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1 Corinthians 2:1-5

Christcross Series: The Off-Center Cross

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Once upon a time there was an architect, a designer of buildings. The architect was renowned, celebrated for his magnificent designs. Of all the buildings that this famous architect designed – office buildings, civic buildings, private residences, public arenas, and more – his favorite task was to design churches.

The architect loved conceiving and drawing up plans for exquisite houses of worship. He reveled in the details. When his plans sprung up off the blueprint page, they were glorious sanctuaries. Congregations and curiosity-seekers flocked to the opening of every new church building that the architect designed. Many famous churches proudly claimed the name of the architect as their own.

At the very end of his career, the architect designed one last church. He worked diligently, painstakingly creating a plan for one final house of worship. He supervised the construction process, and triple-checked every detail. He was pleased with the outcome, more pleased than he had ever been before.

The day came to unveil the architect's brand-new church. A huge crowd gathered, eager to view the sanctuary for the first time. The congregation's pastors, lay leaders, and all the church members and donors stood outside the doors, until finally they were allowed inside for the dedication service.

The people poured in. Immediately they marveled at the artistry, the skillfulness of design, the sheer beauty of the new church. They "oohed" and "ahhed." They turned their

heads every which way. Finally they sat down, and settled in to worship.

And that's when they noticed it. The cross. Hanging above the altar, just like in most church buildings, was a large, prominent cross. But something was unusual about this cross. One by one, the people started noticing, pointing, whispering. "What's wrong with that cross?" "Look at it. It's not right." "The cross is off-center," they murmured.

And so it was. The big cross over the altar was noticeably off-center. It was close to the center of the sanctuary, but the symmetry was off. Conspicuously off-center.

The service commenced, but almost everyone had a hard time paying attention to the liturgy, the hymns, the anthems, and the sermon. They all just kept staring at that cross, wondering what could have possibly gone wrong. All except the architect. He sat in his pew, a serene smile on his face.

After the dedication service ended, the pastors and leaders of the church pulled the architect into a side room. "What happened to the cross," they demanded. "What were you thinking? How could you allow such a huge mistake?"

"There was no mistake," the architect responded, calmly. "The cross is exactly where I wanted it. You didn't notice in my designs, but it's precisely where I planned it to be." The group exploded around him, furious and annoyed.

After a few minutes of fervor, the architect raised his hand. "Allow me to explain," he said. "Here's why the cross is off-center in your new church. I am hoping that it will serve you well, where it now hangs.

"You see, I have designed many fine churches in the past. In each of them, a cross hangs in the very center, above the altar. But in each of those churches, through the years, I've

noticed that something else, besides the cross of our Savior, eventually finds its way to the center of the congregation's life.

"Sometimes it's a dynamic, charismatic pastor, whose wonderful preaching and beloved persona becomes the most important thing to that church. Or sometimes it's a group of laypeople, who demand certain congregational traditions and customs, and those practices eventually become the most important thing to them. Often it's money, or budgets. Or special interest groups that take over a church. It may be a style of music, or a particular form of worship. Sometimes it's a well-meaning concern for social ministry, or for the specific needs of the community around the church, and those concerns somehow become the most important thing in that congregation.

"I've seen it happen time and time again," said the architect. "No church means for it to happen. Most never realize that it's happening to them. But I've noticed, in church after church, that the cross of Jesus somehow loses its central place. The message of Christ crucified – the one and only message that can bring sinners to salvation, the one and only way for sins to be forgiven and heaven's doors to open – the message of the cross ends up becoming less significant, less than central in the life of so many, many churches.

"I would not want to see that happen in your church," the architect declared. "And so I designed the off-center cross to make you think, to help you remember. Every time you see it, I pray," the architect said, "you'll recall how important it is for you, the leaders and the people of Christ's church in this place, to keep Christ crucified in the very center. It's your job, after all – not the architect's job -- to make sure that the cross is truly at the very heart, sincerely and constantly at

the exact center, of everything that you do here in Jesus' name."

The room was silent. The pastors pondered. The leaders mused, sensing the strange wisdom of what the architect had done. Then the architect opened a Bible. He turned to 1 Corinthians, chapter 2. He read, slowly, the words of St. Paul, the dynamic, charismatic, hand-chosen apostle of Jesus Christ himself.

"When I came to you, brothers, I did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. ² For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. ³ And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, ⁴ and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, ⁵ so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God" (vs. 1-5).

"I pray," concluded the architect, "that your faith, and your church, may ever be centered not in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God – centered always in the cross of Jesus."

That church, to this day, is known as the Church of the Off-Center Cross.

May that church be our church. Amen.

Prayer