

sermon-3/14/10 Newport Presbyterian Church
“Plain Talk About the Cross”
2 Cor. 5:14-21

This is the fourth Sunday in Lent. Our journey in this most important season of the church year is bringing us ever closer to Holy Week and the cross. Since we will not have a sermon in our Good Friday service. I decided this might be a good Sunday, given our text in Second Corinthians, to think about the meaning of the cross. I want to explore openly with you both the deep meaning of Jesus’ crucifixion and some of the troubling aspects of a traditional understanding of the cross. Some of what follows may be a bit challenging if you have never explored alternative meanings of the cross.

As I tell the lectionary class on Tuesday mornings, please know you don’t have to agree with any of what I say. Honest sharing, talking plainly about the deepest parts of our faith, is a useful exercise. It is in that spirit I take the risk of sharing honestly with you some of what I have been thinking and reading about the cross. Hopefully, even if you disagree, this discussion will help us all enter more deeply into the heart of our faith.

The traditional understanding of the cross many of us grew up learning is called substitutionary atonement. In this understanding of the cross, we are told that human beings are sinful creatures. We have all done wrong. Our lives are filled with brokenness. According to God’s cosmic justice, we deserve to be punished. There are consequences to sinful behavior we should not, and cannot ignore. God is a righteous judge who cannot stand to look upon injustice. Therefore we deserve to suffer the consequences of our sin, which is death.

But, Jesus was sent into the world by God. While he lived among us in this sinful world, he did not become infected, as it were, with our sinful condition. He lived fully into the human being God intended at creation for all human beings. He did not deserve punishment. Yet, he graciously stood in our place. He was our substitute when the punishment was given out. He died for us and our sins. In fact, according to this way of thinking, that is the reason God sent Jesus into the world. Jesus came into the world to die for us. That was the purpose of his life. He had to die a painful death on the cross so that we might be made right, or reconciled to God.

As with any attempt to try and explain a complicated and ultimately mysterious event as the cross, this traditional understanding has some helpful points and some troubling aspects as well. It certainly captures some of our experience of the world as broken, where people commit terrible, hateful acts against each other. It also satisfies our desire that there be some justice in the world. Those who do bad things ought to be punished.

But, this doctrine of the atonement has its downsides as well. It certainly leaves us with a strange notion of God as well as the purpose of Jesus’ life. To help us see what I mean by this I’m going to quote a passage from the book *The Last Week* by Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan. They feel substitutionary atonement combines the concepts of sacrifice, suffering and substitution in an unhelpful way.

The context of this quote is their talk about sacrifice in the Old Testament. They note that people today no longer do ritual sacrifices in their places of worship. Thus, many of us

find some of the early church's understanding of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross a bit foreign, if not troubling.

For example, some in the early church saw Jesus' death on the cross through the lens of the sacrificial killing of the perfect lamb at Passover. Jesus became the perfect lamb of God sacrificed for our sins. His blood saved us from the death we all deserve, as the blood of the lamb saved the Israelites at the time of the Exodus.

Borg and Crossan find that lens to view the cross unsatisfactory today. In order for us to see this clearly they tell a story about a firefighter who saves a child from a burning building and dies in the process.

“The next day the local paper headlines ‘Firefighter Sacrifices Her Life.’ We are not ancients, but moderns, and yet that is still an absolutely acceptable statement. On the one hand, all human life and all human death are sacred. On the other, that firefighter has made her own death peculiarly, especially, emphatically sacred by giving it up to save the life of another. So far, so good. Now imagine if somebody confused sacrifice with suffering and denied it was a sacrifice because the firefighter died instantly and without intolerable suffering. Or imagine if somebody confused sacrifice with substitution, saying that God wanted somebody dead that day and accepted the firefighter in lieu of the child. And worst of all, imagine that somebody brought together sacrifice, suffering, and substitution by claiming that the firefighter had to die in agony as atonement for the sins of the child's parents.” They say that is, in essence, what some are saying when they push substitutionary atonement.

While their story is not a perfect analogy, it does help us see how some in our time are terribly uncomfortable with the God of the traditional understanding of the atonement. A God that needed someone to suffer intolerable pain and die on the cross so that God's justice could be satisfied, and thus enable God to love us, is a troubling understanding of a God we call Father. What parent among us would feel that way about their children?

I realize this may be hard for some to hear. If you grew up with the notion that Jesus' died on the cross for our sins, paying the price so that we might be saved, any thoughts that would undermine that understanding would be threatening. Please know, if the traditional substitutionary atonement theory is helpful and meaningful for you, that is great. There is certainly ample biblical passages that seem to say that is how we are to understand the cross.

But, that is not the only way the Bible talks about the cross. There are other ways that may be helpful for those who are uncomfortable with the God behind the substitutionary atonement theory. One commentator, a Cistercian monk, put it this way. “Christ saved us by his life, not by his death. But his death is part of his life.” That is a complicated sentence, and one we need to unpack.

We are saved by God's love and grace, not by God's judgment. Jesus revealed that love so clearly in his life as he loved the poor, spoke out against injustice, and challenged those in power when they oppressed those under them. He knew if he continued to speak up, he would get into trouble and most likely be executed. But he loved the people so much he kept at it. It led to his capture and horrible death on the cross.

It is in his life, his actions, his parables, and his courage to keep on loving in spite of the threats, including his death on the cross, that we see the love of God revealed. We call that the incarnation. Jesus incarnated God's love and grace. He put flesh on them so we might not be afraid of God any longer. In fact, we become reconciled to God in Christ. We are saved, in other words, from the world's brokenness and our part in that brokenness.

It is here where we finally get to our scripture passage for today. Paul is saying God was acting in Christ to reconcile the world to God's self. When we are in Christ we experience everything as new. "There is a new creation" says Paul. The Christ event was on the order of the first creation. Everything is new.

One commentator helps us see what this means. Paul says, in 5:16, "we regard no one from a human point of view" anymore. The NEB's translation is more helpful here. It says, "With us therefore worldly standards have ceased to count in our estimate of (anyone). . ."

Because of Jesus' life and death, we look at ourselves and others, the whole world for that matter, differently. We don't judge success by the same standards as does the culture. We look at people as beloved children of God, not as rich or poor, white or brown, educated or illiterate, part of our faith community or part of another.

The world said Jesus' death was justified. He was claiming to be king, challenging the Roman Empire and Israel's stability. That is how Paul used to see it. But now, he says, he does not look at Christ from a human point of view any longer.

Because of Jesus' life and death, the old has passed away and everything is new! As that same commentator writes, "To say that the old order is gone is not to deny that our lives must be lived in the midst of a broken, distorted world, but it is to say that the old order is ultimately powerless to effect changes and to provide meaning for human existence."

Sure life still stinks from time to time. Sure there is cruelty in the world, disease that strikes those we love, but those realities don't define us or give life meaning. We look at life through a different lens. We know the reality at the center of the universe, the reality we call God, is on our side. We need not fear God. At the center of creation, is a love that surrounds us and holds us come what may.

And because we, the Church, are the body of Christ, we are to be ambassadors of this reconciliation with God. We are to be about helping others know that God loves all humanity. We are to be about helping others know they are not defined by the world's standards. And because all who love and are loved by God are brothers and sisters, I believe we can unite with people of good conscience from many different religious traditions as God works through each of us to reconcile the world to God's self. All of that is made clear in Jesus' life, which includes his unjustified death on the cross. Amen