

## God's Love and the Cross

Well, happy New Year! That's what we celebrate on Rally Sunday, isn't it? A new year for our kids and teachers in school, a new year for our deacons and our Sunday School teachers. In our multi-cultural, multi-tasking society, we have the opportunity to celebrate all kinds of New Years, don't we? There's Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, that comes next weekend; the beginning of the liturgical year, the first Sunday of Advent, which is the Sunday after Thanksgiving this year; The New Year's Day of our Gregorian calendar; and Chinese New Year and Tet, which come in February. All kinds of New Years, all kinds of opportunities to start afresh. Perhaps Jeremiah, with his prophet's prescience, had this in mind when he wrote in Lamentations that the Lord's mercies are new every morning.

Traditionally, when we begin a new year, we take time to consider things that are most basic and central to us, the important things like our foundational beliefs. So as we begin our new year together as Good Shepherd Baptist Church, I thought I would set aside our exploration of the Wisdom books, some of the least known books of the Bible, to turn to perhaps its best known verse, John 3:16, and some of our most foundational beliefs. I want us to think this morning about the love of God and the Cross, the very core of our faith, two seemingly disparate ideas that have been held in tension for 2000 years, what they have meant and what they mean for us now.

Our Christian faith is built on many paradoxes: God who is both transcendent and immanent, Christ who is both God and man, the Kingdom that is both now and not-yet. But this may be the most extraordinary — that God's unfathomable, creative, saving and sustaining love for humankind and all Creation should be epitomized in a crude instrument of torture and death. According to John, Jesus knew it was coming and gave himself up to it. According to Paul, this absurdly contradictory image represents the ultimate plan and wisdom of God. How can such a thing be?

As we consider God's love and the Cross, let us think first of the Cross. It has become so common a sight, so tamed by familiarity that it is easy to forget what it really is. For a time, though the fad seems to be fading, a cross or a crucifix was almost a *de rigueur* accessory for fashionistas, immortalized in U2's song "Vertigo": "The girl with crimson nails/Has Jesus round her neck/Swayin' to the music..." We see crosses as the eyes of fish on the backs of cars, cross pins on lapels, crosses in stained glass, crosses of polished wood or polished metal, gold crosses, silver crosses, crosses of cut glass and crosses of brightly colored plastic. So overused as a symbol, the cross begins to mean not much at all. If we think of it in any way as a symbol of death, then it would be because of its use in military cemeteries, where row upon row of white crosses stand on rolling green lawns, or because of its use in the displays of abortion protests.

But a symbol of death it was to the contemporaries of Jesus and Paul and we should not forget that. To them, the cross meant nothing but the threat of capital punishment, efficiently, brutally and arbitrarily carried out by the Romans, who ruled by conquest nearly every place that the Gospel was carried in those early years. The Romans held out this threat for any who would challenge the smooth functioning of their regime – bandits, pirates, rebellious slaves, revolutionaries or just plain troublemakers, like the carpenter

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from Nazareth. Although it is difficult, I think it is appropriate for us to remember from time to time just what a horror-inducing death came by way of the cross. The awful wounds to wrists and feet seem terrible enough to us, but death on the cross was not from pain or blood loss. Jesus died relatively quickly for a victim of crucifixion, probably because he had been beaten nearly to death before he reached Golgotha, but for most it was a death of slow asphyxiation, often taking days, as the diaphragm lost its ability, with no stable base for the body to push against, to draw air into the lungs.

As our opening hymn this morning reminds us, the cross was an emblem not only of suffering but also of shame. In our rather sanitized century, we have forgotten how those sentenced to die by courts or government used to be paraded through the streets on their way to a public place of execution, jeered and taunted by onlookers, often pelted by refuse, forced, perhaps, to see their loved ones looking on in horror as they died, as the Gospel according to John tells us was true for Jesus. To add further insult to injury, those condemned to crucifixion were made to carry the heavy cross beam of the instrument of execution to the fatal site. After death, the crucified were usually left to hang in place as a warning to any other would-be miscreants, sometimes until the carrion-eaters had picked them clean. Is it any wonder that the Romans, not a particularly squeamish lot, banned crucifixion for Roman citizens? The great Roman orator, Cicero, said it was, "a most cruel and disgusting punishment... what, then, shall I say of crucifixion? It is impossible to find the word for such an abomination... Let the very mention of the cross be far removed not only from a Roman citizen's body, but from his mind, his eyes, his ears." For the Jews, subject as the Romans were not to this horrid punishment, the Deuteronomic admonition that a hanged man was cursed by God quickly became associated with crucifixion.

So, despite Paul's enthusiasm, it is hardly surprising that early Christian images did not feature the cross. In early Christian art, we see the cup, the fish and the Chi-Rho (the first two letters of the word Christ in Greek); we see Jesus portrayed as the Good Shepherd rather than as the Hanged Man. The cross did not become the predominant symbol for Christians until after Constantine in the 300s. Constantine was the first Christian emperor of Rome, ruling from A.D. 306 until 337, and issued the Edict of Milan in 317, which legalized Christian worship and established religious tolerance throughout the Empire. Legend has it that before the Battle of Milvian Bridge, which solidified his hold on the throne in A.D. 312, Constantine saw a vision of a cross and the words "*in hoc signo vinces*" or "by this sign, conquer." He hastily had crosses drawn on his soldier's shields and, indeed, won out against a superior force. The cross went from a sign of shame and suffering to one of victory and quickly became the symbol of the newly respectable and growing Church. But over the centuries, the cross stayed on the shields of soldiers, so that it became once again a symbol of armed domination and death, in the Crusades, in the Inquisition, and in those places in the Americas, Africa and Asia where allegiance to Christ was imposed by violence rather than won by love. Hardly the image of the Cross Paul had in mind.

Seeing then how the Cross would have been for Paul's contemporaries and for many through the ages a symbol of persecution and fear rather than one of salvation and joy, a

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thing to be shunned rather than cherished, how do we begin to understand it as revelatory of the Loving God? How can we possibly see the cross as Good News? For the first part of our answer, I turn again to our reading from I Corinthians. Paul posits that in the Cross we can begin to understand that we don't understand. All human efforts to understand God and to come into full relationship with God, according to Paul, have failed. Neither the carefully worked out philosophy of the Greeks nor the careful reliance on the miraculous history of the Jews have enabled humankind to bridge the gap between Creator and fallen Creation. Instead, God has chosen to reveal Godself in a way that seems like nonsense to the sensible Greeks and like blasphemy to the observant Jews. According to Richard Carlson, Professor of New Testament at Lutheran Theological Seminary in Gettysburg, "The cross is the divine activity which both embarrasses and embraces humanity in an inclusive way... God's embarrassing action in the cross relates to humanity's attempts to establish its own appropriate means for encountering God... God has not sought out humanity according to the ways humanity has sought out God. Rather, God has intentionally and decidedly destroyed the ways and means by which humanity decided get to God... We do not get to God, or find the key to knowing God through our efforts. Rather, God comes to us and establishes the terms of the encounter of faith in the proclamation of the cross." What God says through the Cross, according to Paul, is that we are free to lay aside our efforts to earn our way into God's favor and to simply accept the love that is freely offered to us. Our model is not to be the philosopher or the theologian or the careful legalist, but the One who was willing to die the most dreadful death of all on behalf of the very ones who killed him. Jesus is our exemplar because he trusted God all the way through a plan that made no sense, a path that led to him even becoming accursed of God in order to fully reveal God, all that others might know the freedom of God's love.

The Cross and the crucified Christ, the epitome of God's wisdom and power, are revelatory because they show God's greatness in Jesus' weakness. God's best and final word for humankind is that God is willing to set aside all majesty, all authority, all we would understand as power and become as the least member of God's own people in order to show us how to live. Through the suffering of Jesus, God shows that suffering humanity is not ignored by God but rather is joined by God who stands in compassion, understanding and solidarity with all that suffer. Through the Cross, we see that the Creator who is worthy of our worship, who could rightly demand our absolute allegiance, instead comes to us with a gentle invitation of love.

This is why we cherish the old rugged Cross, why we ask Jesus to keep us near the Cross. From being a symbol of harsh Roman authority, whether that be of the pagan Roman Empire or of the Christendom that replaced it, the cross is become a symbol of the self-giving, sacrificial love of Jesus, which is God's own self-revelation. The Cross stands before us not in judgment and condemnation but in solidarity and invitation. In the death and resurrection of Jesus, God has taken perhaps the darkest symbol of human cruelty and turned it into the symbol of all-forgiving love, just as through the Christ event, God redeems us from all of the mistakes, rebellions and brokenness of our lives to restore God's own image in us, making us beloved children of God and joint heirs with Christ Jesus.

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We are not left on our own by God to earn our way into God's favor and find a rich, fulfilling and everlasting life. We do not have to fight to make ourselves better than anyone else, either by our own achievements or by the denigration of others. We are given the free gift of God's love, with no strings attached, all because of God's incredible love for us. A writer whose work has often blessed me, Rev. Dr. William Willimon, the Bishop of the United Methodist Conference of North Alabama and former Dean of the Chapel at Duke University, puts it this way: "God loved the world, loved so much that he gave. Not to condemn but to save, John says. Not to condemn. In the midst of our trivial moralizing, our scolding, supererogation, and scrambling for a few penitential brownie points, John reminds us of why we're here. We are on the way of the cross not because of what we have done or left undone but because of what God has done. The cross is not simply one more piece of damaging evidence that seals shut the case against guilty humanity. The goriest work of human sin gets sidetracked into glorious divine redemption. The prophet is sent not to scold but to save. It was out of love that he came among us and stood beside us and chided us and died with us, for us, and saved us. Love."

And so, my sisters and brothers, in view of this love, this sacrificing, limitless, redeeming love, how then shall we live? How shall we go about cherishing that old rugged Cross? What do our lives look like when we walk in the shadow of the Cross from day to day? The violence that previously characterized that cross cannot be a part of our lives, whether it is overt violence of word or deed or the subtle violence that we do to others by undervaluing them, by ignoring their needs, by putting our own desires ahead of them. Instead, we must have the same mind that was in Christ Jesus, seeking to become the servant of others rather than their master, obedient only to God and not the twisted whispers of our culture which call us only to care for ourselves. The Crucified One, Jesus, and the One he called Abba call on us to share with others the great love of God for us. We are called to live our lives so that others can see the presence of Jesus in our lives, see that we are led by the Holy Spirit. And, yes, we are called to confess with our mouths as well as with our actions that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father. As Francis of Assisi said, we must "Preach the Gospel at all times. Use words if necessary."

And so we begin our New Year. It has promise, this year to come. We will open our Shepherd's Garden and welcome new neighbors. We will see children graduate and children born. We will likely see new problems and new sorrows as well. But we will do it all in the shadow of the Cross, not a shadow of death but of eternal life, not a shadow of condemnation but of redeeming love. For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Thanks be to God!