

What about the Cross and its Meaning for Us Today?

I Corinthians 1: 18-25; Luke 22: 19

The question of the meaning of the cross may seem especially pertinent as our steeple with its cross lies on its side on the ground in front of our church. It must have been an urgent question for Paul and the 1st century Christians, as he said that the cross was “a stumbling block to the Jews [his own people] and foolishness to the Greeks [whom he knew very well, having grown up in a Hellenistic Greco-Roman city].”

But here’s the dilemma: some of the various meanings we have assigned to the cross have made it a stumbling block and a folly to many of *us* today. In a former church, after a Bible study on the cross, a woman came to me and said: “I hate the cross!” We will explore her feelings in a moment, but first let’s look again at the actual crucifixion of Jesus on a Roman cross.

I

Can we begin to comprehend the horror and scandal of the cross, and of the Crucified Messiah? Roman crucifixion was reserved for the worst of offenders, seditious revolutionaries against Rome, violent criminals, low-class thieves. Roman citizens could only be crucified for high treason. The body was strung up on a cross, the feet fastened together with a stake through the feet onto the wood.

It took a tortuously long time for the person to die, and then the corpses were thrown onto a trash pile to rot or to be scavenged by dogs. No more hideous fate could be imagined.

Justin Martyr, defender of the faith in the [next generation](#), wrote “They say that our madness consists in the fact that we put a crucified man in second place after the unchangeable and eternal God, the creator of the world.”

The Roman statesman Pliny wrote about the “perverse and extravagant superstition” of Christians, that a man honored as God would be nailed to a cross as a common enemy of the state. Some early graffiti discovered on a Roman palace wall near the Circus Maximus, dated 200 C.E., shows a man hanging on a cross, except instead of the head of man it has the head of a jackass. Scribbled underneath are the words, ALEXAMENOS WORSHIPS GOD.

A stumbling block to the Jews, folly to the Greeks. Holocaust survivor and Nobel Peace Prize winner Eli Wiesel writes that the cross is still a stumbling block for the Jew because for the Jew, life can never come from death.

II

Through the centuries the theologians of the church have sought to explain the meaning of the cross and how it accomplished our salvation. We have called these theories the “Doctrine of Atonement.” The English word itself conveys the

meaning: At-one-ment. Reconciliation. What was wrong is made right. What was estranged has been overcome.

Yom Kippur, the most important holy day in the Jewish calendar is called the Day of Atonement. In the days of the ancient Temple a bull was sacrificed as a sin offering for the priest, followed by the sacrifice of a goat to remove the people's sins and blot them out. Then a second goat was sent into the wilderness, carrying the sins and guilt of the people away. A scape goat.

Early Christians drew on the Day of Atonement to say that at the cross Jesus bore our sins and bore them away.

Through the centuries other meanings were attached to the death of Jesus on the Cross. Perhaps the one most used by the church arose in the Middle Ages and was called "the Satisfaction Theory." It said that God's justice, God's honor, had to be preserved, or satisfied. Someone had to pay for our sins, and if that someone was the one perfect innocent son of God, then all our sins would be forgiven. This theory has dominated the theology of the cross ever since, and it is one reason I think that after that Bible Study class the woman said, "I hate the cross!" This is what she had heard in church all her life: Jesus had to die for our sins. God sent Jesus to die for our sins. Here was the theology of blood sacrifice: God required the death of God's innocent Son so that our sins could be forgiven.

One of the five fundamentals of Fundamentalism is this belief in Vicarious Blood Atonement. Fundamentalism says you have to believe it to be a Christian. It's a belief that has dominated our Baptist tradition as well.

There was an old preacher story to illustrate this theory of Atonement. A student had misbehaved in class and was about to be punished physically in front of the class. A handsome, strong young man offered to take the student's place, and he received the whipping in his place. You can figure out who was Jesus in this story and who was God. Grimace. A better analogy, though all of them fail, would be this: a school building caught on fire, and the school teacher rushed into the burning building to save her students and herself died in the flames.

The theory of Vicarious Blood Atonement, which at one time evoked adoration in the hearts of Christians, is more apt to bring revulsion today. It casts a shadow on the character of God. It is morally abhorrent. It plants violence in our souls. We might love Jesus in such a scenario, but how could we love and worship such a God? And how do we escape the violence at its heart?

To make an important contrast at this point, there was another Atonement Theory which also arose at the same time in the Middle Ages. It was called the Moral Persuasion Theory of the Atonement. It held that Jesus' death was not the *cause* of God's salvation or the mechanism of our forgiveness, but was the

revealing of God's love, the *revealing* of our salvation, the *revealing* of God's forgiveness, ever flowing from the heart of God.

God's love, Christ's love, poured out on the cross, moves us at the deepest places and changes us. Perhaps this theory is closer to what some of us believe today.

III

But the search for the meaning of the Cross goes on. By lucky providence I grew up singing the Atonement and drawing its melody across the strings of my cello before I had to make a doctrine about it, or try to make sense of it. All I heard was Love.

Some doctrines are better sung than recited as a creed we must believe. My feeling about the cross was captured in the verse: "Having loved us, he loved us to the end." Jesus' love for us went all the way.

Perhaps most of our questions surround the words of the Risen Christ to his two disciples on the road to Emmaus: "Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into glory?" Was it? And how?

Perhaps we might begin by considering that God, God's own self, suffered on the cross; that on the cross God entered into our human suffering at the deepest level. In German theologian Jurgen Moltman's most influential book,

The Crucified God, he writes of *God's own being suffering on the cross*. All our Christian theology must be written, he said, "within earshot of the dying Jesus."

In Black theologian James Cone's last book, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, he says that on the cross Jesus stands with all the crucified peoples of the world.

The grammar of God's salvation all along has said that God's saving love is also a suffering love. So with the word given to Isaiah about God's Suffering Servant:

Who has believed what we have seen? He was despised and rejected, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.... Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows.... But he was wounded because of our griefs, crushed by our iniquities.

Peter Kreeft writes of Jesus' life and death:

He came. He entered space and time and suffering. He came like a lover.... He sits beside us in the lowest places of our lives, like water. Are we broken? He is broken with us. Are we rejected? He was a "man of sorrows and acquainted with grief". Does he descend into all our hells? Yes. In the unforgettable line of Corrie Ten Boom from the depths of the Nazi death camp, "No matter how deep our darkness, he is deeper still".

All true love is a costly love, and God's love poured out on the cross was the most costly of all.

IV

What else can we say? Let's think about how the cross shapes how we live, how it is a saving thing for us and for others. How it moves us to be persons who live for others, saving us from lives lived only for ourselves. The cross says to me, "I cannot be a bystander to the suffering of others."

I repeat an earlier question: How can we remove the violence at the heart of Blood Atonement? One significant contemporary theological treatment of the cross says that Jesus' death as a voluntary victim on the cross has announced to the world the end of sacred violence, violence done in God's name, and the end of the scapegoating of other people and peoples to protect our own false innocence and purity. As the James Taylor song goes: "You just can't kill for Jesus."¹

For the cross to me meaningful to me, I must say: Jesus' death was not a death required by God, but one *given*, given to God, given for us. His whole life was given, every moment of it, including most powerfully his death on the cross. His death was a life given, not taken, not demanded, given. From beginning to end his life was a life poured out for us and for all. And ever since, we who follow

him have poured out our lives for others. As Barbara Brown Taylor has written, the true church is the “poured out church”.

One of the most dramatic examples I know of a life given was the life of Christian de Cherge, a Trappist monk who served the Muslim people of Algeria. His story is portrayed in the unforgettable 2010 film, “Of Gods and Men.”

On May 26, 1996, Christian de Cherges’ mother opened a sealed letter, containing the last words of her son, who had just been beheaded by a militant Muslim group, the GIA. They had taken over the country and demanded that all foreigners leave. Christian de Cherge, the Prior of the Trappist monastery, who had spent his whole life among the people of Algeria, refused to go.

He had grown up from boyhood there, the son of a French military man stationed there. He had grown to have a deep love of the Algerian people and a deep respect for their Muslim faith. He had observed the reverence of their worship and lives. His mother had told him that he must always respect them because they and Muslims worshipped the same God. He called his mother his “*very first church*”.

But there was another transformative moment in his life. As a young adult he had become friends with a local Muslim policeman named Mohamed. One evening as they were walking along, Christian was accosted by a violent group.

Mohamed intervened and rescued his friend; the next day Mohamed was assassinated. Christian had seen in his friend “the soul of Islam” (note he didn’t say “the soul of Christianity”!) and recognized its kinship with the soul of Christianity. So later, when the GIA demanded that de Cherge leave, he refused.

When his mother opened his letter, she read these words:

If it should happen one day—it could be today—that I have become a victim of the terrorism which now seems ready to engulf all the foreigners living in Algeria, I would like my community, my church, my family to remember that my life was GIVEN [all in caps] to God and to this country.

The last portion of the letter was written, almost unbelievably, to his prospective murderer on the horizon:

And also to you, the friend of the final moment, who would not be aware of what you were doing. Yes, I must also say *Merci* [thank you] and *Adieu* [a goodbye blessing] to you.

And may we find each other, happy thieves in Paradise, if it pleases God, Father of us both. Amen.

Then he closed with the Muslim reverent words, “*In Sha Allah*”, the reverent Muslim words which mean “As God wills.”²

The life and death of de Cherge was imprinted by the life and words and death of Jesus.

Perhaps the deepest meaning of the cross is found in Jesus' words from the cross. His words to the thief beside him, "Today you will dwell with me in Paradise". And these words, "Father forgive them for they know not what they do." None of us know the extent of the harm we do, but God forgives us ever.

At the last supper with his disciples, Jesus took the bread and broke it and, giving thanks, of all things, said, "This is my body GIVEN" ...not taken, not required, not demanded, GIVEN for us and for the world God so loves.

The cross is a counter-cultural sign, a sign that goes against the grain of our world. Its wisdom seems like foolishness; its power looks like weakness. A world turned against God would, by terrible necessity, kill God's son. The cross speaks of a life given in costly love, a love that (can we believe it?!) is saving us and saving the world.

As we bear its emblem on our lives and on our church may its love live on through us to others. Stumbling block? Folly? Perhaps. But it is, as Paul wrote, "the power of God unto salvation."

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1. I refer to the work of Rene Girard, Dale Alison and Gil Baille
 2. I am indebted to Karl Plank, whose essay on de Cherge moved me to my depths.