

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, October 10, 2021

Hebrews 12:1-3

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart.

Of all the symbols of the forever pieces that we will wrestle with, and have wrestle with, and will over the next couple of weeks, perhaps this one, the cross, is the most peculiar. It's the most peculiar.

You know, it's also probably the most controversial because of its different meanings, but it's peculiar because what we have done as people who follow in the ways of Jesus Christ. We have made central a symbol that is, in essence, a symbol of imperial power. If we were to try to draw a parallel between the cross of 2000 years ago and modern America, we might indeed center a noose in this place if it was 100 years ago. If it was 30 years ago, perhaps an electric chair. If it's today, perhaps, it's a syringe and the chair with straps on it. It's an odd thing for us to center in our life together. I wonder what Mary the mother of Jesus would think as she walked into many Christian churches across our country, and across the world, and saw the symbol of the cross as a central forever peace of what church means and what it looks like. I wonder how she would see it this time empty of her son.

I imagine it would still hold deep amounts of grief and pain and hurt, and yet we've made it central. I wonder if we might today wrestle with why it is we have done that.

So, let's start with why. Perhaps we have decentralized the cross because of its controversial nature. We have often, I believe, not focused too much on the cross because the cross for each of us in our journey, and perhaps some more than others, has had a rather negative connotation to it. We start with what does it mean well for us? As Presbyterians it means one thing, but in other traditions, it might mean something completely different. A shorthand of what the cross means could be that it means salvation for those who choose Christ. It could mean substitutionary atonement bloodshed for us, a toll levied on the body of Jesus that all creation might benefit. When we ask the question of what doesn't mean for some it's a very simple answer. It means the death that was necessary for each of us to have life. It turns out, though, that that simple answer doesn't provide much comfort over the long haul, or even much motivation to follow in the ways of Jesus. If the central argument of the Christian faith is that 2000 years ago God died for us, and that should motivate us today in the here and now to living righteous and good lives, I hate to tell you, but I think that message is falling short of its intended purpose. The cross seemingly has less motivational power than it did some years ago. Perhaps if we stood at the foot of it and watched our savior die, it would be one thing, but we don't do that. We look at an empty cross perhaps as a piece of jewelry perhaps adorning some part of our office or our home.

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So, instead of asking what the cross mean does, I wonder if there might be different questions that we could ask of the cross. Different and deeper questions like what does it reveal about us and about God? I want to posit to you that the cross, at least, reveals four important things for us this day. Ones that don't take us back 2000 years but bring us right to today.

The cross and the violence that was perpetrated on it against our savior reveals the insidious nature of violence.

Indeed, the story of the cross is that God endured the violence of an empire, took the weight of that pain and violence in nails and in tears, and, ultimately, in giving his last breath.

The cross reveals the insidious nature of violence, but that doesn't seem to help us understand that even today as we continue encyclical violence against each other in the midst of the world and our body politic.

The cross also reveals to us, **Richard Rohr would say, “our great sin.” That is, we as God's people, we kill what we should love. (source??)**

Over and over again, we as humanity kill what we should love. And so, God takes on flesh and moves to the world with grace and healing and forgiveness, makes people whole again, and we kill that God. The god that we should embrace, be grateful for, because that God isn't what we want that God to be, that God does not triumph over all the other powers in the world. Instead, that God is meek, indeed is willing to yield to the powers of this world, to show what real love looks like.

As I was wrestling with a question of what the cross reveals, I was doing some reading of Howard Thurman. A good friend passed along a book that was influential for me. Perhaps you've read it, *Jesus and the Disinherited*.

Thurman brings forth this belief that the cross reveals Christ's kinship with the persecuted and the violated and the vulnerable in the world. Thurman says “When we look at the cross, what we should see is that in the midst of all the brokenness and hurt that we see in the world. Christ is there.”

Scratch (First Name and Source??) says, “I used to think where Christ is there is no misery. Now i realize where there is misery, there Christ is.”

From Thurman's perspective, wherever the Spirit of Jesus appears, the oppressed gather fresh courage, for Christ announced the good news that fear, and hypocrisy, and hatred, and violence have no true dominion in this world or the next. Final thing that the cross reveals to us is that the power of God at work in the world exposes the powerlessness of evil in the world. Death does not have the final say, never.

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It's interesting, then, if the cross isn't just about some salvific act that happened two thousand years ago but is indeed about for us revealing the insidious nature of violence, then we might be changed by watching and looking and reflecting on the cross. It might change the way that we move through the world. If it's about for us revealing the great sin of killing what it is that we're supposed to love, then perhaps we will not do that any longer. If it is about us recognizing God's kinship with the most vulnerable in our society, perhaps our hearts might be changed to know that we are to reflect that same kinship.

It seems to me that this peculiar forever piece the cross also calls us to recognize something here and now in 2021. We are to recognize first our kinship with the persecuted, the violated, the oppressed, the vulnerable, but we are also to recognize something else.

That Christ on the cross enters into and endures the pain of the world bodily pain, but also spiritual. If we believe that to be true, if we recognize that when we look at the cross, then what we know to be true is that Christ will understand our pain too.

Christ will understand the pain that we carry into this place this day. Perhaps it's grief or hurt or fear.

If indeed on the cross we can recognize Christ's ability to endure and be present in that pain, then perhaps we might know that Christ can understand the pain of all creation,

If that's true, it means that, even in our city in the last few weeks, Christ has understood and has been in the midst of the pain of the Raynor family, the families impacted by violence at the coming school. If it's true that Christ is made known in the pain of this world, then Christ was made known in the shooting at the Kroger just a few weeks ago.

It seems to me that whatever it is we've imagined the cross to symbolize as a forever piece for us, it falls short of what it truly can, and perhaps should, symbolize for us.

You know, the author of the Epistle of Hebrews invites the people to take note of this great cloud of witnesses that they are walking alongside with. And then the author speaks about Christ and the crucifixion. In the words of Hebrews chapter 12, "Let us look to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith, who for the sake of joy, for the sake of joy that was set before him, endured the cross, disregarding its shame." That's a really interesting phrase there, 'for the sake of joy.' The author seems to be saying that for Jesus the cross was a part of the journey, a part of the journey that Christ was on, and it was a part of the journey that had great suffering and even death. But it did not have the last word for Jesus's life, or for ours.

Here's what I imagine church.

The cross of Christ that we make a forever piece makes a claim that new life springs forth from death.

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New life springs forth from death, and here's what I imagine. If the only message that the church of Jesus Christ or Idlewild Presbyterian Church can proclaim regarding the cross with any integrity is that new life springs forth from death, then that will be enough. It will be enough for our children when they are hurting, it will be enough for our teenagers when they are heartbroken, it will be enough for our young adults when they are searching, it will be enough for our elderly as they grieve.

If new life springs forth from death, it will be enough for our marriages and for our parenting. It will be enough for our hospital rooms and, even, our gravesides. It will be enough for our public forums, and our classrooms, for our counselors' offices, and our prisons, our political discourse, in our AA meetings, for those who are working for justice, and our sojourning for peace. New life springs forth from death.

So, the claim that we make this morning, is that the cross is a forever piece, which is a weird thing to do because for every other forever piece I've been able to point.

For the font, for the table, for the Bible, for even music, we can look to our choir, look to your hymnals. The cross doesn't have as prominent of a place here.

Save one.

Our foundation of the sanctuary.

1928.

The foundation laid in this place was in the shape of the cross. We might call it donut side and riverside, or the penalty box, but what we actually have here, what we are sitting in the midst of is, a forever symbol. It is a forever piece of who we know ourselves to be, and our hope, and our trust, and our belief, is that every time we sit in the midst of this cross, we might recognize and know that this cross symbolizes God in the midst of pain, symbolizes Christ's kinship with the most vulnerable in our society, symbolizes for us that, indeed, new life can spring forth from every dead and broken place. So, as we sit in the midst of this forever piece today, as you sit in the midst of whatever pain or hurt that you are knowing this day, as we move to the world that knows brokenness and vulnerability for so many, as we sit in the midst of this forever piece today may we be reminded.

Wait, may we be reminded once again, reassured of Christ's presence here.

May this cross inspire us as a community of faith, both now and forever. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One God, Mother of us all. Amen.