

WHAT DO WE UNDERSTAND ABOUT THE CROSS?

I am eager for Holy Week and all its incredible events to mean more to us than ever before. Therefore I have to back away a little bit and not get overeager. Part of the problem is that I don't know how many more chances I will get. But that's okay. I am not the only one who can help you to understand such things. There are three or four others. Besides, I may get more chances to go through Holy Week with you. We never know.

A bigger problem is that the events of Holy Week all fit together. Each one is crucial to the others. They are each an essential part of the larger story. Only, we do not gather for the whole event. Jews in Jesus' time gathered for a whole week to celebrate Passover, but we cut up Holy Week into five separate worship services as if it were about five different events. Very few people make it to all five celebrations, and even if some do, we talk about each event as if it were a "stand-alone" affair. I add in Pentecost as the fifth event because it is the culmination and purpose of all that came before, though lots of people do not connect it with the other big events of Jesus' life. In any case, each of these events is bigger than we can grasp and remember, and they are each a part of the larger meaning and purpose of Jesus' coming. If we leave one out or try to be aware and grateful for one without the others, we get more gibberish than glory.

A third problem is that in most places, at least from my perspective, each of these major events of Jesus' life is misunderstood and misexplained, and turned into creeds and belief systems that are far removed and even damaging to the meaning and Message of Jesus' life and purpose among us. That, of course, bothers *me* more than it seems to bother most people. Jesus is the most important person in my life, and I don't like to see Him maligned or misrepresented. I don't even like it when *you* are maligned or misrepresented. Jesus came to reconcile us to the FATHER, and to reveal to us a God who is not the cruel or punishing deity that our race has always feared in the subconscious and interior realms of our psyche.

I am aware, and most of you are too, that if you ask eighty percent of Christendom about the meaning of the Cross, you will be told essentially – in essence – that God, in great compassion for humanity, sacrificed his own Son on the Cross in order to appease his

WHAT DO WE UNDERSTAND ABOUT THE CROSS?

own wrath regarding our sins. This sacrifice of Jesus, because Jesus was sinless, paid the price for our sins – thus balancing the scales of justice – so that we do not have to be thrown into Hell to be tortured for all time ... by this same God of love and mercy. By implication, this God is not omnipotent or powerful enough to forgive us out of love or mercy. This God must serve the laws of justice, and either punish us or kill his own Son. So Jesus had to die on the Cross, and God set it up to happen just exactly like it happened. Hence, Jesus died on the Cross to save us.

Behind this mythological nonsense, there is a good motive, of course. If we can frighten people badly enough, it will cause them to be good. This “righteousness through fear” approach – this “scare the Hell out of them” principle – has never worked very well. But we still keep hoping. It is the logic behind crucifixion itself. If you can execute criminals in a painful enough manner and do it where everybody can watch, pretty soon nobody will dare to break the law. Everybody will be good. The evidence to prove this theory is that, after thousands of years, our prisons are still overrun and our justice systems are overwhelmed. But our culture hangs on to this belief with far more conviction than it hangs on to its belief about the presence of God. In any case, crucifixion was not unique to Jesus. It was the standard way in which the Roman Empire executed its worst criminals. If you make the bad guys suffer cruelly enough, everybody will be good.

It is an inescapable part of Jesus’ story that He gets caught in this inexpressibly cruel system and dies in the most painful manner that humans had yet devised. Only, as I never tire of reminding myself and you: It was not *God* who did this to Jesus. It was *humans* – it was us.

Before going any further, I will add a personal comment. The Cross is as important and significant to me as it is to any other human you have ever met. It does not mean to me what it seems to mean to most of Christendom. It means *more*. Only, I do not try to blame it on the God of love – on the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. And I can promise you that nobody will ever persuade me that the Crucifixion of Jesus was God’s desire or God’s doing. That will not be possible, because I trust and believe what Jesus came to reveal to us about what God is really like.

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WHAT DO WE UNDERSTAND ABOUT THE CROSS?

It is possible to read all the most pertinent passages in the New Testament about the meaning of the Cross in about three or four minutes. I just proved that by doing it for you. (Romans 6:6-8; I Corinthians 1:17-18, 22-25; I Corinthians 2:2-8; Galatians 2:20-21; Galatians 5:24-25; Galatians 6:14; Ephesians 2:14-18; Colossians 2:13-15) There are other passages that tell us about the Crucifixion – how it happened – but I read the passages that talk about what it might *mean*. Did you hear any well-developed concepts or doctrines about the *meaning* of the Cross from what I just read to you? We read such passages and then dub back in the constructs and beliefs that were developed and concluded hundreds of years later.

So I wanted to remind you of one of the bothersome but very familiar principles of human reasoning: There is always a possible gap between what actually happened and what we decide it means. Endless mysteries, profound concepts, and huge errors dwell in that gap. There is always a possible gap between what actually happened and what we decide it means.

There is a huge thunder-and-lightning storm. What does it mean? It means that Zeus is angry with us and throwing thunderbolts at us. We smile with a superior air, but for many generations this was the accepted explanation. Today we know that this is ridiculous. There is no Zeus. It was Yahweh. It has always been Yahweh. Even so, this superstition converted Martin Luther. We may think it is too bad that Luther did not know more about meteorology, but what came from his conversion is still amazing. In any case, the gap between what happens and what we decide it means is formidable and significant in the extreme. Jesus died on a Cross. But what do we decide it means?

Two people kiss. It does happen. But what does it mean? Sometimes it means they want to cherish and love each other, grow old together, and be loyal and faithful to each other “for as long as they both shall live.” Sometimes it only means that there is the possibility of an interesting evening coming up. The problem, of course, is when it means the former to one of them and the latter to the other. Even so, there is always the possible gap between what happened and what people think it means.

Jesus died on a Cross. The evidence is overwhelming. But what does it mean? The very familiar realities of temple worship and animal sacrifice became the accepted imagery by which this event was explained. Only, unwittingly, this imagery is full of booby traps and

unintended conundrums. Jesus became the perfect “Lamb of God” without blemish – without sin – and therefore the perfect sacrifice for all time. At last, a total forgiveness for us sinners.

But there are numerous flaws in this imagery, as often happens when we make up our explanations without thinking things through. For example, where did the sacrifice come from? That ends up being a terrible flaw. Humans are not capable of providing a perfect sacrifice, or they would not need a Savior in the first place. So *God* had to provide the sacrifice. And from there, at least in terms of what we claim this means, everything went terribly wrong. But once invested in the explanation, no matter how wrong or ludicrous, we have clung to it for centuries.

I cannot tell you in one sermon all that the Cross means to me. I have made numerous attempts to put some of it into words over the years. Indeed, I will hint at some of it again tonight. And it doesn’t really matter what I think it means so far as *your* faith is concerned. What matters to your life is what *you* think it means. I just want you to know, because I am your Pastor, that this sermon contains only the “tip of the iceberg,” as we sometimes say.

Among other things, the Cross means that God does not destroy or punish us – no matter what we do to him *or* to His Messiah. Actually, that’s hard to swallow – at least for me. It is hard for me to imagine what manner of self-control and self-discipline it must have required for God to watch the Crucifixion and not interfere. I suspect that the universe has seldom been closer to total annihilation than it was on that Friday afternoon two thousand years ago. I further suspect that it is always exceedingly difficult for God to keep from interfering with the ways in which his children are often being treated by one or another of us. Even so, with Jesus it must have been far more difficult.

Jesus Himself claims that if He had requested it, legions of angels would have come to His aid. But part of the story is that Jesus is so focused on the will of God – Jesus is so obedient and in tune with God’s purposes – that He is not going to call for the kind of help that would destroy and undo everything the two of them are wanting to accomplish. That is, the reconciliation between us and God – the building or rebuilding of the relationship between us and God that can lead us into the Kingdom – is the purpose, and it is too important a purpose to abandon because of anger or unfairness.

WHAT DO WE UNDERSTAND ABOUT THE CROSS?

So we are reminded that Jesus got into this horrible place – the place of crucifixion – because He would not run away from the real purpose. And that indeed makes me wonder and ponder: What could the Crucifixion possibly mean to us humans which would make it worth that kind of death?

We already hinted at one of the meanings. For those of us who believe, it means that God never reverts to punishment or retaliation or what we call “justice.” God does not kill his own Son, but neither does God kill *us* for killing Jesus. God is the Creator – not the Destroyer. I always struggle to get and keep that clear. God corrects, but never punishes. God will forever work for our growth and awakening and for our dawning desire to have a relationship – a bond of love – between us and God. Some people claim this is easy to believe. I can get glimpses of it, but I find it very difficult to truly and deeply believe it and to hold on to it.

If we really want to know how God punishes people who kill his Son, we need to reread the story of Paul on the Damascus Road. That story reveals God’s mind-boggling response to Paul’s rebelliousness and murder. And indeed, to be commissioned as an Apostle to the Gentiles was exquisite punishment for a rabbinically trained Pharisee. Yet it was also, despite its humor and its irony, full of love and grace and New Life for Paul. No man ever took his punishment with greater gratitude. But it also cost Paul dearly for over thirty years, right up to the day of his own execution, trying to fulfill his mission.

The world did indeed face Jesus with the most excruciating death it could command. At first it did not dawn on anybody that the threat of such a death would not work – that Jesus would not run. But because Jesus would not run from the Cross, many of us learned that there was no depth of alienation, sin, evil, error, blunder – purposeful or unpurposeful – that God would not forgive, if we repented. That was never known before. Many have not learned it even still. But the Cross keeps proclaiming it for any and all of us willing to notice. And some of us can remember that seeing the light this Cross shines forth on the depth and breadth of God’s forgiveness was all that kept *us* from despair in some of our own darkest nights.

Because Jesus would not run from the Cross, it also unmasked the depths of human pride and privilege. What will humans do to keep their positions and their flimsy and temporary security? To be sure, we are only wanting to survive here – wanting to provide for our

families. What do we care if that puts us in competition with the leadership – the rightful rule – of the Messiah of God? By the way, I have many dear friends who did indeed turn over their earthly positions to the Messiah, only to receive them back again with slightly altered instructions about how to manage them for God’s Kingdom. The Messiah is not an idiot. He needs all the faithful help He can get.

Because Jesus would not run from the Cross, it also made it clear to many of us that no matter how low we thought we had fallen – no matter what depths we considered our own “station in life” to have sunk to – we also could still be included in God’s promises and plans. This man on this Cross – He is at this moment the utter epitome of failure. This is no king in a palace. This is not the CEO of any company. This is not even a man on welfare or someone standing in a breadline. This man is at the dregs of the worst possible station in life – dying the death of a criminal, in the worst possible manner. Only, He is not abandoned by God. His life is not over and done with. His truth reaches even to this, the lowest low point any of us can imagine. God is still with Him. God has not thrown Him away. The evaluations and conclusions of this world that seem so real and final are of no account – they have no true authority – in the realities of God’s Kingdom.

And so the lowest of the low among us, like that thief on the other cross, can blink and swallow and hang on to Jesus. And the WAY of Jesus can go from utter despair, failure, misery, and pain ... to Paradise Some people say “in a heartbeat”; some of us say it takes thirty or forty years. But that is not what matters. What matters is that this Cross reaches deeper and wider and higher than anything this world can fathom or imagine.

The Cross is not a ticket out of Hell. That is such a picayune travesty of its power and its truth that it has to be Satan’s ploy to sidetrack the careless and the thoughtless. The Cross *is* an invitation to New Life with Jesus. Of course, we would not know that until a little while after Good Friday – not until Easter and Pentecost. Even so, we *do* know that now. It always seems to us, for a while, that disaster is going to be the end of everything. But in reality, it is a very short time between what we think will be the end of all joy and happiness forever ... and the dawning of more than we ever hoped or dreamed could ever be.

WHAT DO WE UNDERSTAND ABOUT THE CROSS?

Jesus died to save us. That is wonderful, and I couldn't be more grateful. But what does "salvation" mean to you? A ticket out of Hell? I suppose, if you have been raised to fear being thrown into Hell, that might seem important. To me that only seems like a pathetic little variation of the boogeyman scare tactic.

Jesus comes to save us FOR – not *from*. Jesus comes to save us FOR an eternal adventure of love and challenge and expansion with God and with each other – the Kingdom of Heaven. And not for later, but starting whenever we are willing to come with Him. The Cross alone does not save us. The Cross just keeps us from letting the world bribe or buy or scare us off. Jesus saves us by loving us – by the love-bond He forms with us – and by the love-bond which then ends up forming between us and God. And that means all of it reaching us and calling us into Life: Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Easter, Pentecost – and all they stand for and awaken us into. Jesus is our Savior. A far greater Savior than most of Christendom is talking about, even to this very day. Think it through again. Talk about it again.