

“By the Blood of His Cross”

“For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things...making peace by the blood of his cross” (Colossians 1:19-20).

Earlier this year, our preschool director Gwen Kanning shared a wonderful devotion with our church staff. As you may remember, last summer the church steeple was covered with scaffolding while crews restored the exterior of the church. At one point during this process the copper cross at the top of our steeple was removed. For several weeks, it sat in Ebenezer Hall so that our members could get a good look at it before it was repaired and placed back on the top of the steeple. It was during this time that Miss Kanning brought her class over to look at the cross. Each of the kids had their picture taken next to the giant cross, and, in her devotion, Gwen recalled the conversation she had with her preschoolers about this once-in-lifetime opportunity. She wrote:

One child said, “It’s a cross for Jesus!” Another kid exclaimed, “It’s taller than my dad.” Then, as they examined the weathered relic more closely, their comments took on a different tone. One preschooler proclaimed, “It’s dirty.” Another quipped, “It’s yucky.” Some noticed the dent and asked, “How did it get bended?” One thoughtful boy said, “Who hit it? And, Gwen said, more than one child asked, “When will Mr. Randy put it back up?”

The honesty of preschoolers is refreshing, and, in their simple and sincere questions, the youngest members of our church seemed to recognize the cross for what it really was with all its flaws and imperfections. And today, there is a great lesson for us in their words. You see, there’s no question that the cross is one of the most iconic images in human history, and yet, in so many ways, we look past the truth of its original meaning. Today, we see crosses at hospitals and in cemeteries; we display them in our homes as artwork, we wear them on our bodies as jewelry or tattoos, and we see crosses everywhere from greeting cards to bumper stickers. But, in its purist form, a cross is never something we would consider attractive or desirable.

The cross was a Roman instrument of death designed to heighten humiliation and extend suffering. Its simple shape was an intentional frame on which criminals were executed in the most degrading way imaginable. On the cross, a naked body was stretched out and exposed for all to see and mock, and without a shred of clothing to cover its shame. Tied or nailed to the crossbeam, the victims of crucifixion would take days to die, usually by suffocation, and then would remain on the cross for weeks as their bodies rotted. This is what the cross was meant to do and no one in their right mind would ever want anything to do with a cross.

Now I want you to listen to what I’m about to say, because this is a very important thing for us to understand: The truth is, that even as Christians, *we still don’t want anything to do with the cross!* Paul talked about this in I Corinthians when he wrote, “For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing” (I Corinthians 1:18). This foundational statement from Paul’s pastoral letter is familiar to most us and it’s often quoted by Christian pastors and people alike to describe the world’s rejection of Christ, but if we are honest, we have to confess that we really don’t want to embrace the cross either.

In his book, “On Being a Theologian of the Cross,” Gerhard Forde says this very plainly when he writes that, “the theology of the cross is an offensive theology” because the cross is “the attack of God on the old sinner” (Forde, 4). And the truth that we don’t like to admit is that the “old sinner” inside each and every one of us is still very much alive...and it hates the cross! And, instead of letting the cross do its job on us, the old sinner tries to hide from this reality and cover up this truth by pointing to the good things we do. Our giving, our patience, our self-sacrifice, and even our religious identity as Christians all can be ways that we avoid the work of the cross. And so, very quickly, our trust turns from a reliance on the promises of God, to a dependence on the good stuff we think we’ve done or thought or said.

Last week in our family confirmation class, Pastor Sheaffer led a discussion on the Ten Commandments, and as we worked through Luther's meanings to the 4th and 5th Commandments, I was amazed at how quickly I found myself thinking about and looking for exceptions to the rule. "What about wicked rulers?" I thought to myself, "Do we have to honor them?" or "What about people who wish to harm us? Do we really have to help and support them in every physical need?" You see, the unbending character of God's Law leaves no room for the "old sinner" inside of us to breathe, and yet our sinful hearts fight like crazy to stay alive. We look for ways to justify our indifference, we explain away our prejudice, we hold up our hurt as a reason for us to meet one wrong with another, and in a thousand different ways our "old sinner" looks for any excuse it can use to stay alive. And that is why the cross of Jesus Christ is so important.

Luther wrote that, "the real and true work of (the cross) is to make man conform to Christ, so that man's conscience is tormented by his sins (just) as Christ was tormented in body and soul by our sins... Now, the whole world closes in upon you." And Luther continues, "You must get this thought through your head and not doubt that you are the one who is torturing Christ, for your sins have surely wrought this... Therefore when you see the nails piercing Christ's hands, you can be certain that it is your work. When you behold his crown of thorns, you may rest assured that *there* are your evil thoughts" (Luther's Works, 42:9). And when we understand that the story of the cross is our story, then we can also know and receive the most wonderful truth of God, that *there on the cross* we died with Christ.

Christ has done the unthinkable for us, and in today's reading from Colossians, Paul explains this when he writes that God "has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins... For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, *making peace by the blood of his cross*" (Colossians 1:13-14, 19-20).

You see the cross is the place where sin died. The cross is the place where *your* sin died! And when we see our death in the death of Jesus, then we recognize with Isaiah, that even our most righteous acts "are like filthy rags" and that there is nothing in ourselves that leads to life. Forde writes, on the cross of Jesus Christ, "all loopholes are closed so that the believer will in the end simply be cast on that creative love of God, which makes the object of its love out of *the nothing* to which the sinner has been reduced" (Forde, 12).

And that is what the cross means. Not only have we, "been crucified with Christ" but we, as Paul writes, "no longer live" and instead, Christ lives in us (Galatians 2:20). Through our Baptism into Christ, we have died to sin, we have been buried with Christ, and we have been recreated and raised to live as His new creation (Romans 6). This means that we can now judge everything and everyone by the cross, knowing that our good words and works and intentions can't and don't add one thing to the love that God has given to us in His Son.

In her devotion, Gwen put it this way: "The cross of Jesus is indeed a beautiful, ugly thing. (There) we know all about the ugliness of our sins and about the horrible suffering of Jesus to pay for those sins. As Paul writes, *the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God*" (I Corinthians 1:18). And then, Gwen concluded her devotion with this wonderful statement: "The message of Christ's cross is powerful and saving and loving and freeing for each one of us."

My friends, today, our King comes to give us everything He accomplished for us on the cross. Through His death, we too have died to sin, and in His strong, creating Word, He has raised us to a new and righteous life, and today, in this life, we can live and love and serve our neighbor to the glory of God knowing that He has reconciled all things to himself by the blood of the cross. Go with the peace and joy of this promise of God to you. Amen.

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