

HE BEARS OUR BURDENS

a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, Feb. 12, 2017

based on Isaiah 53:4-6, Luke 18:9-14

The sermon this morning is the second in a sermon series entitled, “The Points of the Cross: how the cross of Christ can save you.” In the initial message last week, we noted how, since the first century, the cross has baffled many people; people have struggled to make sense of it. As Paul said, “The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing.” [I Cor. 1:18] Today many people continue to struggle with the whole idea of salvation through the cross. Why was it necessary for Jesus to go to the cross, and how does his death on a cross save us? Does God demand human sacrifice? Why is Jesus made the scapegoat? Is God a bloodthirsty God, who only saves through some violent act? Such questions arise often for people today when they consider the cross.

This sermon series is designed for everyone who in any way is perplexed by the cross. We will see during this series how the cross not only makes sense, but it profoundly addresses our whole human problem, so that when we truly take hold of the message of the cross, it is transformational for our life and our future. As Paul went on to saying concerning the cross, “. . . to us who are being saved it is the power of God.” (I Cor. 1:18) Let us begin with a moment of prayer . . .

What is our basic human problem? People often don’t really think about this question, because in fact we have many problems, and we generally spend our energy trying to deal with a multiplicity of various specific issues. As we do so, we typically see our problems as something outside us. Our problem may be some obstacle or misfortune that confronts us. Or the problem may be some other person—that individual at school or at work or in the neighborhood who is causing us aggravation. And we carry that idea onto a larger social scale and often want to define the problem as those certain “other people” out there.

This pattern was quite evident in Jesus’ day. For many of the Jews who were living in Judea and Galilee, the problem was the Roman government. If only they could be rid of those Romans, people thought, life would be good. Or the problem was more broadly defined as “the sinners” out there—as in the parable we heard this morning, where the Pharisee, a very decent and upstanding citizen, looked with disdain on the sinner on the other side of the temple. So who are the sinners? You know who they are. They are all those miscreants out there who are not good, decent folk like us!

But Jesus penetrated through this whole human pattern of projecting the problem as something beyond us. The basic problem, Jesus taught, is within each one of us. The problem is our spiritual brokenness—how we each have turned away from God and alienated ourselves from God. The Biblical term for this is sin. It is out of that inner spiritual brokenness and alienation that all our other issues arise—our twisted priorities, our problematic behaviors, our fears and anxieties, our conflicts with one another. Until we address the core human problem, nothing else can really be resolved.

But once we begin to be confronted with the fact that the problem is within us, we tend to shift to another key way in which human beings have dealt with their inner shortcomings—we ignore them. We tend to want to overlook any failings within ourselves. A corollary to that is that we want God to overlook our shortcomings. So we do what the Pharisee did in that parable. The Pharisees were people within ancient Judaism who sought to live a decent, law-abiding life. They were nice folks, like you and me. In the parable, the Pharisee “trusted in his own righteousness”—that is, he convinced himself that he was really a good person, certainly much better than those sinners out there, and as he ticked off his various good qualities, he expected that God should just pay attention to his relative goodness. This is a very common approach today; people want to think that they are basically good people, particularly in comparison to those rotten eggs out there, and that this merits a pat on the back from God. We want God to overlook all those things might not be quite right in us.

On the other hand, we don’t want God to overlook all the wrongs that others are doing. In fact, we often wish that God would really clobber some of the bad people out there. We want God to do something about the evil in the world.

God does do something. One thing that is very clear in the Bible is that God does not overlook the wrongs in the world. The Psalmist pointed out how God sees everything. “The Lord looks down from heaven,” says Psalm 33, “God sees all humankind. From where God sits enthroned God watches all the inhabitants of the earth and observes all their deeds.” (Psalm 33:13-15) Moreover, God observes not only the outward actions of human beings, but, as the Scriptures say, “God sees the heart.” (I Samuel 16:7) Of course, what God sees is not always so wonderful. “God has indignation every day,” say the Psalms. (Psalm 7:11) Small wonder.

So what should God do in response to the wrong in the world? Biblical prophets got the vision that God’s righteousness requires that there be judgment upon wrongdoing. Prophets such as Nahum spoke of how God’s punishing wrath would come inexorably upon sinners. “Who can stand before God’s indignation?” said Nahum. “God’s wrath is poured out like fire . . . the Lord will by no means clear the guilty.” (Nahum 1:3,6)

This may sound fine as long as we project all wrongdoing as being something beyond us. But if in fact God sees everything and does not overlook sin, then it becomes apparent that God clearly sees us. God sees past the veneer of our outwardly decent lives and sees all the flaws and wrongs and spiritual distortions within us. God sees what the apostle Paul noted, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” (Romans 3:23) And if God’s response to sin will be the outpouring of judgment upon the guilty, we are in trouble.

The prophets were right that God does not overlook sin and that God will do something about it, but for the most part they did not yet clearly perceive what exactly God would do. In fact God would act; but God would act finally not by hammering all the sinners out there, which would also include us, but God would act by addressing our core problem—the spiritual brokenness within us all. God would act, in extraordinary fashion, in Jesus Christ.

We noted last week that Jesus on the cross unites himself with us. If our human situation in this world is analogous to a swimmer on the verge of drowning, then Jesus is One who dives into the deep with us. Jesus joins with us - he takes our struggles, our weakness, our pain, our fallen condition upon himself. He unites himself fully with us.

We noted further last week that the cross itself can function as a symbol of the ways that Jesus acts through the cross—each arm of the cross representing an aspect of Jesus' saving work. In this respect, the downward beam of the cross reminds us of how Jesus has connected with our earthly condition, how he has truly joined himself with us.

It is crucial to understand further who exactly this Jesus is who unites himself with us. It is not as though God tosses down some poor guy named Jesus to struggle in the rough waters of life along with us. Rather it is God who comes to us; the New Testament makes plain that Jesus is God in human form—the “Word of God become flesh” as the gospel of John puts it. (John 1:14) [*the Word of God became flesh and dwelled among us*] In other words, in Jesus, God joins with us, which is why Jesus was called Emmanuel—“God with us.” [*They will call Him Emmanuel—God with us. Matthew 1:23*]

So God responds to our spiritual brokenness by entering into our human condition, connecting with our weakness. The prophet Isaiah, in the passage we heard, uses the image of illness in this regard to describe the condition of our soul. What God does in Jesus Christ is to take our illness upon himself. “Surely he has borne our infirmities,” he said, “and carried our diseases.” (Is. 53:4) The Lord does not leave us alone in our spiritual weakness, but joins with us, in order that we may be healed.

But what about all the wrong within us, which would divide us from God? The prophets had noted that our human sin calls for judgment. In our guilt, we merit the punishing wrath of God. But as Christ joins with us, he goes to the cross, and there he takes all the punishment due to us upon himself. As Isaiah said, “he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his stripes we are healed.” (Is. 53:5) Through Christ, the judgment against sin is carried out, that we may be forgiven.

Thus the final image that Isaiah offers is that of the lamb. If we are the sheep of God's pasture, then we are sheep who have wandered off and gotten lost; as Isaiah said “All we like sheep have gone astray.” (Is. 53:6) But Christ now becomes the sacrificial lamb who offers himself on our behalf, in order finally to reconcile us with God. As Isaiah concludes, “the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.” (Is. 53:6)

In ancient Israel, the holiest day of the year was Yom Kippur, the day of atonement. It was a day when people sought forgiveness for sin and reconciliation with God. At the center of worship on that day, the high priest would symbolically lay the sins of the people onto a goat, and the goat would be driven off. It was the “scapegoat,” who bore the sins of the people. This was all symbolism; but it would become reality in Jesus Christ. Christ on the cross would take all of our weakness and pain, all of our wrong and all of our guilt, upon himself.

How dramatically different this is from the ways in which human beings typically respond to our human sin. We want to ignore our sin, but Christ addresses our human problem at its core. We want to project our problems outward and blame others, but Christ takes the blame upon himself. Or we assume the blame ourselves and become mired in guilt and despair, but Christ joins with us and takes our weakness and guilt and pain upon himself, in order that we may be set free. Christ has come to us in the depths of our spiritual brokenness and alienation—to heal our souls and to lift us up into fellowship with God.

And Christ does this not just for a few individuals but for all humanity. But if Christ takes upon himself all our human wrong, all our human pain, and all our human guilt; and if Christ does this in one eternally defining transformative moment, that will be a dreadful day. So the crucifixion is a dreadful day—a day of anguish and blood and suffering. And it is so not because God is bloodthirsty, but because God loves us so much that God has come to us in Christ to sacrifice himself on our behalf in order that we might be redeemed.

So the cross appeals directly to our core human problem. When we look at the cross, we can no longer ignore sin. We can no longer blame others. But we can also no longer give up on ourselves in despair; for Christ has offered himself for our salvation. All the wrath that might rightfully have been poured out on ourselves—and on others—has been absorbed by Christ. Although we are guilty, through the cross we are forgiven, and although we are weak, through the cross Jesus now stands with us to bring us into the life and promise of God.

What then should we do? The cross invites us to respond like the man in that parable who acknowledged his weakness and sin, and who turned then to the Lord in faith, saying, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” [Luke 18:13] That one, Jesus said, “went to his house justified,” that is, put right with God. [Luke 18:14]

All this is well symbolized by thinking of one of the extending arms of the cross. The outstretched arm can remind us of how Jesus bears our burdens—how He has taken all the wrongs of the human race upon himself, bearing the judgment for our sin, so that we can be forgiven. And thus the outstretched arm of the cross invites us now to open our own hearts to God’s mercy. As Jesus said, “Those who humble themselves”—those who know their need for God and receive God’s grace—“will be exalted.” [Luke 18:14]