

Atonement

**A sermon taken from Luke 23. 44-49, and preached on Palm Sunday, 2010 at
Providence United Methodist Church in Charlotte, North Carolina
by Dr. Ken Carter**

At the center of our faith, of our assembly is a symbol, the cross. The symbol is not only here, before us, and we not only gather in a cross shaped building, but many of us have crosses that are important to us. A part of our seasonal ritual is to place a large cross just outside on Providence Road, draping it with purple, signifying mourning and pain but also royalty. The next evening we gather in the sanctuary and mark our foreheads with ashes by the sign of the cross, reminding us of our mortality.

In my office I have a cross from Israel, one from a Walk to Emmaus retreat, a crucifix given to me by a Catholic friend, a cross from Haiti, and a cross made from the wood of the Brown Building. Many of us have crosses that are important to us.

The cross is the central symbol of Christianity, the marketing profession would say that it is our brand. It is what we are about, it is who we are. That is not to deny the ambiguity and confusion that surrounds the cross, and this has been true for over two thousand years; **We preach Christ crucified**, the apostle Paul commented, **a scandal to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles...**A scandal, a stone of stumbling, something that we cannot quite get over or beyond.

At the heart of this scandal are some very penetrating questions: why the violence of the cross, why the suffering, why, in particular, did Jesus have to die? In our Gospel lesson the centurion speaks for many when he confesses, at Golgotha, **"surely this man was innocent."** Beyond the suffering of the innocent, a problem for those who have faith and those without faith, there is the more specific question: what did the death of Jesus mean, what did it accomplish?

We are moving toward our need to explain all of this, and there have been, historically, a variety of explanations for the death of Jesus; these are sometimes labeled as theories of the atonement. These theories help, or do not help to answer the question, why did Jesus die on the cross, and what did he accomplish, and what does that have to do with you or me, anyway?

It has to do, for some, with the idea of substitution---he took our place on the cross, he died for our sins. It has to do, for some, with the idea of satisfaction---he took away the wrath of God in his obedience. It has to do, for some, with the idea of sacrifice---he gave himself, the gift of his life. It has to do, for some, with the

idea of ransom---he paid the price for our freedom. It has to do, for some, with the idea of Passover---he is the **lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.**

We must admit, that there is much that is a scandal even in these explanations. Why did God need the death of his son for our forgiveness? Is there is an angry God and a good Jesus, balancing out some kind of equation? Is God a violent God? Did Jesus really have a choice in the matter? What kind of religion would make all of this the focal point of its origin? Maybe you have wondered about some or all of this, or maybe not. Many have, and some have found it to be too much, and they have wandered away from the faith. It might be nice to avoid all of this---I think of the mega-church in another part of the country that removed the cross from its worship because it was offensive to seekers. They were correct. It is offensive. We are talking about "*The old rugged cross,*" as the hymn has it, "*so despised by the world, the emblem of suffering and shame.*"

And yet the cross has another meaning. **We preach Christ crucified, a scandal to the Jews and foolishness to the gentiles, but to those who are being saved, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.**

It helps to think about what is happening at the cross. It is a symbol of God's love for us, for all people, for the creation. This has been at the heart of how Methodist Christians have viewed the cross, and for us this is most eloquently expressed in the hymns of Charles Wesley:

*O love divine, what has thou done? The immortal God hath died for me.
The Father's co-eternal son, bore all my sins upon the tree.
The immortal God for me hath died. My Lord, my love is crucified.*

The cross is a symbol of the love of God for us. What was accomplished on the cross, in the death of Jesus? It has to do with the depth of sacrificial love. And so, as the missionary Leslie Newbigin insisted, it is not "*the love and self-sacrifice of Christ which turned away the wrath of God and so secured our salvation. This is a perversion of the truth...The love which secured our salvation also comes from God. It is because God loves the world that he gave his Son to be its Saviour.*"

And so love and suffering, at the cross, are mixed together, co-mingled, as is so often the case in life. In the cross God moves toward suffering---Dietrich Bonhoeffer, writing from a Nazi Prison cell shortly before his death, remarked, "*only the suffering God can help*". And so, we look to Jesus, who ---- **emptied himself**, Paul says, **taking the form of a servant, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross.** Again, Charles Wesley's incomparable hymn captures this:

He left his Father's throne above, So free, so infinite his grace.

Emptied himself of all but love and bled for Adam's helpless race.

God takes the sin and suffering of humanity upon himself, literally absorbing it into his body. This is one of the meanings of atonement---at /one/ment. And so the question is shifted from what kind of God demands suffering and death, to what kind of God enters into our suffering and is in solidarity with us in our death? In its most extreme form this is related to the words that we have taken out of the creed: *"he descended into hell"---yet, for the sinner who wants to be damned apart from God, the cross is the sign of God's solidarity with us, "God's act to bring us back to himself at any cost".*

Two weeks ago we read the parable of the prodigal son--- do you remember the story, the younger son goes to the far country, the older brother remains, the father divides the inheritance, the younger son wastes his share, squanders the birthright. This is all still a disgrace. The son in leaving has disrespected the father and dishonored the community, not to mention the alienation toward the sibling, all of it a parable of the sin that separates us from each other and our true purpose in life. And then there is a shift in the story, the son comes to himself, this is repentance, a turning, and he walks back home.

At a great distance the father who has lost a child, and the community's respect, sees that the son is returning home. More than one scholar has interpreted his race toward the returning son not only as a gesture of reconciliation, but as an act of protection---the son has offended the community, and in an honor and shame culture could have been, indeed should have been killed. The father forgives the offense of the son to the family, he seeks to reconcile with the older brother, who seemingly will have no part of this, and he acts to make amends with the whole community. How does the father make amends? He prepares a great feast, not only for his family for the entire community, they would have smelled the aroma of the choicest meat, the fatted calf. This was an honor and shame culture but they understood sacrifice.

This story stays with us, we locate ourselves in this story in some way: of course, we are lost, or hoping for some sense of reconciliation, we want to protect our loved ones from harm, we want everything to be right and whole. And perhaps many of us along the way have found ourselves in one of these roles: the one who goes out into the world, or the one who stays home and keeps up appearances, or the one who waits, and watches, and welcomes. And so we locate ourselves somewhere in the story, and we have the sense that the parent must be God.

A friend was talking about this parable recently, and asked a provocative question, we see ourselves in the story, perhaps we see God, but where is Jesus in the story,

who is Jesus? And then he offered this answer. What if Jesus is the fatted calf, what if he is the sacrifice that brings the community together?

This is atonement---at-one-ment: **the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world**. Jesus, on the cross, the atoning sacrifice, his body, broken for us, his blood, poured out for us, his word, clearly spoken to and about each of us and the whole community, "Father, forgive them". Christ crucified is the grace of God that makes us one with ourselves, one with each other, one with the world, and one with our creator. This is quite an accomplishment, almost beyond our human comprehension, certainly beyond our capability.

A wonderful gift came to me at the end of the week. I received a phone call early on Friday morning. I recognized the voice of a friend, Leighton Ford. *"What is your schedule like today, would you like to have lunch?"* It happened to be a mostly open day, so we met for lunch. Leighton has become a good friend to me and to our church across these years. He is an internationally known evangelist, spiritual director and author. He is the brother-in-law of Billy Graham and for years spoke in that movement.

We were sitting down to lunch, talking about a variety of things, and he asked what I would be preaching about, and I said, the cross. And then he said, you have to share this, and so I will. *"The other morning I received a call from Billy Graham. It was early in the morning and caught me by surprise. He has not been well at all for over a year, not well at all, he finds it very difficult to speak, but on this morning his voice sounded as clear as a bell. Who is this, I asked. He said, it's your brother in law! And Billy Graham told Leighton that he was feeling much better. He said, "you know, I may even have one more sermon in me".*

And so, Leighton asked him, what would you preach about? And Billy Graham said, if I had one more sermon to preach, it would be on Galatians 6. 14:

May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ...

And so we make our entrance, with Jesus, into Jerusalem, we call this Holy Week. They wanted a King of Glory, a leader who would unite the nation under his power. He was the Suffering Servant, who would lay down his life for his friends, and ask for the forgiveness of his enemies. Why did Jesus die on the cross, and what did he accomplish, and what does that have to do with you or me, anyway? *"Only the suffering God can help"*. Many of us have crosses that are important to us.

Sources: The writings of Robert Jenson, Leslie Newbigin, Jurgen Moltmann, Charles Wesley, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Thanks also to Grant Hagiya for the insight about the "fatted calf", and to Leighton Ford for the conversation.