

Grace Overcomes Disgrace
Acts 10:34-43; Luke 23:18-34
Palm/Passion Sunday, (April 14) 2019
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This week we slow down to re – member the most important things of our faith but also the hardest things of our faith.

The cross, the crucifixion of Jesus, is at the very heart of Christianity. It is crucial – literally and metaphorically. It is crucial; it is difficult; it is inscrutable. Part of the difficulty is that the cross, and the fact that we worship a crucified savior, is a paradox. This cruel, tortuous death is also the act through which God brings hope, salvation, healing, and resistance to this death-obsessed, hate-filled world. Paradox.

Crucifixion was the particular form of execution reserved by the Roman Empire for insurrectionists and rebels. It was a public spectacle of shaming accompanied by torture and shame – one of the most humiliating and painful deaths ever devised by human beings.

Writer Susan Sontag, who suffered for years from cancer that eventually killed her, wrote, “It is not suffering as such that is most deeply feared but suffering that degrades” (*AIDS and Its Metaphors*, p. 37). Crucifixion was specifically designed to be the ultimate insult to personal dignity, the last word in humiliating and dehumanizing treatment. Degradation was the whole point. Killing people on crosses was all about debasement and shame. It was about the process of declaring people worthless. The cross was the ultimate dis-grace.

It was intended to send a message to everyone and anyone considering rebelling against Rome: Rome was supreme and to challenge that supremacy would result in torture, public shame and dehumanization.

For the early church to be able to say that Jesus executed on a cross is the savior of the world took some explaining. For the Jews of Jesus' time, crucifixion was especially shameful given that in Deuteronomy 21:23 it says, "anyone hung on a tree is under God's curse."

In ancient Near Eastern times, long before Rome, it was not uncommon for empires to hang or nail someone considered a rebel or insurrectionist on an upright pole. Sometime it was just a pole, sometimes it was the trunk of a big tree, and by the time of Rome, they were usually using beams and cross-beams to make a cross. Sometimes, it was called a cross and sometimes a tree. In the New Testament, the Greek word used most often is the word cross. There are a few references to Jesus being hung or crucified on a tree. Scholars have long known that the two words: cross or tree are interchangeable.

The Apostle Paul said that the "word of the cross is foolishness" to the intellect and a stumbling block to standard religious understandings. It is a paradox because it inverts, it turns upside-down, the so-called common sense of our lives and our world with news that hope comes by way of defeat, that suffering, death, and disgrace do not have the last word, that the last shall be first, and that God brings God's Way by losing and dying.

An old activist friend of mine used to say, “If you go up against the Powers and you’d better look good on wood because that’s where you’ll end up.”

That’s what happened to Jesus. But somehow or another God turned this cross around, inverted it, turned it upside-down into hope, life, and healing.

The cross is what happens when the Empire or Powers try to shut down God’s Way of Life and Love and Peace. But at the same time, the cross is a revelation of who God is. In the cross, we get a picture of who God is more clearly than anywhere else.

This is important. The Cross shows us who God is.

This is what the early church knew. And it is what we are discovering again mostly through the black church.

Historians have shown that from the very beginning of slavery in this country, black slaves who first heard the gospel message seized upon the power of the cross. That God could “make a way of out of no way” was absurd and paradoxical but it was real to the black slaves. Christ crucified was what happened to God when God in Christ stood against the Powers. No matter if it was the Powers of the Empire or the White Powers, God in Christ was crucified. If you want to know where to find God, look to the cross, look to suffering people and you will find God in Jesus Christ there.

The black church saw in the cross hope while also receiving encouragement to resist the Powers, nowhere more clearly than during the Jim Crow era, also

known as the lynching era (roughly 1880-1940). Although white southerners lost the Civil War, they did not lose the cultural war. The struggle to define America as a white nation and blacks and others as inferior, unfit for governing and leadership and equality, continues on. During the lynching era the white supremacy system sought to control the black population through lynching. It was an effort to control through violence, intimidation, despair, shame, and disgrace. Lynching was a white public spectacle of shaming, often announced ahead of time in the local newspapers. Entire families came to watch and participate in the torture of the victim, inviting women and children to cut off genitals, fingers, toes, and ears as souvenirs. Black victims were often burned or roasted slowly. Postcards were made from the photographs with smiling white children, women, and men around the black victim, and then sold to members of the crowd, who mailed them to relatives and friends, writing things like, "This is the barbeque we had last night" (see James Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, p. 9).

The lynching tree was and continues to be the most potent symbol of the cross to our day. It names, like nothing else, the suffering and shame, the disgrace that is not talked about even now. Almost no one, neither white nor black, in Nacogdoches wants to talk about the lynchings that occurred here in our history. We are ashamed. It is a dis-grace.

When the White Powers hung black folk from southern trees, where was God? God was in Jesus being lynched on a tree too. When the old spiritual asked, "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?" the answer was, "You better believe I was there. I saw it in lynchings!"

While the lynching tree symbolized white power and “black death,” the cross symbolized God’s power and “black life” – God overcoming the power of sin and death. No matter what trouble they encountered, no matter the suffering and pain, blacks kept on believing and hoping that “a change is gonna come.”

So what does all this mean to you and me?

On this Passion Sunday, as we head toward the cross on Good Friday, we want to re-center ourselves to be near the cross. We want to put ourselves with Jesus. And where is Jesus? Where is God?

Instead of a God who died for us, that is sacrificed himself on our behalf; the cross points to the God who suffers with us. The cross is a great symbol of deep commitment and understanding of suffering. God knows our suffering. The cry of anguish of the cross in all its depth and complexity speaks to a God who names and understands the kind of suffering we endure. It is not an approving validation and legitimizing of suffering and the circumstances that create our suffering, like violence and abuse. It is a point of identification and naming, a presence that says, “Your suffering is excruciating; I am with you and I understand you.”

Are you looking for God? Go to the cancer ward in any hospital. Go hold the hand of a child dying from cancer and you’ll find God in Christ there, suffering alongside, giving comfort, grieving with parents. Why do children suffer and die? I don’t know. But I do know that’s where God is found.

Cindy Bertin’s friend, theologian Beth Toler says she remembers sitting with a woman in a family shelter with bruises on her face. She had finally left her

abusive husband. “I am incredibly sad,” she said, “but now I have hope.” She was holding a cross, a crucifix to be exact, and she looked at it and said, “I finally know what this means.” Beth says, that for her, the cross named her reality, her suffering, in all its harshness and brutality. This strong identification, this cross came to represent for her the real possibility of hope in the midst of what could have been a situation of hopeless desperation. It represented a turning point for her. Beth said she heard her difficult confession of faith become a source of confidence as she looked to her uncertain future with trust.

The power of the cross is not just in the ability of God to identify and know our suffering. The cross is also an event of judgment and revelation. God in Christ on the cross stands with us and at the same time, over and against us and confronts us with the question, “Who is on the cross and why is he or she there in the first place?” The powers and principalities that put Jesus on the cross are the powers and principalities that the cross judges.

For example: What is the sin and what are the powers and principalities that lead to domestic abuse? A system that mistreats and exploits in the name of profit and greed is one full of anger and fear. And if it is okay to bomb children and families in war what’s the difference at home when our social habit is violence and abuse? In the name of profit we cast off workers so why as a society should we care how we treat others?

But it is not enough to criticize the social structures that give rise to abuse unless we are able to clarify how we are entangled in them and perpetuate them. The judgment of the cross says that any system that perpetuates human dominance in any form is false and must be changed.

The same goes for racism. How and why is racism perpetuated in this country? From the perspective of the cross, we learn to ask questions about racism from the perspective of the victims and not from the perspective of those with power.

A few nights ago, several black college student women were tackled and arrested by a Nacogdoches off-duty, out of uniform policeman at an apartment complex because they ran from him, even though according to the video, he did not identify himself. Now, we are cautious to hear the whole story but I'm asking, why was the off-duty cop concerned with a group of black young women congregated around the apartment swimming pool? Would this have happened to white young women?

Finally, the cross is a powerful symbol of transformation and empowerment. It is a symbol of empowerment because it ultimately points to the resurrection. The reality of the resurrection is the reality that says, the worst word the world has to offer us – pain, suffering, degradation, and violence – is not the last word in our lives. God's word, of life, hope and transformation is the last word. We need not be doomed to a life of violence and abuse. God does not want us to suffer. God wants to take the brutal, real suffering – like the cross, and transform it into something new and whole and life giving. God brings change, God demands change, and God calls us to participate in that change.

God takes the dis-grace and shame, the dehumanization and death of the cross and the lynching tree and transforms it all. Grace overcomes dis-grace. Shame and dehumanization are not the last word. The last word is grace.

The church is to be the community of the cross. It shapes us and tells us who we are to be. Our life together is to be cruciformed. Like Jesus, we are to be found among those who suffer and grieve. Because Jesus suffers and knows our suffering, we can offer up our suffering to Jesus. Our sickness, our pain and hurt, and our grief can be given up to Jesus in prayer or in reading the Psalms, or in singing the old hymns and spirituals. Nobody knows the trouble I see. Nobody knows but Jesus.

And like Jesus, we are to stand against any and all forms of Death, abuse, hatred, and bigotry.

Fannie Lou Hamer, the poor, Mississippi sharecropper and one of the greatest Christians of the 20th century saw life through lens of the cross of Christ. Bernice Johnson Reagon, the great civil rights singer in the original Freedom Singers and later founded Sweet Honey in the Rock, said that Fannie Lou “embraced the cross and brought its full force to bear on the work she had to do.” Because Ms. Fannie Lou had been beaten, blinded, tortured, shot at, and nearly lynched she knew the cross. As someone said at her funeral, “They whipped her body but they did not whip her soul.”

In churches, Ms. Fannie Lou would stand up and testify and call people to get involved, get registered to vote, and to stand against bigotry and hatred. One of the ways she’d do it was to ask using the words from the old spiritual, “Must Jesus bear the cross alone and all the world go free? No there’s a cross for everyone and there’s a cross for me. This consecrated cross I’ll bear, till death shall set me free. And then go home a crown to wear, for there’s a crown for me.”

May it be so for us.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God,
Mother of us all. Amen.