

Sermon for Sunday, March 11, 2018

Lift High the Cross

The story recalled in our Old Testament reading this morning is just really odd. Once again, the Israelites whine and complain and grow impatient with God's deliverance of them. They hate the food God has provided them—that manna stuff—and their life in the wilderness is harsh. Then inexplicably—perhaps to teach them a lesson—God inflicts upon them a bunch of poisonous snakes, who bite them, and they die. What's with that? So, in a spirit of penance and fear, they come to Moses and say, "We messed up! Pray to God for us!" He does, and God instructs him to make a snake, put it on a pole, and when people who have been bitten look at it, they will be healed. So Moses does and it works! When they are bit, the people look at the bronze snake on the pole, and they are healed. They don't die. Go figure! It worked so well, in fact, that the snake on a pole became the symbol of the healing arts, and it still is.

Then in our New Testament reading from John's Gospel, Jesus calls upon that story to make the case for his own healing charms. Like the snake on the pole, the Son of Man must be lifted up on the cross, and whoever sees him there, and believes in him, will not perish, but will have everlasting life. You will recall that in John's Gospel, seeing and believing is a recurring theme.

So, if you look at Jesus on the cross, and believe in his atoning sacrifice for sin, you will be healed, saved, reconciled to God, and restored to the life that is eternal. Maybe that explains why it's remained important to our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters to keep Jesus on the cross, what we call a crucifix. It's not to make them feel guilty about causing Jesus' suffering—although it does—but for the sight of it to heal them, save them, and rescue them. And in keeping with this, it used to be that above every bed in every Catholic hospital was a crucifix. The cross of Christ is still considered a healing sight, even the empty cross that we use in the Protestant tradition.

Now it's tempting to think of these "poles" as idolatrous, and they did become so. Snake worship became a problem for the Israelites—you see snakes rejuvenate themselves by shedding their skin; a kind of immortality—and the Protestant reformers considered the crucifix a graven image of God, hence our empty cross. But what unites them in John's Gospel, and for us, is how they remind us who we are, and who God is. We sin, and God saves. We sin, turn against God, and suffer the consequences of our faithlessness. God, on the other hand, forgives, and heals the brokenness in our relationship, at great cost to God's self. "Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all." So the healing power in these symbols, is in how they invite us to remember, the forgiving, saving, and healing love of God. It's why we just sang, "In the Cross of Christ I Glory." God does not condemn us when we turn against God. God rescues us and reconciles us.

The Bible proclaims that death is the final enemy. Death should scare the hell out of us, but it doesn't. We remain as committed to that which separates us from God as we ever did. But God does not want us to live in fear, so God takes on the ministry of showing us, in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, that death does not have the last word. God has the last word. The Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, is not birth and death, and not your birth and your death. It is God, who made us, loves us, abides with us and will not let us go.

In his book, [How to Read the Bible and Still be a Christian](#), biblical scholar and theologian John Dominic Crossan, argues that the story of Adam and Eve was never about Original Sin, but instead was about our need to acknowledge, and live with the fact, that we are mortal, that we will die. The biblical story we all know so well borrowed wantonly from equally well-known stories in antiquity that also demonstrated the futility of seeking immortality, or rejuvenation. Try as we might, and have, humankind has never achieved it, and never will. We are dust, and to dust we shall return. Crossan thinks the message of the story of the Garden of Eden is less about disobedience and more about reminding us that we cannot attain immortality. So get over it.

But how do we conquer the fear of death? God invites us, paradoxically, to eliminate our fear of death, by making death our friend. Seriously! Because the best way to eliminate an enemy is to make him or her a friend. Not that God wants to encourage us to put our life at risk by doing highly dangerous things, or that God wants us to end our life prematurely because death seems like a better alternative, but that God doesn't want the fear of death to paralyze us from enjoying the gift of life to the full. So how, in God's name, do we make death a friend?

Our Christian faith has an answer to that question, and his name is Jesus. He is our savior and Lord because he demonstrates to us, in his life, death, and resurrection, that we belong to God—in life *and* in death—and that nothing in all creation, especially not our sin, can separate us from the love of God when we believe in, trust in, and love him. Believing in him removes the sting of death, and the victory of death, because despite death's power to destroy, we continue to live in God's love, which we enjoy through faith now and forever. So in Christ, death becomes a friend. Not a best friend, for sure, but a friend that reminds us that we aren't eternal, but God is, and God will never abandon us, will always cherish us, and through faith makes us a part of the resurrection body of our Lord Jesus to live in him now and forever.

Said John, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." And Paul wrote that "in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself." Both proclaimed their conviction that somehow, and in some way, in his life, death, and resurrection, Jesus restored our relationship with God and with one another, and that it was God who accomplished this on our behalf. Though we had become God's enemies, God chose to get up close and personal with us in Christ, at great risk to God's self, to make us God's friends again. And though God paid a terrible price for such love, it changes anyone who sees and believes it, who looks upon the cross and sees not just humanity's worst, but God's best. That is the good news of the gospel.

God, however, forgives and heals and reconciles us in Christ for a reason, and Paul expressed this better than any other: "to entrust the message of reconciliation to us." We are saved to live as God's reconciled community, and to become agents of God's reconciling love.

Dominic Crossan is deeply concerned about the escalating violence of the human race, and convicted, as every Christian should be, by the non-violent resistance of Jesus to those who would abuse any of God's children. But non-violent resistance is difficult. It requires that we treat everyone with dignity and respect, and pray for our enemies. It's far easier to ostracize them, incarcerate them, expel them from school, or remove them from society in one way, shape, or form. But that easier way makes more enemies, not fewer. Only love's way, love's costly way, transforms enemies into friends. Love's way of forgiveness and reconciliation that our Lord calls us to follow, is the only way to unite the whole world into one community of faith, hope, love, and peace. This is the challenge you embrace as disciples of Jesus Christ and as members of his church, to live in love's way, love's costly way, to transform enemies into friends.

Keep gazing upon the cross and it will heal you. It will remind you that you are mortal and always will be. It will remind you that you aren't perfect, but fail again and again to live faithfully in God's love. But it will also remind you that God does not kill you, or punish you, or cast you out, or ignore you. God forgives you, and suffers for you, and sacrifices his life for you in Christ, that you may see and believe in God's eternal love, be transformed for new life, and not perish but have everlasting life. Believe it, and live.

PRAYER: Almighty God, we believe. Help our unbelief. May we always look at the cross and remember how you saved us. And healed by that sight, may we serve as those who lift it high on behalf of others, that they too may see and believe, and join us in adoring our Lord's sacred name. In Christ we ask it. Amen.

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John 3:14-21
Numbers 21:4-9