

## “What Means This Cross?”

**Date:** March 30, 2018    **Place:** Lakewood UMC    **Occasion:** Good Friday  
**Texts:** John 18:1-11; John 19:1-30    **Themes:** Suffering, death, atonement

The *cross* refers to the Roman instrument of death. Crucifixion was a form of execution in ancient times. A person was tied or nailed to a pole or a cross, and then left to hang until they died. According to ancient historians, such as Cicero and Josephus, crucifixion was the worst form of death.

In fact, the word *crucify* is actually derived from the word torture, which in Latin is *cruciare*. The primary political and social purpose of crucifixion was deterrence. Whenever they crucified the condemned, hill tops and crowded roads were chosen, where the most people could see and be moved by this terror. Crucifixion was meant to scare people into following Roman Law.

The condemned man usually carried the cross-beam, sometimes with a wooden sign around his neck declaring his name and punishment, later to be attached to the cross. The Gospels tell us that such a placard was placed on the cross of Jesus and that it was written in more than one language, describing Jesus as “king of the Jews.”

Crucifixion victims were usually beaten, scourged with whips, to which hooks or sharp pieces of metal or glass were attached, to maximize the pain and suffering. After carrying the cross-beam to the place of execution, the victim was then nailed to the cross, either through the wrists and ankles or heels.

They were left to die, however long that took, sometimes taking several days. At times friends and relatives were allowed to feed their loved one. Guards were stationed until the victim expired, because

occasionally friends or relatives attempted to rescue their loved one. The bodies of the crucified were usually left unburied, to rot and to be picked apart by birds and animals.

According to the Gospels, Jesus was taken down the very day he was crucified. To hasten the deaths of the two men crucified with Jesus, their legs were broken, making it impossible for them to push up to gasp for more air, and they would suffocate sooner. This allowed them to be buried before sundown, in keeping with Jewish law and sensitivities.

What means this cross, aside from the cruel instrument of Roman execution? For Christians it is the means by which God reconciled humanity to God's own self. The barrier of sin is dealt with by the sacrificial death of a perfect sacrifice, God's own Son.

The Bible gives the cross multiple meanings. We find as we turn the pages of the New Testament a generous menu for making sense of Jesus' atoning death. Indeed, the New Testament writers seem never to tire of generating new models of understanding to communicate the saving importance of the cross.

Taken as a whole, however, these images tend to congregate around five areas of public life in ancient times. There is the court of law, in which the cross justifies us before God, the almighty judge. There is the world of commerce, in which the cross redeems us, or pays the price for our release as if we were slaves.

There is the realm of personal relationships, in which the cross is understood as the reconciliation between two parties that have been estranged. There is the arena of worship, whereby the cross is understood as an atoning sacrifice. Finally, there is the battleground, whereby Jesus triumphs over evil, sin and death.

For most people the cross represents the forgiveness of sins, and it is that. It is most certainly that. But it is so much more, as all of these different images imply. We would do well to study our New Testament to gain a fuller understanding of what the cross means.

This Lent, as I've been reading and studying, I came across a new understanding of the cross that I want to share with you this evening. One definition of sin is "that which separates us from God." We usually think of sin as a moral shortcoming. But, sin can also be a thought or an attitude that separates us from intimate communion with God.

And for many people the problem of suffering has caused them to separate themselves from their loving God. In his book "Breathing Under Water," Father Richard Rohr writes:

"The evidence is overwhelming that God fully allows and does not stop genocides, the abuse of children, brutal wars, unspeakable human and animal suffering, the imprisonment of the innocent, the sexual enslavement of girls, the regular death of whole species and civilizations, the tragic lives of addicts and their codependents."(BUW, p.120)

He acknowledges, and I agree, that most explanations as to why God causes, or permits, suffering to happen are inadequate and unsatisfying. But he offers us an alternative. "If God is somehow in the suffering, participating as a suffering object too, in full solidarity with the world He or She created, then we can make some possible and initial sense of God and our world." (BUW, 121)

In Jesus Christ, God has entered our world and he experienced incredible suffering. Ours is the crucified God, who is not out there in space somewhere, watching disinterestedly in what happens to us. But God has chosen to enter our world and participate in the suffering of the

human experience. On the cross, God embraces all human suffering and makes it His own. We belong to a God who suffers with us. Jesus is not observing human suffering from a distance, but is somehow in our human suffering, both with us and for us.

Only a suffering God can understand our pain and anguish. Only a suffering God can understand our sense of isolation in times of great pain and loss. Only a suffering God can feel what we feel and understand our experience.

From the Christian perspective, Jesus is understood as the human incarnation of God. The suffering he experienced in his life and death on the cross has connected the dots for many people. This crucified God walks in solidarity with crucified people. God is with us in our suffering.

As those who have experienced suffering, we are called to be in solidarity with others who suffer. And so the cross becomes a kind of short-hand for the type of life the Christian is expected to lead. We are called to be in solidarity with those who suffer, to extend compassion and love and care and help.

The way of the cross is the way of the Christian life, signifying practical, sacrificial, loving service rather than ambition, domination, apathy or selfishness. It denotes love for enemies rather than vengeance, and faithfulness in suffering and persecution, even to the point of death.

The cross is life-giving and life-forming. It is God's instrument of peace and security in a world of violence. It is a divine critique of all ideologies of violence or domination. The cross is a divine summons to radical humble service, and self-giving love.

We serve the crucified God who suffers with us, when we serve the needs of those who suffer in any way. May it be so with us. Amen.

Resources for this sermon:

1. *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, Volume A-C*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006, pp. 803-804, "The Cross," Michael J. Gorman.
2. *Breathing Under Water*, by Fr. Richard Rohr, Cincinnati, OH: Franciscan Media, 2011, pp. 120-128.