

“WHY THE CROSS?”

Proper 19B September 13, 2009
Isaiah 52:13-15, 53:10-12; Psalm 40:5-14;
1 Corinthians 1:16-24; John 12:23-33

Holy Cross Sunday

Introduction:

Today is the Sunday we celebrate our birthday as a church. Our launching as a congregation occurred in conjunction with the annual celebration of Holy Cross Day on September 14th.

I like to think that Holy Cross Day was chosen because the original leaders of the congregation so understood the Cross' significance that they especially wanted that day to be the feast day of this church. Holy Cross Day - what a great feast day and name for a new church!

It is hard to go wrong with the image of the cross and what it means for us as the guiding principle for a congregation. As Christians we all know what the Cross means – don't we? After all, we wear crosses as jewelry, we sign ourselves with the cross as part of our prayer and devotional life, and we sing songs glorifying the Cross' meaning in our lives. We fully, completely, totally, absolutely understand the meaning of the Cross, and are ready to answer seekers and skeptics alike when they ask us, “Why The Cross?” Or do we?

So,

Why The Cross?

Actually, to ask, “Why The Cross?” is to ask: Why was it necessary that Jesus die? That’s the essential question. The Cross was a means. Today, it might be the Electric Chair, or the Gas Chamber. So, **“Why is what the Cross represents so important for me today?”**

St. Paul wrote that God sent Christ to the Cross *to demonstrate his justice*. On the surface the Cross seems like a strange way to represent a religion!

Moses, Buddha, Confucius, and Mohammed all lived long lives and had peaceful deaths. Only Jesus did not die at a ripe old age, after a lifetime of teaching, amid wide popular acclaim. His death was premature, tragic, lonely, and on a cross to boot.

We are used to thinking of the cross as a religious symbol. In Jesus’ day it was anything but religious or beautiful. On the contrary, it was repulsive and offensive. The great Roman orator, Cicero, said that the very word ‘cross’ should not even enter the thoughts or ears of a Roman citizen, so disgusting were its connotations. Yet the early Christians not only admitted that their founder had died in this contemptible manner,

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they boasted about it. *'May I never glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ'*, said the apostle Paul. *'We preach Christ crucified ... though it is a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, to us Christians it displays the power and wisdom of God'*.

What possible significance could that bizarre and shocking death have assumed for the first Christians, that they turned the cross from being an unmentionable infamy to a badge of honor? In short, why did Jesus have to die an un-natural death? St. Paul answers that question in Romans 3:20-26. It is

A key Bible passage

No one will be declared righteous in God's sight by observing the law; rather through the law we become conscious of sin. But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known ... This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement ... He did this to demonstrate his justice ... so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.

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The mistake many people make is to think that it is easy for God to forgive sins. It isn't; and the reason is tied up in the word- *righteousness*.

First of all, God is morally perfect; that means that sin is a thousand times more offensive to him than it is to us. Secondly, and even more importantly, God is the ultimate ground of all moral values in this universe.

God has to treat wickedness with the seriousness it deserves. If God overlooks an evil act, it is as good as saying that morality is relative. God would be open to the charge of moral negligence. God's moral consistency must be unimpeachable. He must act justly always – or the very idea of righteousness loses its meaning.

If goodness is to mean something in this universe, it is absolutely necessary that God's righteousness be beyond dispute. In Paul's words, his justice needs to be '*demonstrated*'. God must in some way dissociate himself personally from evil in the world. He must make a clear stand against it. If he does not, then all moral standards and values stand on sand.

The old way of demonstrating God's righteousness

Was for God to establish laws and judge us by our performance. This is precisely what God did in the days of Moses. He gave Israel the Ten Commandments and warned them that those who did not keep them would be punished.

What resulted was the universal condemnation of the entire human race. The law succeeded in highlighting the moral plight of the human race, but as far as making us right with God, it didn't. As Paul puts it: '*No one can be declared righteous in God's sight*' that way. All the law can do is make us '*conscious of our sin*.'

Is there an alternative? Is it possible for God's moral character to be asserted in some other way? Is it possible that instead of condemning human beings, his justice could actually acquit human beings? On the face of it that seems quite impossible, because we are guilty. So, how could God ever treat us as anything other than what we are? Yet Paul's astonishing news is that such an alternative has actually become available. This is

The good news!

'*But now*,' Paul says. Those words mark a momentous line that divides world history. Something

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tremendous has happened; and as a result it is possible for God to be fully righteous and true to his own moral character, and yet at the same time to pardon sinful human beings. He can be *'just and the one who justifies the person who has faith in Jesus'*, because now *'there is a righteousness from God apart from law'*.

By the phrase *'apart from law'* Paul means that in this new demonstration of his righteousness God does not assume the role of legislator and judge as he did under the old covenant. That's where Jesus and the cross come in. Here is Paul's answer to that crucial question with which we began: why did Jesus die? **'God presented Jesus as a sacrifice of atonement ... he did this to demonstrate his justice.'**

Perhaps a story will make it easier.

Forgiveness is never cheap

John and Alice were married, living in a covenant relationship. Everything seemed perfect. But then along came Ivan, a blond, blue-eyed, muscle-bound Russian boy. Alice became infatuated with him, and so one day, quite suddenly, she walked out and left John. Six months passed in which John spent a good deal of

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time weeping inconsolably. But, eventually, he pulled himself together. Then, as suddenly as she had departed, there she was again – on the doorstep. Things hadn't worked out with Ivan. She discovered her Russian bombshell had a sadistic streak and a wandering eye. The infatuation had passed. She wanted to say "sorry" to John. She wanted to come back.

Now, the question I want you to ask yourself is this: what is John going to do? He has three choices:

One: It's possible, isn't it, that his love for Alice has died – murdered by her desertion. Perhaps, he just feels emotionally numb. If so his reaction to Alice's appeal is going to be one of total indifference. *'Sure! Come in and collect your stuff if you want. To be honest I couldn't care less about you or anybody else now! I just want to be alone.'*

The Second possibility is that John is still fuming with inner rage, his pride scalded by his partner's infidelity. If that is the situation he might well lose his temper and justly so. *'How dare you come back to me!'* *'Get out! Go to Hell! I never want to set eyes on you again!'*

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Third Choice: But what if John's love for Alice is still burning in his heart? What if he has long dreamed of their reconciliation? How will he react then? He can't feign indifference – for he cares deeply. He can't pretend he isn't angry, because he is. Yet, he can't tell Alice to get lost either, because he desperately wants her to stay. So what does he do?

I suggest he has to say something like this: *'I love you. I want you back. But you have to realize how much you have angered and hurt me by what you have done.'*

If there is to be any chance of their relationship being reconstructed, John must find the inner resources to absorb the injury that Alice has inflicted on him. His love must be large enough to overcome his indignation, to swallow his rage, to accept his pain.

It Is The cost of reconciliation

This is not a perfect illustration, but according to Paul something like this is happening on the cross. We have deserted God. We have angered him. We have hurt him. As a result, he could turn the cold shoulder of indifference toward us. He could, with perfect justice, vent his wrath and tell us to go to Hell! But, here is the

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good news that spells hope for the world – his divine heart yearns for reconciliation. So he says to us: ‘I love you. I want you back. But you have to realize how much you have angered and hurt me by what you have done.’

Do we realize that? Do we want to see it spelled out in graphic drama? Then look at the cross – see there God’s divine agony. See the heart of God ravaged by the sin of the world. No one can accuse God of moral indifference now. No-one can say he doesn’t care passionately about righteousness. Look at the cross – that’s how much he cares!

St. Paul wrote: *‘He did this to demonstrate his justice.’* The cross is not a theatrical gesture. It is the place where God, like John in my story, absorbed the pain and anger we had caused him. It is the place where God found the inner resources he needed to forgive us. It is the place where he proved his love was large enough to overcome his indignation, to swallow his rage, to accept his pain.

St. Paul was a Jew, so he knew that divine forgiveness could never be cheap. He witnessed, and participated in the animal sacrifices in the Temple.– for

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every Jew the blood of an animal was a symbol of the costliness of their forgiveness. They looked at the blood and trusted God's promise that it meant they were forgiven – at least for a season.

Though the blood of an animal covers human sin for a season it doesn't wash it clean. More is needed. If sinners are to go free there has to be a more profound and more satisfying vindication of the divine justice than a dead lamb could provide! And in the cross, that deeper and more satisfying vindication has at last been provided.

Paul said that: *'God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement.'* It is not the blood of a lamb but Christ's blood which is the true focus of saving faith. *'He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities,'* predicts the prophet Isaiah. *'We all like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.'*

Was That A travesty of Justice?

I've sometimes heard the objection that interpreting the cross this way as an act of vicarious atonement is monstrously unfair. It suggests that God was willing for an innocent man to suffer to appease his

own need for judicial satisfaction. What kind of 'demonstration of justice' is that?

But such an objection misses a vital point. Of course God did not make a scapegoat of some guiltless third party. Jesus wasn't a third party. He was God in flesh. As a result there are not three parties involved in the transaction of the cross, but only two – God and us. God is not punishing somebody else for our sins – he is punishing himself ! He is absorbing the consequences of our sins within himself.

That's why it had to be Jesus who did it. Only he could take the cup and say: '*This is my blood which is shed for the forgiveness of sin*'. That's why Paul can say a little later in Romans '*God demonstrates his love to us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us*' (Romans 5:8). As he puts it in II Corinthians 5: '**God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.**' By '*in Christ*' Paul implies that Christ was not only the *means* which God used, but the *place* where God chose to locate himself. The cross is

A remedy for Christians who feel guilty

Most of us are troubled one way or another by guilt. Listen – if you are a Christian believer, then the

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Bible insists you have been declared righteous by God himself – not because you have obeyed the rule-book, nobody, but Jesus, has done that. No, you have been *'justified freely, by God's grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus'*. You have been *'justified through faith in his blood'*.

Away then with guilt-ridden anxieties. *'Since we have been justified by faith we have peace with God'* (Romans 5:1). Now live in the enjoyment of that restored relationship Christ suffered to obtain for you. By continuing to wallow in feelings of guilt you are implying Jesus didn't suffer enough! The Cross is also

A challenge to those on a spiritual quest.

Maybe there is someone here who has not yet reached the point of Christian commitment. You are interested in the Christian faith perhaps. But, if you're honest you couldn't call yourself a believer. There are after all so many other faiths in the world.

Well, it is not my intention to browbeat you. But, can you at least understand now why we Christians say we love Jesus? It's not the brainwashing of our parental upbringing that has made us believers. It's not the fear of Hell. It's not the psychological manipulation of a clever

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preacher. We love Jesus because he loved us. We have come to realize, as did Paul, '*the Son of God loved me and gave himself for me*' (Galatians 2:20).

There was I, like wayward Peter, on the doorstep; and he welcomed me back, in spite of all the pain and anger I had caused him. He absorbed it all within his own body and mind and soul on that first Good Friday. He paid the price of my sins. How can anyone understand that, and not love him for it?

Of course those other great world faiths have their truth. But Moses did not die on the cross for my sins. Buddha didn't; Confucius didn't; Mohammed didn't – prophets they may have been, but saviors they are not! Their followers may reverence them, but they cannot possibly love and worship them as we Christians love and worship 'Christ crucified'.

Amen? Amen!