the Sermon

Where are all the exorcists? When I asked the PPG what they thought of when the heard the word ‘exorcist’ it was apparent all the exorcists are in the movies, the soap operas, and a few fringe churches. Yet, in reading the Gospel of Mark, I wondered if Jesus had a different answer. The PPG and I read Mark 9, with special emphasis on Mark 9:14-29 and 38-40. The disciples failed to cast out a demon and it is pretty clear Jesus isn’t happy with them. The disciples often fail in Mark’s Gospel, but this failure is particularly epic because of Mark 3 and 6. “Jesus’ disciples have been unable to do the very thing Jesus has only recently empowered them to do (3:15; 6:7, 13). They can’t exorcise the spirit; it has beaten them.”

Jesus’ disciples lose to a demon, an opponent they should have easily beaten. They were given all the tools and power to do so, but they still lost. It reminded some of the PPG about the recent college football upsets when some of the big powerhouse football schools lost to unknown smaller universities. Christ had given the disciples the power to exorcise demons and specifically sent them out for that task, and they just couldn’t do it. It reminded the PPG of the disciples failing at Jesus’ other simplistic but earnest request of them to stay awake with him in the Garden of Gethsemane.

I love the fact that the disciples, in the wake of such an epic failure can argue about which one of them is the greatest. One member of the PPG compared it to all the teams who didn’t make it to the NCAA tournament arguing about which one of them was the best team (we

have a lot of sports fans on our PPG!). We laughed though. We laughed and shook our heads at these clueless failures of disciples who couldn’t even do what Jesus asked them to do, yet thought they were totally awesome.

Then, in verse 38, we heard about a man who could do what Jesus desired, cast out demons, but who wasn’t one of the disciples. The disciples aren’t too happy about this. Members of the PPG shared that the disciples probably felt upstaged and were therefore angry. The PPG insightfully pointed out that jealousy often leads to anger and exclusion. The PPG quickly realized the disciples were worried about their position and their power. The problem wasn’t with the man casting out demons in Jesus’ name; “The problem as presented here is not that the man was not following Jesus, but that he was not following the Twelve (“us,” the established leadership of the church). Jesus’ answer is categorical: ‘Do not forbid him.’”

The disciples are jealous of this exorcist’s power, but also jealous that someone outside their group had that power. They thought only the followers of Jesus could policy be able to do good things in the name of Jesus and in the name of God. They were just arguing about who was the greatest, but they had all assumed it had to be one of ‘them.’ “Indeed, the disciples are disgruntled at 9:38-41 because someone is exorcising demonic spirits, the very thing they were just unable to do (9:18), without showing the courtesy of following “us” (9:38).”

Mark 9 is really a chapter about faith. Too often, we mistake faith for belief. The disciples made the mistake of equating faith with belonging. The PPG agreed that many people who go to church believe they must be Christian because they are a member of this or that Christian church. They were even convicted at feeling secure in belonging to the church. We all

often think our memberships or lineage is enough to qualify us for some status or reward, but Jesus even points out that being a child of Abraham is not enough (Matthew 3:9).

Faith isn’t accepting a community’s standard of belief and joining that community, it isn’t being a part of a group that claims to speak for God or work with God. Faith is trust. “Faith means confidence in the power of God to do the impossible on behalf of the community,”¹²⁰ like the outsider exorcist, like the woman with the twelve-year flow of blood who believes Jesus can heal her, like the father of the boy who believes Jesus can heal his son even when his disciples couldn’t.

The PPG wondered if they had that faith. Sometimes, they thought, but not always. They admitted not always acting in a confident manner that God really can do the impossible on behalf of friends, neighbors, or strangers. We all admitted that we tend to despair at the problems of the world, or pray about it, but not act in confidence.

We also all came to the conclusion that we are more like the disciples than we care to admit. We often do not do what Jesus asks from binding up the broken hearted, loving our enemy, tending his sheep, or freeing the captives, yet we often congratulate ourselves on being such good Christians. We get into competitions with other churches about who is the best, which offers the best programs, which denomination takes scripture more seriously or is more biblically based. In other words, we argue about who is the greatest in the midst of discipleship failures.

The comparisons, unfortunately, didn’t stop there. We ignore Christ’s command to cast out the demons, or fail at it, and then we try to stop others who are doing the things we can’t.

The PPG was in some disagreement over the reality of demon possession. The majority of the group didn’t believe in demon possession, as typically thought of and portrayed in the

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New Testament. It is one reason why the PPG laughed at my initial question about whether we needed more exorcists in the church, but then Gordon made an interesting point.

“If we believe God can inspire people and that we can be ‘filled’ with the Holy Spirit, cannot the same be possible with more evil spirits?”

Gordon’s comment got us all thinking about what exorcism might look like today. We talked about the potential of literal demons, but also the demonic forces that we may personify like Paul did. The PPG listed several demons in our world today that plague our world and ruined lives: misogyny, inequality, bullying, domestic violence, genocide, poverty, and sex trafficking. The PPG began seeing that exorcism can go beyond casting literal evil demons from individuals, but could encompass casting out the programs, attitudes, and actions that rob people of the lives God intended for them.

The sad reality for our group, and our church, is that we, like the disciples, fail to exorcise the demons of our time despite the power and the command to do so. The PPG affirmed our church’s success at welcoming all people in God’s love and in preaching the good news. We have increased our mission giving and the projects we support, but we faced the truth together that we engage in ‘safe’ missions. It is relatively easy and non-controversial to give money to this or that charity in town, to collect school supplies for kids and drop them off somewhere, or do some yard work at a local mission. Those are all good things and important things, but we are not fully engaging the demons through those things. We have not exposed the demons and we have not done enough to cast them out.

Jesus fully engaged the powers of the world though. Christ exposed and engaged the powers manifest in human institutions and lives, and the powers of sin and death, which threaten the life and relationship with God that God intended for us. Christ exorcises the demons and the
forces at work in the world that are contrary to God’s will. “This is what happens on the cross. Jesus exposes the powers, and by exposing them, as we read in Colossians, he ‘disarms’ them and frees us from their grip.”\textsuperscript{121}

Our time in study came to a close with the question, “Where are all the exorcists?” The committee believed there are individuals in the world putting it all on the line to expose the powers and restore life, but agreed the answer should be in the church, specifically in our church, and in this room. When Jesus asks his disciples to, “‘take up your cross and follow me,’ he is calling us not simply to bear the burdens of life or to practice ascetic self-denial but to take up the way of resistance to the Domination System.”\textsuperscript{122} The Domination System is the manifestation of the demonic forces at work in our world. Demonic forces are not just spirits that inhabit bodies; demonic forces are the attitudes, compulsions, and actions that destroy human life and dignity. We, as members of Christ’s church, as his disciples, as his hands and feet are given the power to, and sent out to, resist, expose, and exorcise those forces.

The study with the PPG gave me a lot to think about for the sermon. I used the same format I typically use, one of weaving personal and cultural stories and illustrations in with the biblical text. As always, the PPG gave me new insights into the text and ways to mediate a conversation between the congregation on Sunday morning and the story of Jesus, his disciples, and an outsider exorcist.

\textsuperscript{122} Ibid, 64.
APPENDIX K

A sample of PPG member responses to the sermon “Where Are All The Exorcists” using the sermon feedback form used for all sermons in this series.

PPG Sermon Feedback Form- “Where Are All the Exorcists?” Alex Marshall

1. What main image/idea did you leave the church with?

We are commanded by Jesus to be exorcists against evil in the world. We should look outside ourselves to help others in need. Our little part can make a difference and can help others do the same.

2. How did the cross tie in with the biblical text today? How did it help you understand the text on its own and as part of God’s larger story?

The cross is a symbol of Christ power over evil. It helped me understand that even I can affect change (be an exorcist) because of the Cross.

3. What did you learn about the character and nature of God in light of the cross today? How should and could that be reflected in who you are and what you do, and who the church is and what the church does?

That God has many uses for the Cross in our lives. That it can be used to help, heal, protect, give hope, love, & fight against evils of the world.

   To me it is a reminder of who & what we should be doing in our lives. That it is not only about what God can do for us, but we can do for others through God.

   As a Church we should be there for each other inside and outside the walls of the Church. We should be a Church that extends God calling to help all.

4. What did the cross unite for you today? How was the cross presented as the common chord or string for the pearls? (of scripture, of things in the church, of your thinking, your life, of different kinds of people, of ideas about God, etc)

The message today brought together for me seeing the Cross as more than one thing. It shows and reminds me that it is there for me when I need it and for me to help others when they need it.

The common thread I see is that the Cross can be used for more than idea. It always has a place in our lives from showing love, helping others, standing up against evil, strengthening faith, healing wounds, protecting, & giving peace.

PPG Sermon Feedback Form- “Where Are All the Exorcists?” Alexis Maloof
1. What main image/idea did you leave the church with?

The main thing I thought about after leaving church was the idea of being an exorcist—how this might look, what it might mean, and how to incorporate this identity of “exorcist” into my identity as a believer.

2. How did the cross tie in with the biblical text today? How did it help you understand the text on its own and as part of God’s larger story?

I think this sermon, even more than the last, did a good job of making the biblical text relate to God’s Great Story and the cross. Christ’s death as the ultimate exorcism

PPG SERMON FEEDBACK FORM- “Where Are All The Exorcists?” Craig Heilman

1. What main image/idea did you leave the church with?

I left the church with the idea that we are all exorcists. Even if we don’t realize it. Erin is an exorcist to children who are having trouble in their academic and/or personal lives. I am an exorcist to shelter dogs who are starved for love and attention. And lots of our exorcising demons come in less structured ways, like just listening to a friend or family member who is going through a hard time.

2. How did the cross tie in with the biblical text today? How did it help you understand the text on its own and as part of God’s larger story?

I liked that the cross’ relevance to this sermon was specifically explained at the end of the sermon. The cross became the place where Jesus performed his ultimate exorcism, his exorcising of death and sin from the world.

3. What did you learn about the character and nature of God in light of the cross today? How should and could that be reflected in who you are and what you do, and who the church is and what the church does?

I learned that we are called not to merely be consumers of Christianity. That with that faith comes the responsibility to follow Christ’s lead and make the world a better place, and to do it not for our own glory, but out of love for others.
4. What did the cross unite for you today? How was the cross presented as the common chord or string for the pearls? (of scripture, of things in the church, of your thinking, your life, of different kinds of people, of ideas about God, etc)

This message gives a little more detail as to what Jesus’ message to the world was, and by extension, what the cross is meant to symbolize. In addition to selfless love, it also means responsibility to exorcise demons from the world. It means to find new ways to be exorcists, and help encourage others to be exorcists as well.

**PPG SERMON FEEDBACK FORM- “Where Are All The Exorcists?” Don Hartshorn**

1. What main image/idea did you leave the church with?

I've got work to do. I'm surrounded by demons about which I do little. I realized that while I have been empowered to cast them out, I just don't. No one has kept me out of the "Club," but I have chosen to sit on the bench and let Nicholas Phillips run with the ball. I wonder, does giving money to a cause for fighting demons count as helping to cast them out? I hope so, but now I rather doubt it. Thanks a lot. There goes that comfort zone. I was also encouraged to think about what could be accomplished if we all chose to be exorcists.

2. How did the cross tie in with the biblical text today? How did it help you understand the text on its own and as part of God's larger story?

As Christ drew nearer to the cross, he knew, as we should, that continuing his work, that casting out the world's demons, was not a job for a select few, but for all believers who would work in his name. Because of the cross, if we accept its power, we could do as the unnamed exorcist in Mark did. It's up to each of us, not just the elect, to make the world a better place. You mentioned only a few of the demons we are confronted with every day. The exasperation Jesus no doubt felt, even if he was perfect, was clear in the story. He knew that as he was called upon to leave the world in the flesh, those he left would have to carry on, and the Club was already forming and drawing up membership requirements.

3. What did you learn about the character and nature of God in light of the cross today? How should and could that be reflected in who you are and what you do, and who the church is and what the church does?

That God is inclusive. That he is loving. That he is compassionate. That he is demanding. That nature should be reflected in us, in me, in how we go about casting out the myriad demons besetting the world we live in. For me, it's easy, or comforting, to let those higher up in the Club, the in-crowd, within the church or community to take the lead, rather than doing on my own what I can, as did the unnamed exorcist in Mark. I am all too happy to waddle up the aisle, when I should be flying.
Clearly, for the church, we are called to be inclusive in letting others in the Club, and we are called to serve by casting out the demons we see around us. I think there's a lot of that here already at UPC. We allow ducks, geese, peacocks and sparrows to join us, but we need to do more to get the whole flock to spread its wings and fly.

4. What did the cross unite for you today? How was the cross presented as the common chord or string for the pearls? (of scripture, of things in the church, of your thinking, your life, of different kinds of people, of ideas about God, etc)

By dying for us all (whosoever believeth) on the cross, we were all invited into the Club. The sinners, tax collectors, the whole lot of us, are called to serve, to cast out demons. And there are plenty of them as you noted Sunday. We're all called to join the Club and get to work.

PPG SERMON FEEDBACK FORM- “Where Are All The Exorcists?” Pat Weinkauf

1. What main image/idea did you leave the church with?

All Christians are called to be exorcists and we are all falling down on the job. People today think we don’t need them anymore but they are needed everywhere. We are called to be imitators of Jesus and He has given us the power to be exorcists like Him. There are still lots of demons in this world- bullying, prejudice, child abuse, sexual abuse, people going hungry, greed and many, many more. If we only ask Jesus is there to help.

2. How did the cross tie in with the biblical text today? How did it help you understand the text on its own and part of God’s larger story?

There is power in the cross because Jesus died there. It is not just a symbol inside the church, but it has given us the power to defeat the evil demons in this world. We need to use its power to do so. We need to take the cross out of the sanctuary and let its light uncover all the demons.

3. What did you learn about the character and nature of God in light of the cross today? How should and could that be reflected in who you are and what you do, and who the church is and what the church does?

Christ died on the cross to give us the power to be more like Him. We should follow his example and have more faith in what we can do. It is not necessary that everyone goes to the same church or be one of us to do good in the world. Maybe they can accomplish things we can’t. Service is certainly more important than membership. It is important that we follow Jesus and not others.

Jesus’s authority over the demons demonstrated His deity because He has power over the super natural world. If God is for us who can be against us.
4. What did the cross unite for you today? How was the cross presented as the common chord or string for the pearls? (of scripture, of things in the church, of your thinking, your life, of different kinds of people, of ideas about God, etc)

We need to take the cross and the power Christ gives us and show the world how they should live.
All things are possible for those that believe. The cross should remind us that we are to go out and preach the good news and cast out demons using the power that Christ has given us. Let us not be like the ducks that could fly but only walked.
APPENDIX L

Title: The Side of the Road
Scripture: Luke 10:30-37
YouTube Link: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R_a-A5HnwZg

The PPG Bible Study Before the Sermon

I began the PPG’s time of study by asking them what images or ideas they have of “the side of the road.” Responses ranged from the image of a car broken down on the side of the road to hitchhikers. I asked what memories they had of the side of the road, and PPG members shared times they had to pull of the road for car troubles or to calm misbehaving children down. One member shared about a time he picked up trash along the side of the road for an adopt-a-highway program. He said he noticed everything he picked up was something from an unhealthy lifestyle: beer cans, fast food wrappers, chip bags, cigarette butts, etc. Craig’s point made me think about what we expect to find on the side of the road: waste, and that was a key concept in my sermon. We can learn a lot about our society by what we find at the side of the road, but I also brought it in when talking about how God finds us on the side of the road surrounded by the evidence of our sin.

A woman on the PPG, Carla, told the story of her daughter having a flat tire just the week before. She pulled off into a weigh station where a State Trooper was parked, but the Trooper refused to help her. She had to watch truck after truck, pass her without stopping to help. I couldn’t help but be reminded of the Priest and the Levite. These were stories told that fit in so well with my sermon, before they even knew which passage we were studying that night.

We read the parable together including the introductory text about the lawyer and his question. We discussed how the parable was an answer to a question about semantics. As we discussed the parable, we identified all the characters and what we knew about them. The PPG
soon got the message that we really don’t know much about anyone in the parable. We don’t know their history, their motivations, why they were on the road, or much beyond their immediate actions in the story. The PPG had a lot of interesting theories about why the man ended up on the side of the road. They had ideas on why the Priest and Levite passed him by, and why the Samaritan was there and why the Inn Keeper would trust the Samaritan, but in the end it was all conjecture. We only know that a Samaritan saw a man on the side of the road and that other people who saw him passed him by.

Together, we discussed times we have stopped for someone on the side of the road and what the results of those meetings were. We also discussed times we purposefully passed by and why we might have done that. Each member had stories of helping someone and stories of passing by. Stories were shared of buying someone a hamburger, giving someone a ride, or helping someone with a hotel stay. The PPG made the point that it always costs something to stop whether its money or time. We discussed all the ways stopping cost the Samaritan: time, effort, supplies, and money.

I then led the PPG to think about the side of the road a bit more metaphorically and had them identify other people who might be living on the “side of the road,” today. One woman told the story of her daughter who is in a lesbian relationship. The daughter is at the side of the road unable to get married, while so many of her friends pass her by on the way to the wedding chapel. Someone else shared about some of their friends in their 50’s who’d lost their jobs and were unable to even get interviews anymore because of their age. PPG members continued to share those who are on the side of the road in life like the lonely elderly in nursing homes, addicts who have hit rock bottom, those with chronic diseases who have little or no hope of recovery, and victims of bullying and bigotry.
Since Jesus told the story I asked if the PPG could remember any times that Jesus stopped on the side of the road. It took a moment, but then the answers came flying: healing blind Bartimaeus, the hemorrhaging woman, the widow whose son had died, the ten lepers, calling the disciples from their nets and Matthew from his tax collecting booth, and so many others. We talked about what it might have cost Jesus each of those times to travel the side of the road or stop.

Has Jesus ever been on the side of the road? The PPG was quick to respond because they now expect to see how the cross ties into every sermon. They didn’t miss their cue to respond that Jesus hung from a cross on the side of the road outside Jerusalem on a hill called Golgotha. There were those who passed by and never gave him a thought and there were those who stopped to mock him. Depending on which Gospel there were some or none of Jesus’ disciples and friends there with him at the side of the road.

This is where the cross began to really affect our understanding of the text. Jesus Christ did most of his ministry on the side of the road and died there, so we wouldn’t have to. Jesus, even though he knows exactly why we ended up on the side of the road unable to save ourselves, still stops there for us. Jesus hangs on the side of the road so we can get back on the narrow path and enter God’s kingdom through Christ, the narrow gate. Christ leads us off the side of the road and leads us home.

There is that message of assurance and grace of a good neighbor, Christ, who always meets us on the side of the road when we read the parable with the cross as the common chord, which is certainly something to celebrate. There is also a challenge that is celebratory as well.

One PPG member said that when she was on the side of the road in her life she felt God was sending people to her to take care of her and help her off the side of the road. Since the
parable is a response to a question about what we must do to inherit eternal life, there must be some demand on our lives in the parable. We are called to “love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love our neighbors as ourselves.” If we love God in this way God is going to send us to the side of the road to help those in need. If we follow Jesus that means we have to be willing to take up our cross and follow him. His ministry led him to the side of the road and that’s where we must follow. We are not just the recipients of God’s gracious help, we sometimes are used by God to be that gracious help. That is both a challenge and a celebration.

I told the PPG about my class last summer, Preaching As Celebration, and briefly went through the idea of how a sermon should move from situation, to complication, to resolution, and end in celebration, so I asked the PPG to identify each of those things in the text.

The PPG identified the situation as a man travelling on a road. The complication was that he found himself in a ditch naked, beaten, and robbed while many passed him by. The resolution was that a Samaritan man stopped, healed him, and led him off the side of the road to an inn. The celebration was a little harder for them to determine. There were a lot of suggestions, but they finally settled the celebration that there is help for those at the side of the road because God sent Christ to the side of the road for God and us continues to send Christ’s followers to the side of the road. We can celebrate because we are never on the side of the road alone.

While we were in Bible Study one of the members, Craig, asked, “Wasn’t like all of humanity on the side of the road before Jesus.” I said, “exactly,” and started explaining how God came to us on the side of the road in our sin and God preached on the side of the road and died on the side of the road, etc. When I was done with my mini-sermon Carla said, “Well I think you’ve got the title of your sermon!”
The study with the PPG was key to the formation of the sermon. Their insights, stories, and reactions to my stories and thoughts helped me to craft a sermon that would be relevant and challenging for the congregation, but also celebratory.
APPENDIX M

A sample of PPG member responses to the sermon “The Side of the Road” using the sermon feedback form used for all sermons in this series.

PPG Sermon Feedback Form- “The Side of the Road”  Alex Marshall

1. What main image/idea did you leave the church with?

Not to judge and to remember we have all needed help and one time and not to forget to help others. I don’t always recognize that inner voice that reminds me to help others. I should not dismiss that voice; I should embrace it and know it is God.

2. How did the cross tie in with the biblical text today? How did it help you understand the text on its own and as part of God’s larger story?

It help me in symbolizing how the cross could be viewed as “being on the side of the road” and how easy it can be to pass it by. On it’s own it reminded me of situations I’d been in when I needed help and also when I offered help. It showed how God is everything and we should not just pass it by.

3. What did you learn about the character and nature of God in light of the cross today? How should and could that be reflected in who you are and what you do, and who the church is and what the church does?

It reinforced my belief that God loves all the same no matter our situation and we are all the same in God’s eyes. God’s love for us is almost too great to understand and that we should strive to emulate that love to others as he has shown to us. It also gives us a view of the world that, we as the Church, should remember and exemplify. Our actions as a Church should always keep that love first.

4. What did the cross unite for you today? How was the cross presented as the common chord or string for the pearls? (of scripture, of things in the church, of your thinking, your life, of different kinds of people, of ideas about God, etc)

The sermon further united the grace & love that God has shown us through the cross. The common chord today was how the cross showed God’s love for us and our ignoring the cross “on the side of the road” at the same time. The cross shows us God’s love for us individually, reminds us everyone is deserving of God’s love, and sets the example for us to follow to help others in showing God’s love for everyone.

PPG Sermon Feedback Form- “The Side of the Road”  Bill Hall
1. *What main image/idea did you leave the church with?*

I left church with the idea that things (people, etc.) are “on the side of the road” because they have no other place to be. Furthermore, we were reminded that it is our job as practicing Christians to help those who find themselves on the side of the road. It is what we were asked by Jesus to do—to love our “neighbors.”

2. *How did the cross tie in with the biblical text today? How did it help you understand the text on its own and as part of God’s larger story?*

The way of the cross was on the side of the road and that’s where Jesus was—by choice. Unlike those who are usually on the side of the road, Jesus could have put himself in some other place. He did not have to be on the side of road because he had no other choices…. Jesus chose to be on the side of the road and we should want to choose to help those (in whatever ways are suitable) whom we find on the side of the road.

3. *What did you learn about the character and nature of God in light of the cross today? How should and could that be reflected in who you are and what you do, and who the church is and what the church does?*

As Jesus said to the lawyer in answer to his question, everyone on the side of the road is your neighbor. You are responsible for them. The nature and character of God is that he puts those on the side of our roads and sometimes we might find ourselves on the side of the road and we would expect followers of Jesus to care for us and help us when we find ourselves on the side of the road. And, we should expect to help those we find on the side of the road. That is also what churches should be doing here in Peoria, in the U.S., in the world.

4. *What did the cross unite for you today? How was the cross presented as the common chord or string for the pearls? (of scripture, of things in the church, of your thinking, your life, of different kinds of people, of ideas about God, etc.).*

The common chord is that the cross symbolizes the importance of the sacrifice God/Jesus made for our us and our sins. I believe that the sermon was also about how difficult it is to help someone who is on the side of the road. They are often different than we are (or at least appear to be), they are often not someone we might pick as friends, they may have needs we don’t understand or don’t know how to deal with, helping those on the side of the road are “inconveniences” which is why we don’t often stop to help someone on the side of the road. If we are to help people with needs who are on the side of the road, we have to interrupt our lives, give of ourselves and perhaps our funds, spend time helping them to get off of the side of the road, etc.

PPG Sermon Feedback Form- “The Side of the Road” Pat Weinkauf
1. What main image/idea did you leave the church with?

   Everyone is our neighbor – show mercy and love to all. You never know what is going on in their lives. They may have lost hope, faith, joy or love, their sense of direction or purpose. We have all been on the side of the road and unable to save ourselves. God has reached out his hand to save us through a friend, family member or neighbor.

2. How did the cross tie in with the biblical text today? How did it help you understand the text on its own and as part of God’s larger story?

   Christ lived and died on the side of the road to save us. He didn’t deserve to die on the cross. He could have saved Himself but choose to save us. His friends and disciples deserted Him, passerby’s mocked Him but He will never desert us. Sin should be on side of the road not us.

   4. What did you learn about the character and nature of God in light of the cross today? How should and could that be reflected in who you are and what you do, and who the church is and what the church does?

      We all live on the side of the road and God will never pass us by on the other side of the road. Through mission and friendship we should show mercy to all in need. Christ died so we would know God loves us.

   4. What did the cross unite for you today? How was the cross presented as the common chord or string for the pearls? (of scripture, of things in the church, of your thinking, your life, of different kinds of people, of ideas about God, etc)

      Jesus lived on the side of the road and that is where He finds us. There is always hope when you follow Jesus. You will never be on the side of the road again.
APPENDIX N

A sample of PPG Member responses to the final questionnaire sent at the end of the “Preaching Christ as the Common Chord” project.

FINAL QUESTIONS- Alex Marshall

1. This year the sermons didn’t always overtly have to do with the cross, but the cross was brought in at the end to shine new light on a variety of topics. Did you find it helpful to have every sermon, whether it was on mission, stewardship, Christian identity, always go back to one thing to explain it and proclaim the good news about it?

   Yes, it helped me refocus on the Cross every time. It also helped increase my knowledge of the Cross in ways I never really saw or realized before the series.

2. How have you seen and understood the cross in new ways this year? Has that affected your life or how you see some of the work of the church?

   Yes, I have. It is a constant reminder of what we should be achieving as a church and in my own life. It makes me think before I make decisions for the Church and my life.
   I guess it has become more of a mental compass for me.

3. Has your view about any part of your life, action you take, or any ministry of the church changed in response to the sermons on the cross the past two years?

   It has helped me look to the Cross as more than a simple symbol, but as a complex one with many meanings and answers. As I said before it is a mental compass for me now. It always helps center me now when I have difficult decisions or choices to make.

4. How does the cross inform and affect your life today, beyond the knowledge of salvation, how does it affect what you think and what you do?

   I look to see if I can see the Cross in my actions or the Churches actions, if not I have to questions if it is the right way to proceed.

5. Finally, please share your thoughts and experiences of the two series on the cross, these past two years. What have you gotten out of them? How has it affected your faith and your actions as a disciple of Christ? Any stories or illustrations you can share would be great. You could also share which sermons have stuck with you the most and why. Just share anything you think is important about the past two years worth of sermons and why they have been important for you (if at all).

   I already shared about me not wearing the cross, I sent you an email with that story. I think that the entire series has helped me grow my faith more than I ever have in my life. It has helped open up my mind to God and the complex different meanings that can be found in the
Cross. I always got something out of each sermon, but the ones that stick out to me are "You did it to me", "the side of the road". I know they are 2 of the more recent ones. I think they mean more because the other sermons opened me up more to the message of the Cross. I was ready and willing to accept the message when you preached them. I will say I that curiosity was the reason I first agreed to help with the PPG, but that changed as we went along our journey. I will miss the discussions and fellowship I've had with everyone.

**FINAL QUESTIONS- Laurie Harsthorn**

1. This year the sermons didn’t always overtly have to do with the cross, but the cross was brought in at the end to shine new light on a variety of topics. Did you find it helpful to have every sermon, whether it was on mission, stewardship, Christian identity, always go back to one thing to explain it and proclaim the good news about it?

   Well I love unifying themes, so this idea was a hit with me. I think always coming back to the cross enlarged the way I thought about it and kept it active in my mind.

2. How have you seen and understood the cross in new ways this year? Has that affected your life or how you see some of the work of the church?

   You presented the cross in some very different ways this year, as a source of healing and helping, as a source of strength as we seek to take a stand against evil in the world. These are not things I would have associated with the cross. It made me look at the choices we make as a congregation seeking to make a difference in our community.

3. Has your view about any part of your life, action you take, or any ministry of the church changed in response to the sermons on the cross the past two years?

   The sermons keep me looking at what we are doing as a church to share the kind of love the cross represents. UPC leadership is actively seeking out opportunities for community outreach to provide real help for those facing pain and loss. Your sermon about where are the exorcists was both powerful and challenging.

4. How does the cross inform and affect your life today, beyond the knowledge of salvation, how does it affect what you think and what you do?

   There is more than salvation in the cross. You have presented it as a powerful example of love and strength that we can draw upon as we seek to become our best selves.

5. Finally, please share your thoughts and experiences of the two series on the cross, these past two years. What have you gotten out of them? How has it affected your faith and your actions as a disciple of Christ? Any stories or illustrations you can share would be great. You could also share which sermons have stuck with you the most and why. Just share anything you
think is important about the past two years worth of sermons and why they have been important for you (if at all).

Sermons that particularly stuck with me include Looks Can Be Deceiving, An Unlikely Deliverer, Sinners in the Hands of a Loving God, The World Tree, The Hills Have Eyes, and Where Are the Exorcists. I thought it was very moving to share how Don and Edna Baker faced her death and the way that UPC members surrounded them with God’s love and comfort. The Uncle Drew film clip was memorable. And I think the Bible study prep we did for the World Tree sermon was the most interesting and involving one for me.

Being a part of the PPG has been an encouragement for deeper involvement in the life of UPC for me. Partly this has been possible because I have more time to give at this season of my life. But I have felt perfectly free to say no to lots of other things. I find myself saying yes a lot to things at UPC in large part because both the talk and the walk are all about love, healing, deep thinking, and sharing with others in the larger community. Your cross-centered viewpoint has underlined all of these things.

I find myself noticing physical cross symbols all the time – in jewelry, on church buildings, in newspaper and yellow page ads, beside highways where accidents have occurred. I find myself thinking about the cross less in terms of sacrifice and more in terms of hope, a mental shift.

**FINAL QUESTIONS- Carla Hall**

1. Yes, it always was a good reminder for me that Christ dying on the Cross means so much more than just the fact that he did that to save us from our sins and secure our place in heaven.

2. It has definitely helped me see the various aspects of the cross and yes, I think it has affected the church in it's mission and vision.

3. Yes, there have been several sermons that have changed the way I view my life and its purpose. I'm much more aware of my responsibility to serve others as a result of understanding that the cross calls us to that and many other things.

4. The cross has forced me to look beyond myself and to search for ways to be Jesus' hands and feet in ways I've never before thought about.

5. I have grown so much from your sermons and find myself remembering one or two or sometimes more points that you have made each Sunday. Your ability to tell stories and then relate them biblically and personally to me has been an inspiration to me to try to be the whole Christian that Christ dying on the cross has called me to be. I have felt challenged by the Exorcist sermon to be an exorcist for others but to also exorcise some of my own demons. Your slant on the good Samaritan story gave me new understanding about the disenfranchised and
helped me see myself from their eyes and it's not a pretty picture. It challenged me to not look
the other way but to help when I can and to go beyond that and seek out opportunities to help
others. I think this has been a challenge for our church also and one that it needs.

FINAL QUESTIONS- Pat Weinkauf

1. This year the sermons didn’t always overtly have to do with the cross, but the cross was
brought in at the end to shine new light on a variety of topics. Did you find it helpful to have
every sermon, whether it was on mission, stewardship, Christian identity, always go back to one
thing to explain it and proclaim the good news about it?

Yes! Without it we have nothing. It is what unites the old and new testaments and
everything in the church and us to God. The empty cross is what defines us as a Christian

2. How have you seen and understood the cross in new ways this year? Has that affected
your life or how you see some of the work of the church?

I now see it as a symbol of how much God loves us, and not as the means of a cruel death.

3. Has your view about any part of your life, action you take, or any ministry of the
church changed in response to the sermons on the cross the past two years?

I now realize that the whole world is our neighbor and that we are suppose to love and
help all. I used to think we should spend our money to help those here in Peoria and not all over
the world.

4. How does the cross inform and affect your life today, beyond the knowledge of
salvation, how does it affect what you think and what you do?

We must love and forgive every one just as Christ does for us. What we do to others we
also do to Christ. It should be the center of our lives not just the center of the church. The cross
did not define Christ as a victim or criminal but as hope and salvation for the world.

5. Finally, please share your thoughts and experiences of the two series on the cross, these
past two years. What have you gotten out of them? How has it affected your faith and your
actions as a disciple of Christ? Any stories or illustrations you can share would be great. You
could also share which sermons have stuck with you the most and why. Just share anything you
think is important about the past two years worth of sermons and why they have been important
for you (if at all).

I think your sermons have just gotten better and better each time you preach. I like the
way you bring the scripture for the day into the sermon, not just reading it at the beginning of the
message. I appreciate that you are not talking as fast as you did when you first came. I like the
involvement of the congregation in the message. The sermons I liked best are (and I don’t have
the exact title) what you do to others you do unto Christ, and the ones about the ducks who could
fly, but still waddled. I really liked the time you had people give bible verses and you preach on
each of them.

As I have said before, I got far more out of the PPG than I gave and really appreciate how much research, study and work go into a good sermon. Thanks for asking me. I am proud to have a small part in this. You are the best thing that has happened to our church!