You may have heard the Episcopal Church or the Anglican Communion being referred to as the *via media*. The term translates roughly as middle way and was popularized by John Henry Newman in the 19th century (before he decided he was Catholic). What those giving Anglicanism (i.e. the Episcopal Church) this moniker meant to do was explain how we lie between Protestantism and Catholicism, moderating the more extreme tendencies of both – no to indulgences and no to supralapsarianism. Or if you would prefer it in less theological terms we can always turn to Donnie and Marie Osmond and say that we are a little bit Catholic and a little bit Luther and Calvin. And I think there is some truth to this understanding of the Episcopal Church, I mean just look at what happened here last week. We had our bishop, who was even decked out in his pointy hat, and then we sang that reformation classic, *A Might Fortress is Our God*. Seems pretty middle way to me. But I think in some ways this definition can also apply to Christianity in general; not in relationship to Catholicism and Protestantism but rather in terms of where it stands in the universe of religions. What I mean by that is Christianity navigates a middle way between the extremes in human understandings of God. Let me explain and just as a caveat I will be talking in pretty sweeping generalities.

On one hand there are religions where God or the gods are seen as being very angry. They possess hair trigger tempers and are just waiting for the slightest provocation to unleash their wrath and smite the offenders. These understandings were more prevalent in previous days but they are still around even existing in some parts of Christianity. In these types of religions there is a need to appease God or the gods in extreme ways like through human sacrifice or harsh forms of asceticism. On the other side of this *via media* we have a more modern type of religion that posits a therapeutic god who is not terribly concerned with our behavior but just wants to make sure that we are taking care of ourselves and are using all of our vacation time. In this view God is sort of the giant Care Bear in the sky wanting to shoot rays of love and good cheer from his rainbow belly. But in my mind Christianity divides these two extremes. For it would be very difficult to read the Bible and come away believing that God cares little for how we act. Jesus, who is supposed to be the meek and mild guy, says things like, “if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and throw it away; it is better for you to enter life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into the hell of fire.” However, it is also impossible to come away from a reading of scripture not seeing that God cares deeply for us and forgives and rejoices when we return to him like the father in the parable of the prodigal son. Christianity acknowledges a God who has both very high standards while also possessing love and compassion for us when we do not live up to those high standards. And it is for that reason why I say that I think of Christianity as the *via media* of religions. It has bits of both sides but moderates them in such a way that they actually reflect what God is really like. And it does so by turning the focus away from us and onto God as we understand him in the person of Jesus Christ. For with the two extreme positions – God as wrathful judge or God as sweet-tempered care bear, God reacts to our behavior. Christianity, however, turns things around and tells us that we are the ones reacting. We are reacting to and participating in what God has done and what God is doing.

But enough of me talking about it, let’s hear this perspective from St. Paul. He says, “For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ…Their end is destruction… their minds are set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory.” It is kind of a jumble but among the things that he touches on are the extremes in our views of God and the way that this can be resolved. Here is what I mean.

When I talked about the extremes, I mentioned that, they both, in a strange way, share something in common. And the thing they share in common is their demotion of God to best supporting actor. The show is really all about us and God shows up only after we have done certain things. These two views, in Paul’s telling, are both antithetical to Christianity and are enemies of the cross because they either deny the horror of the cross or deny its saving nature. What this means in practicality is that those who live as enemies of the cross are not willing to submit themselves to what has been done in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Those who ascribe to the angry view of God relegate him to nothing more than a judge. His only role is to tell you whether or not you have been a good boy. He does nothing to help you, rather only tells you whether or not your actions have been worthy of his favor or of his wrath. On the other hand, the therapeutic God does not have much of a role either. We live our lives and the therapeutic God comes along and tidies up after us. But in Paul’s telling, Christianity places God front and center. We participate in the life of God, not the other way round. For remember what he says, “But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory.” God is not simply a judge, nor is he just a therapist, rather he seeks our transformation. A transformation that is not through our own power or will but rather through his power. When Paul says enemies of the cross, he is talking about those who are like your average three-year-old and are screaming, “I do it myself.” But that is not Christianity. Christianity tells us both that we are to live a certain way and if we don’t, we can ask for forgiveness. God is in control of the entire process.

Amy and I were talking about the other day about someone we knew and all of the problems they had. After a moment of reflection, I said that the sad part was most of their issues were self-inflicted. They had burned so many bridges that they were now left in a terrible predicament. And I think when we look at Christianity, most of our issues are self-inflicted that leave us in terrible predicaments. We end up worshiping a god who is not really God. We create our own rituals and theology rather than submitting our will and participating in the salvation he has given to us to freely. We seek to explain God in terms we can easily understand – as a harsh judge or a fun uncle. But the actual God is much more grand and much more complicated than either of these two views. I realize it can be hard to get our minds around God’s call on our lives coupled with God’s ability to forgive, but that is what the cross tells us. In the moment Jesus was being crucified he said, “Father forgive them for they know not what they do.” Jesus acknowledges the wrong and yet asks for it to be forgiven. That is the cross is the *via media*, it is the middle way. God calls us to be his own and asks us to be transformed, but he also forgives when we come up short. Without this there would be no way for us to be his, this day and forevermore.