

GOOD FRIDAY

Get Off the Cross We Need the Wood

Promptings offered by the Rev. Dr. Michael D. Castle
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THE CROSS: WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

Christians through the ages have pondered the meaning of the cross of Jesus. And if each of us were to share what the cross means to us, we would no doubt find a diversity of opinions. Like the old joke says: "Put 3 United Church of Christ folks in the same room and there are likely to be five opinions."

And let me be clear: when it comes to making meaning of the Cross, I am fine with whatever perspective you most identify with. We can worship together, we can serve together, we can be in Christian community together and still think differently about the cross, or any other theological issue and biblical interpretation for that matter.

The United Church of Christ's Statement of Faith, which is our congregation's statement of faith, says that we believe that "in Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, our crucified and risen Savior, you [God] has come to us and shared our common lot, conquering sin and death and reconciling the world to yourself." Our Statement of Faith names Jesus as crucified but it does not define what that *might* or *should* mean to us. In the United Church of Christ, you are entrusted with the task of figuring that out for yourself. And for sure, in the United Church of Christ, we can think differently about the cross and still be one in Christ Jesus. In the United Church of Christ, we feel that we don't need or have to nail down one only opinion among others for all to subscribe. So again, if the way you make meaning out of the cross of Jesus works for you and is meaningful and helpful to you to your Christian life and practice, I'm all for it. I will respect that.

What I won't respect is an unconsidered, knee-jerk response. What I won't respect is the parroting of some dogma that your mama or your daddy or a minister somewhere told you was the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, and you believed it. And you still believe it, although you've never seriously or intentionally considered other ways to think about the cross. What I won't respect is a stubbornness to stake your claim on a single dogma and call others "heretics" and "unbelievers" because their take does not line up with what you were taught or believe.

So I want to offer you a challenge tonight. When it comes to the meaning of the Cross, identify and consider all the possible options, and once you understand each of the options before you, humbly, intentionally decide what makes the most sense to you, and live it, and let it shape your spiritual life and practice.

What I am talking about tonight is what is known as the doctrine of "atonement." An easy way to remember what the doctrine of "atonement" is all about it is this: think of it as "at – one – ment." Or more specifically, how does the cross of Jesus reconcile us to God, or make us *one* with God? Without getting overly heady or technical with you tonight (you should thank me for that!), let me propose two general ways that people have made sense of the Cross of Jesus.

One the one hand, there is the traditional idea that God sent Jesus to earth to die and that the shedding of his blood was what washes all our sins away, and makes it possible for us to be reconnected to God. And of course, even within that position there are many nuances.

Some would see Jesus' death on the cross as the *only* means to be reunited with God and the only way to go to heaven when you die and stay out of hell. Others would see the death of Jesus simply as God's decisive, salvific act for them, but would avoid any claim to Christian exclusivity.

I would identify this position as “high,” or lofty, or heavenly Christian perspective, because it claims and postulates things beyond this world of knowledge and experience, and makes claims about God’s purpose and will. In this position, Jesus’ death on the cross is God’s defining act that makes atonement with God possible.

But there is another hand. On the other hand, there is another Christian perspective concerning the cross of Jesus that I would identify as a “low,” or earthy, because it tends to see things from our human perspective and experience; to only postulate things about the cross from where we sit. And to be honest and fully self-disclosing, I identify most closely with this camp.

This theological understanding would say that God did not send Jesus here to die. There is a great hesitation and resistance to say God sent Jesus to earth to have him killed because that puts God in the awful position of being the violent murderer of his own son. If our faith in God is grounded in abiding love and justice and non-violence, having God send Jesus to earth in order to crucify him just doesn’t make sense. This position would say that Jesus was full of God; that he embodied God in a full and unique way; that in Jesus’ presence people experienced God; and it was that very sense of God in the life of Jesus that threatened the powers, whether political, economic and/or religious, and got him killed. In this position, it is not Jesus’ death on the cross that is God’s clear and salvific act, rather it is Jesus’ life that is God’s most defining and it is that life that leads us into oneness with God. It is in the human life of Jesus that God is revealed and defines what “oneness” with God looks and feels like. Thus, the cross is the risky, calculated outcome of a life lived out of an ongoing experience of God. And this ongoing experience of God will always threaten some and upset systems of power, hierarchy, exclusion and injustice. And it can get you killed.

Well, as you sit at the foot of the cross tonight, I don’t know what makes the most sense to you as you try to make meaning out of the cross...but I hope your presence here tonight means you are willing to think about it and wrestle with it until it blesses you.

THE CROSS: WHAT YEARNINGS DOES IT CALL FORTH?

If you don’t think how we make meaning out of the Cross is a relevant and lively exercise for the church today, think again. In recent days, this whole notion of Jesus’ atonement on the cross has been central to some recent “news.”

You may have already read Newsweek’s front page story this week: “The End of Christian America.” The article is attempting to address the dramatic 10% fall in the number of people who self-identify as Christians over the past two decades. In that story, Albert Mohler, the president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary is quoted a lot. He laments this trend and despairs that it is a sign of an imminent fall of an America shaped and suffused by Christianity. Mohler is quoted as saying that “the most basic contours of American culture have been radically altered. The so-called Judeo-Christian consensus of the last millennium has given way to a post-modern, post Christian, post-Western cultural crisis which threatens the very heart of our culture.” He then adds, “Clearly, there is a new narrative, a post-Christian narrative, that is animating large portions of this society.”

Now, what is not in the article, but surely motivates Albert Mohler, is his belief that the cross of Jesus is the only means by which one can find atonement with God. I have read enough of Al Mohler over the years to know that for him the cross is God’s all-important, atoning, salvific act. There is no other. It all hinges on the cross. And according to him, we know this because the Bible says so! At the core of his lament in Newsweek is his perceived loss of this exclusivistic Christian claim to move and persuade Americans and Christians today. And he is doing everything in his power to proclaim and articulate a salvation that comes from God only through Jesus and the cross.

And in another story, the Episcopal Church here in southern Ohio is all a buzz. Their new bishop, Thomas Breidenthal recently sent out a letter to the people of the Episcopal Diocese of Southern Ohio stating that he would not be voting to elect Kevin Thew Forrester as the bishop of the Northern Michigan diocese because of his “low” theology of the cross. Here is his reason: “Why is Thew Forrester’s teaching troubling to me? Breidenthal asks. “Because it flies in the face of what I take to be the conviction at the

heart of our faith tradition, namely, that we are in bondage to sin and cannot get free without the rescue God has offered us in Jesus, who shouldered our sins on the cross.”

I guess I won't be running for bishop in the Episcopal church anytime soon.

I know Thomas Breidenthal to be a liberal, mainline clergyperson. So for me, his narrow view is shocking. Now, I doubt that Breidenthal will see Jesus as exclusivistically as Albert Mohler does, but nonetheless, for both men's Christian faith, the cross remains God's all-important salvific act and any deviation of that understanding is not acceptable.

I find their positions troubling for many reasons. And with all due respect to Mohler, Breidenthal (and to any of you in this room who feel more at home with their position than not), I think positions like theirs are in fact killing the church. The way I see it (and this is my take, I will own it!), it is theological understandings like theirs that are going to have to die in order for a new and energized church to emerge. But mainly, I find their positions archaic at best, a distortion at worse, and a major distraction to the Christian Church. They are positing tired, old arguments in a post-modern, pluralistic world. And they just aren't working for people anymore!

In the movie *Sordid Lives: A Dark Comedy about White Trash*, there is a great line. It goes like this: “Get off the cross, we need the wood.”

When I think about Mohler and Breidenthal's arguments, I want to scream: “Fellas, get off the cross, we need the wood!”

We don't need more arguments about atonement. We don't need a god of fear. We don't need more division in the church, where people are divided into the good and the bad, the acceptable and the non-acceptable. “Get off the cross fellas, we need the wood!”

What we need is a Church--a community of Jesus' followers--who are serious and intentional about love and justice and liberation and reconciliation and welcome and healing and forgiveness and peace in the Church...and beyond the Church in the world! What we need is a Church that is willing to enter into the story of Jesus and experience God again in our precious present. What we need is a Church that is willing to yearn and work for a brighter future and better world and dream with God in a community of grace and care about what that world might look like.

For me, the cross stands as a stark reminder that there is danger and inherent risk in living and leading a God-intoxicated life. For me, the cross is a reminder that a Jesus kind of life can get you killed! The cross will not let me forget that although the powers of death and violence and fear and injustice and hate indeed reek pain and suffering of all kinds on our lives, their actions are never the end of the story. For me, the cross is a reminder that the mystery of God's grace cannot be boxed or contained by our limited reach or understanding. For me, the Christian cross is a sign and symbol of God's kingdom, when and only when, people of difference are brought together and made “one with each other and with God” at the Table of Love.

Tonight, on Good Friday, I hope the cross of Jesus will call forth in each of us a deep desire and a passionate yearning – however risky -- to say “Yes!” to God and to allow God to be seen and known in the world through our flesh and our bones – just like Jesus did. For me, that is a cross of Jesus that will mean something!

Well, I have said my piece, maybe too much. But I am curious: what yearning is pulling at your heart as you sit at the foot of the cross and think about the life it represents? What wondrous love is this?

I think the hymn writer helps us: It is a love so amazing, so divine, it demands my soul, my life, my all!

Amen.