

Why the cross?

That is the question we need to ponder and answer as Christians. It is the question that comes into focus especially at this time of the year. The cross was a shameful death and the message of the cross was described as “foolishness” even two thousand years ago. Today, some Christians may feel the same way—that the cross is something from our religious past that we can ignore or at least diminish and move beyond.

But is it? God could have brought his message of love and forgiveness in some other way at some other time and place in history. Perhaps God could have waited until our day and had someone write a best seller or a popular blog or host a TV show or even start a cable network. Persuasion and a good example would work, wouldn't it? No need for God to get down and dirty in human life, and experience what Jesus did...

In fact, some today describe our religious message in the mainline churches as “Therapeutic Moralistic Deism.” In other words, we have forgotten the roots of our faith and replaced it with warm and fuzzy sentiments like, “Be nice to one another” and “I'm okay and you're okay.” The problem is, that message is woefully inadequate for what we face in life.

That's why the cross is so important. The cross both identifies and provides a way out for the deep problems we face as human beings. Without the message of the cross, those of us who are doing okay could simply ignore the reality of others. And those of us who struggle with the burdens of life would have no hope, no sense that God is there, that God cares, and that God is active to save us.

So why the cross?

The cross has been described in an Orthodox hymn as a lamp that brings light to this dark world. The cross reveals what the powerful of this world can do when they feel threatened, when they feel they need to act in order to protect what they value in life. The cruel death that Jesus experienced is one example of millions of cruel acts done by the powerful—to enemies, slaves, women, children, people who are different. If we study history, we know this. Many of us would prefer to look away or explain away how the powerful—whether it's us or those representing us-- have done such cruelty. The cross brings the cruelty of the powerful into focus for us and reminds us of what they—and we-- are capable of doing.

In today's news, we see this most vividly in stories of beheadings and people being burned alive by the terrorist movement known as the Islamic State. We shake our heads and wonder how human beings can commit such atrocities. But the cross exposes more than the cruelty of such monstrous states, like ISIS. The cross reminds us of the evil that can be done by good people, too.

The Roman Empire and the Jewish religion were two of the best examples of human political and religious power in the time of Jesus. They had rules and generally followed them to maintain a reasonably just state and way of life. And yet these two good institutions conspired to do great harm to an innocent man. And so the cross reminds us of that. Not to justify and perpetuate hatred of a particular group, but so we see the potential we and our institutions have to do evil. So for us today, we need to use the light of the cross to ask, "How does our nation use its great power in ways that are unjust? How does our church-- and how do other churches-- take up the cross not to follow Jesus but to harm others? And, more personally, how do I use my own power?" Those questions can help us follow the way of the cross.

In addition to revealing the abuses of the powerful, the light of the cross also reveals God's great love for us. If we believe that God became human in Jesus Christ, then the message of the cross is truly amazing. If God is all-knowing, then God understood the grave risk of becoming one of us. God-made-human would set aside divine power and be subject to the whims of the crowd and the violent reactions of the powerful. God knew the cross was in God's human destiny. And God still became one of us.

When Jesus focused on compassion over religious rules, he knew he was treading in dangerous territory. When Jesus taught that there is another kingdom coming that is beyond the reach of Rome or the limits of the Temple, he knew he was stirring up trouble. When despite his warnings and resistance, the crowd would spread the news of his miracles and seek to make him king, Jesus knew his life was at risk. God knew all this and the tragic result that we just read together. And yet God still became human. God joined our lives in order to reveal the cruelty of this world and make known God's loving desire to save us.

The cross especially reveals that God love is expressed in God's solidarity with those who are oppressed by the world's power. Jesus' cruel death among criminals makes clear with whom God identifies in our world. It is not with the powerful and those who do their bidding in the name of maintaining order. It is with the people who are whipped or executed, bombed or shot, or simply left to fend for themselves despite what they may face.

Jesus makes this clear in the famous passage from Matthew's Gospel—that when we have treated "the least of these" with kindness, we have done it unto him personally, the one true king who will judge us. The list of the least would make an interesting agenda for our prayers, our service, and our advocacy as people who take up our cross and follow Jesus. The

list includes people who are hungry and thirsty; people who are alone and estranged; people without clothing, the sick, and prisoners. God makes clear through the life, teaching, and death of Jesus that God identifies with these people we often forget or ignore.

To be clear, the good news is that God loves all of us—even the powerful. But God is clear about where we can find God—among those without the basics of life, those without power, people who may be losing hope. God calls us to notice and respond to them for our own soul's salvation as well as for the care we can provide for them. The cross reminds us of that.

The message of the cross is so much more than a simple feel good saying or religious platitude. It reaches deep into our individual souls and our shared lives and touches us where we hurt. The cross provides a bridge for us to walk over as we acknowledge our part in the sin of this world, repent, and follow the way God makes known to us as we follow Jesus.

One more thing-- this message of the cross is true and powerful—but it is not something we can do by ourselves. We are unable to take up our cross without God's help and the help of one another. That is why we gather in this place to pray and worship and learn and build relationships— to give and receive help so we can take the message of the cross from within these doors to the world outside that needs to hear it.

So let us consider the way of the cross during this Holy Week. And let us anticipate the completion of the Christian message coming at this week's end. Though we won't proclaim it liturgically until late Saturday night, Christ is risen from the dead and the cross is not the end of our story. The cross leads us to new life in the risen Christ so that we can join together in God's work of healing and restoration in our world.

Amen.