

Acton Congregational Church, United Church of Christ

Date: Sunday, October 15, 2023

Scripture: 1 Cor 1:18-25, Mark 15: 12-16, 20-25, 33-38

Preacher: Rev. Ruth Richards

SERMON

“Cross”

Rev. Ruth Richards

Well, thank you! Thank you for coming, thank you for staying here, for hanging in there – so far. You came here today, all unsuspecting – some of you at least. Probably hoping for something encouraging, uplifting and sustaining. The news is ... awful. Israel at war with Palestine, Russia shows no signs of leaving Ukraine, our own country is tearing itself apart as we move further into politically uncharted waters ...

It's supposed to be an ordinary Sunday in the church year, the 20<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost doesn't get much more ordinary than that, yet today - we've got an ugly cross made from a mutilated Christmas tree up front here, our scripture for today was Jesus' crucifixion ... It's beginning to look a lot like ... the middle of Holy Week.

When it is Holy Week, we know that in a few days' time - it'll be Easter! We'll be celebrating Jesus' Resurrection! Hallelujahs! We'll be belting out *Christ the Lord is Risen Today*. There'll be spring flowers, colorful banners, trumpeters.

But not today. Because today, in our series of sermons on the very basics of our Christian faith, we're doing the most basic, raw, peculiar, terrible thing of all. The Cross.

So, as I said, thank you for showing up, and thank you for staying.

The first time I heard about Jesus' dying by being nailed to a cross I was probably about 5 years old. It was nearly Christmas.

I knew that Christmas was Jesus' birthday, and I knew that the age you were on your birthday was very important, so I asked my mum how old Jesus was going to be on this birthday. She was taken by surprise, as we all are when our children ask about important things. She explained that Jesus had died ever such a long time ago but if he hadn't died he would be hundreds of years old by now. She added that some men who didn't like him nailed him to a big wooden cross by his hands and feet and he ... died. I was shocked! It sounded really

horrible, and also it didn't make any sense. I thought everyone liked Jesus. Then I forgot about it for quite a long time. It was nearly Christmas, after all.

The trouble with the Cross is that it is horrible.  
And it doesn't make any sense.

Paul nails it when he writes to the church in Corinth that Christ crucified is "a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to [Greeks and Romans, - (Gentiles)]."

When Jesus, a devout Jew, tried to prepare his best friends, who were also devout Jews, that he would be handed over to the authorities in Jerusalem, beaten and killed, and rise to life on the third day, they just couldn't believe it. I don't think they even heard that last part, about rising on the third day.

From the point of view of the Gentiles, or pagans, with their many gods it sounded absurd. They were used to myths about sons of gods born to human women (invariably the beautiful daughters of kings or noblemen). These guys grew up to be heroes, they slayed monstrous bulls in labyrinths, or grotesque supernatural women with snakes for hair. They had cool things like magic swords and shiny shields and sandals with wings so they could fly.

Jesus was nothing like them. His closest friends all ran away to save themselves one dark night when he was arrested by the Jewish religious authorities – just as he'd told them would happen. He was condemned to death after a dubiously legal trial, then was too weak to carry his wooden cross and simply died - on that cross. No fantastic deeds, no monsters to fight. Jesus didn't lead the charge in any glorious battles, or even a heroic last stand, he just died a humiliating and anguished death. He died like all the other common insignificant criminals mown down by the machinery of the Roman justice system. Yet, we believe he died for us, and if any of that makes sense to you, you can be pretty sure it's the power of the Holy Spirit working in you.

When we say, recite or sing that Jesus died for us on the cross – what do we mean by that? As a young adult, after I started going to church I accepted that I fell far short of God's perfect goodness. I heard it in the words of the prayer of confession: "We have sinned against You and against our neighbors in thought, and word and deed: in the evil we have done, in the good we have not done; through ignorance, through weakness, through our own deliberate fault..." That's certainly clear.

My sense of fair play or justice was also clear:

If you harm someone, injure them physically, damage their property or damage them emotionally, you should say you're sorry and do your best to make it better for them. You should do this whether the harmful act was deliberate on your part or accidental, or even something you weren't aware of at the time.

Two wrongs don't make a right, but a wrong action may be partly or completely neutralized by an appropriate "good action."

If the damage done is considered a crime, our legal system requires that you are punished in some way, or make restitution – The greater the harm done, the greater the consequences to the perpetrator. In 27 US states, authorized murder by the state can be the punishment for the crime of murder. That's clear too. That's how human justice works.

So it's logical that our wrong actions pile up and however hard we try to not do them or make up for them, we can't ever make it to God's holy standard. But Jesus could, and Jesus did, and he brings enough for everyone. "The wages of sin is death but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. " it says in Romans 6:23.

Sin separates us from God; we can't close the gap but Jesus closes the gap for us ... by dying on a cross.

BUT – I began to have a problem with Jesus' death on the cross. If God is Love why does God require that death in order to forgive us?

Suppose that Jesus, God made man, had to experience every part of human mortality, including death itself in order to live an entire perfect life as a human being. That would surely and inevitably include suffering. We all suffer, it is truly a part of our human mortal lives. Our bodies, our frail biological flesh, in a world that obeys the laws of physics, feel hunger, thirst, pain. They get injured, they get sick – they suffer. We also suffer from grief and bereavement because we also love. Jesus as a human being experienced these limitations, these griefs.

BUT – if Jesus had to die to complete the circle, why did it have to start with betrayal, denial and enemies plotting against him and end in arrest and an ordeal of hours of state-legalized torture and murder? Even dying of natural causes at a good old age is tough going towards the end. Wouldn't that have been enough?

And there's another problem: the fact that Jesus suffered, willingly, and also forgave his tormentors has produced and prolonged other people's suffering. A major part of Jesus' teaching is about forgiving each other; we need look no further than the Lord's Prayer. "Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us."

Yet, tragically, people, usually women, in abusive relationships have often absorbed the idea that they should both forgive their abuser AND remain in the relationship, while continuing to experience abuse, especially if they are Christians. Often they've received this teaching from the Church.

It goes something like this: "If you love Jesus you should endure the suffering because it brings you closer to Jesus, who bore his suffering on the cross."<sup>1</sup> This is bad theology – God does not desire or approve of human suffering and misery. Jesus suffering on the cross does **NOT** mean that God values the well-being of the abuser above that of their victim. (And if anyone here is experiencing abuse, or is concerned about someone who is experiencing abuse, please come and speak with me, or check out the website for Hagar's Sisters).

[www.hagarssisters.org](http://www.hagarssisters.org)

When Peter, stumblingly, argued that Jesus, God's Messiah, Chosen One, Anointed One couldn't possibly fall into the hands of his enemies and die a criminal's death, Jesus bawled him out and called him Satan! Jesus himself was convinced that it was part of God's plan! Yet Jesus also taught publically of God's forgiveness, without making it conditional on his death. It's a paradox.

Now, I must say that, YES, discovering God's intense love for us, becoming human in an act of amazing, divine self-giving love for us has liberated us as individuals from the weight of our sin. We've likely experienced something of that – it is a vital and deeply personal part of our faith. And I don't want to contradict that here today. But I want to explore the cross as something that is more than personal. I want to explore the cross as God's solution to some of the problems of human instincts and behavior.

When we think about Jesus on the cross, we envisage a tortured body dying a painful death, innocent of any crime. We see a victim. The question is, whose victim and why? A God who does indeed require sacrificial death, with its blood, and pain and tears and despair in order to forgive humankind seems completely

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<sup>1</sup> S. Mark Heim, *Saved from Sacrifice*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. Grand Rapids p. 28

different from God who is “slow to anger and abiding in steadfast love.” There’s something so wrong here.

Stay with me.

Human violence against each other has been a problem since humans started living in large groups. It easily escalates. Someone is injured or even killed, in an accident or a fight. The injured person, or the dead person’s family takes vengeance. More people are killed, so more revenge is sought – and so on. If the community cannot find a way of living together, stopping the violence from spreading, well – they end up like Israel and Palestine and their shared history.

Or suppose a community has another problem that threatens them: a plague or a famine, or something else that is destructive to their survival. Tension rises and turns to fear. They must figure out why it’s happening and do something to fix it. It must be someone’s fault. Someone who doesn’t fit in, someone who has sinned, maybe just be being there, and the gods (or God) is punishing the community. The people clamor to be rescued, a scapegoat is identified and killed or exiled. The problem is solved and the community returns to normal life. At least for a while.

The individuals on whom the evil is pinned are those who are alone, with few or no friends or allies to defend them. Maybe they’re different in some way – disfigured, lame, or blind, developmentally delayed, or they stand out because they are a minority, without power against the majority. Maybe the problem is because of an entire minority group. As the cause of the threat they have to be removed. Something like this happened in New England in the last half of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century with witch trials and executions in Hartford and Salem.

Another example is more recent. In his excellent book, *Just Mercy*, Bryan Stevenson, a talented attorney who works with condemned prisoners on death row tells the story of what happened when a young white woman was murdered in Monroeville, Alabama one morning in the store where she worked. The murder horrified the small town. The crime remained unsolved for months and the community grew restive and anxious, critical of the local police and eventually of state officials. A man named Walter McMillian was eventually arrested for the murder despite there being no hard evidence against him. He also had a cast iron alibi for the period when the murder took place, yet he was convicted and sentenced to execution. No matter. The community needed a solution, a victim. McMillian would do. It was 1986 when he became the scapegoat for Monroeville

and its legal system. (Stevenson worked to get him exonerated and released but it took years, during which time McMillian was held in terrible conditions on death row, living with the fear of execution for a crime of which he was completely innocent).

Black and brown people have often been killed violently and needlessly both in our past and present. We have to face up to the atrocities committed in hundreds of years of slavery and lynching during the Jim Crow era. In our present time George Floyd and Ahmaud Arbery are two well-known recent victims – racial minorities who had committed no crime yet were killed as if they were dangerous criminals. There are many more. The difference – the surprise - is that Floyd's and Arbery's murderers were convicted, **because we saw the victims!** Thanks to cell phone cameras and social media, our wider society saw them and demanded that the system change!

NO - I can't believe that God demands a victim, a blood sacrifice, suffering, in order to forgive us. I believe God knows that it is our human societies that demand a victim. It is our "system" if you like that needs it, not God's. Mark Heim puts it like this: "Jesus didn't volunteer to get into God's justice machine. It is God who volunteered to get into ours."<sup>2</sup> Jesus as victim, as sacrifice, transforms our system.

When we see that, with that knowledge, we have the possibility of changing ourselves and our societies. We have a defense, a protection, from our own fear. Maybe if we can recognize it, if we can learn from it, if we can see it coming, we no longer have to serve it.

We see it when we remember and envisage Jesus' death, not from old age but on the cross. Jesus, God incarnate, made man. Sacrifice is not necessary to God's justice system, yet God understands it in ours and has entered into our justice system – yes, as the innocent victim, so we can be transformed and saved from having to repeat it.

Amen

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<sup>2</sup> Heim, p xi