

THE MESSAGE OF THE CROSS IV. “The Answer to Suffering”

3-9-08

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Mtt. 26:36-46; Heb. 4:14-16; 5:7-9, *Msg.*

INTRODUCTION

It is risky in this year of presidential elections to quote from any of the candidates, lest it seem like an endorsement. But at Christmas, John McCain circulated a letter that contains a vital truth about the Cross of Christ. Please receive this for what it is— the witness of a POW from Viet Nam— nothing more:

“As a POW, my captors would tie my arms behind my back and then loop the rope around my neck and ankles so that my head was pulled down between my knees. I was often left like that throughout the night.

“One night a guard came into my cell. He put his finger to his lips signaling for me to be quiet, and then loosened my ropes to relieve my pain. The next morning, when his shift ended, the guard returned and retightened the ropes, never saying a word to me.

“A month later or so, on Christmas Day, I was standing in the dirt courtyard when I saw that same guard approach me. He walked up and stood silently next to me, not looking or smiling at me.

“After a few moments had passed, he rather nonchalantly used his sandaled foot to draw a cross in the dirt. We stood wordlessly looking at the cross, remembering the true light of Christmas, even in the darkness of a Vietnamese prison camp. After a minute or two, he rubbed it out and walked away.

“That guard was my Good Samaritan. I will never forget that man and I will never forget that moment. And I will never forget that, no matter where you are, no matter how difficult the circumstances, there will always be someone to pick you up and carry you.”

While McCain focused this story on the humanitarian gesture of this man, I want to ask another question. Why would a cross drawn in the dirt offer hope and meaning to John McCain? I can’t tell you what McCain’s answer would be. But for everyone who has come to know Christ as their Lord and Savior, the Cross of Christ provides the key we need in unraveling the mystery of human suffering. And it provides comfort to us in the midst of suffering knowing that no matter where I am, no matter how low I get, no matter how much I suffer, Jesus has been there and is with me in my suffering. My brother notes, in the lowest of our lows, “It is comforting to know that I can never get beneath God.” God has come to us in Jesus and submitted to all the pain and suffering of our humanity.

For Lent, we’ve been looking at how the Cross is central to our faith. You can’t miss the importance of the Cross of Christ when you read the Gospels. The Gospels are fast-paced until they get to the final week and the events around the Cross. Then time slows to a crawl as we

approach the cross. Matthew, Mark and Luke devote nearly one-third of their books to this. John focuses

about half his Gospel on the Cross. What other biography gives such huge importance to the death of its subject? The whole point is, Jesus came to die. The reason He died and the way He died IS the essence of the meaning of His life and the heart of our salvation.

We've considered how the Cross is the centerpiece of Christianity. It is necessary for our eternal salvation. It also models for us, as we saw last Sunday, the way God calls us to live in "taking up [our] cross daily" and following Him— a life of relinquishment to His will. But in the Cross, we also find the answer to the nagging question of, "Why is there such terrible suffering in the world if God is good and loves us?"

NOT THE WAY IT'S MEANT TO BE

To all the various experiences of bad things in our world, something deep within the human heart cries out, "It's not fair." Whether it's the latest terrorist attack, a devastating tornado or flood, some terrible disease afflicting us or people we love, fraud, murder, rape, or any other of the multitude of bad things that happen— we somehow know it shouldn't be that way. That feeling is consistent with what the Bible tells us. All the bad things that happen are foreign invaders to the beautiful world God created and the way He designed it to work. As I've often mentioned, it all began with the fall— with Adam and Eve rebelling against God and giving sin and the devil entrance into this world.

Unfortunately, many people turn away from God and are bitter and angry over some tragedy, some manifestation of evil. They question either or both the goodness and power of God. "If God loves me, and He could prevent this, why didn't He?" While there is a lot of complexity in the answer and also mystery— the big picture is very clear. God loves us and has proved His love for us in sending His only Son, Jesus, to suffer and die on the Cross for us to save our world not only from sin but all the effects of sin— destroying evil and the devil. We are assured in this that in spite of the havoc evil is working in our world it is temporary and will come to an end. None of it is what God wants for us.

In the Cross we see the gravity of our sin. Instead of glossing over our sin with an understanding nod, God reveals the true nature of sin. The Cross reveals the ugliness of sin and the seriousness of sin. There are no "small" sins. The only way our sin could be removed is by God coming to us in Jesus and dying on the Cross for our sins. This is somehow woven into the fabric of the moral universe in ways we are not given access to understanding. But Scripture is absolutely clear. Christ had to die for our sins in order to save us. And God was in Christ. Sin can't just be removed, done away with. It is at the root of all that is wrong in our world, all evil, and all that is "out of joint." On the cross, we see the depth of our problem and the ends to which God in His love has gone to get us out of our mess.

But, the mystery part to us is, why the solution for our world is taking so long. Even as we wait, we are assured God's purpose is loving, as 2 Pet. 3:9 says,

The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

This is a reference to the Lord's promised return when the curtain of history will be called down and He will reign forever— perfect peace, wholeness, without any more death or suffering. But in the meantime, that salvation is being worked out, giving people a chance to come to repentance. Time is a gift to bring more people into salvation in Christ.

In the meantime, in the Cross we have God's assurance that He takes the suffering that evil brings into the world seriously, and even feels our pain.

In 1989, 96 fans were crushed to death in a soccer stadium in Sheffield, England, and another 200 were seriously injured. At one of the hospitals where victims were taken, an attending surgeon read the names of those killed and expressed his sympathy. He said that he believed that God understood the parents'

grief and was with them in their time of need. One father bitterly responded: "What does God know about losing a son?"

GOD WITH US

Sadly, that father did not know about the Cross. The Cross makes it clear that God knows about our pain. He has entered into our humanity and gone through what we go through.

Prominent British pastor and leading evangelical thinker, John R. Stott acknowledges that suffering is "the single greatest challenge to the Christian faith." But here is his own conclusion: "I could never myself believe in God if it were not for the cross.... In the real world of pain, how could one worship a God who was immune to it? I have entered many Buddhist temples in different Asian countries and stood respectfully before the statue of Buddha, his legs crossed, arms folded, eyes closed, the ghost of a smile playing round his mouth, a remote look on his face, detached from the agonies of the world. But each time after awhile I have had to turn away. And in imagination I have turned instead to that lonely, twisted, tortured figure on the cross, nails through hands and feet, back lacerated, limbs wrenched, brow bleeding from thorn-pricks, mouth dry and intolerably thirsty, plunged in God-forsaken darkness. That is the God for me! He laid aside his immunity to pain. He entered our world of flesh and blood, tears and death. He suffered for us. Our sufferings become more manageable in light of this. There is still a question mark against human suffering, but over it we boldly stamp another mark, the cross which symbolizes divine suffering. 'The cross of Christ... is God's only self-justification in such a world' as ours."

This is unique to Christianity. No other world religion offers us the God who has come alongside us in this way. Hebrews expresses it so well:

Heb 4:14-16— 14 Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. 15 For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are — yet was without sin. 16 Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

Heb 5:7-9 (The Message)— 7 While he lived on earth, anticipating death, Jesus cried out in pain and wept in sorrow as he offered up priestly prayers to God. Because he honored God, God answered him. 8 Though he was God's Son, he learned trusting-obedience by what he suffered, just as we do.... 9 He became the source of eternal salvation to all who believingly obey him.

There is no help like the help of one who has been through what you are going through, is there? Whether its cancer, Alzheimer's disease, the loss of a home, alcoholism, or the loss of child. Many of you are quick to be involved in such ministries of understanding and empathy. You can empathize in ways those on the outside can never know.

I remember in a former church, we had a woman named Ruth who had been through the tragedy of losing an infant to Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. She then offered to be there for others facing the same thing. Not long after her offer, I was called to the hospital for a SIDS death. Of course I prayed with the couple, cried with them, shared Scripture. Then I asked if I could introduce them to Ruth, whom they did not know. I brought her into the room and stepped back in amazement of the immediate effect. I could feel the comfort her presence immediately conveyed. Here's someone who'd been there, who understood the confusion, had wrestled with the same "whys?", knew the guilt, and the pain. Her presence, support, and prayers provided a level of help I could never provide.

Hebrews assures us, Jesus has been there. I remember in Corrie Ten Boom's [The Hiding Place](#), she recounted the suffering and painful indignities of the Nazi concentration camp at Ravensbruck. Upon entering the camp, these women were all stripped naked and paraded in front of leering guards. As Corrie and her sister Betsy faced this humiliation, Betsy whispered to Corrie— "Corrie, remember Jesus hung

naked on the Cross for us." With that, Corrie said, new strength flowed into us.

ENCOUNTERING GOD IN OUR SUFFERING

Not only does the Cross assure us that God is with us, identifying with us in our suffering, but God also wants to transform what we go through into a means of our growth. The classic verse in this regard providing our assurance is Rom. 8:28–

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

But remember, this is promised only for believers, *those who love him, who have been called*. And, it doesn't mean only good things will happen. Rather, God can take bad things, even evil things that come our way and, as we yield our hearts to Him, He will accomplish good things in and through them. Again, the Cross is the ultimate witness to that. Satan did his worst in destroying the Son of God. God turned it into His best— resurrection and salvation for all who will receive Him. And, ultimately, the destruction of all Satan's schemes and the darkness and evil in this world.

Most Christians don't have to look very far in their lives to know that some of the worst things have ultimately brought blessing and richness to their souls. In our pain, in our disappointment, in our losses, and when we face life threatening adversity, we reach out to God for help. In so doing, we draw closer to Him and He is able to enter into our lives with His life-giving presence in a deeper way. As Joni Earekson Tada, a quadriplegic from a diving accident as a teenager, reminds us, "Hardships press us up against God." And Mother Teresa notes, "Suffering opens up space within that otherwise would not be there— so God can come in and fill it."

Yet, we can also think of people in who have faced trouble and become bitter, angry, and hardened against God and life. The Rev. John Wright Follette is insightful when he observes:

"Trouble will make you either bitter or better. Notice how very much alike these words are, and how little is needed to change them; just the letter "I"... It is the "I" that changes the whole matter."

If we are self-absorbed, self-centered, we will indeed become bitter. If we face things with God, letting Him be in control and help us through, we will become much a much better person.

As a pastor, I've come to respect suffering as a priceless opportunity to discover more of God. Suffering causes people to ask questions like nothing else in the world can. Someone referred to pain as "the question mark turned like a fishhook in the human heart." And in those questions and in the suffering our illusions of control and sufficiency are dissolved. For the seeking heart, God uses this to develop character and graces that could never be formed in prideful self-sufficiency when life is easy. I've often been struck with awe at the incredible beauty of a life that has yielded itself to God in the midst of trouble. The spiritual health with which they resonate is of eternal value. These bodies will die. But what God forms in our souls is forever.

Helen Roseveare is a British medical doctor who worked for many years as a missionary in Zaire. During the revolution of the 1960s, she often faced brutal beatings and other forms of physical torture. On one occasion, when she was about to be executed, she feared God had forsaken her. In that moment, she sensed Jesus saying to her through the Holy Spirit:

Twenty years ago you asked Me for the privilege of being identified with Me. This is it. Don't you want it? This is what it means. These are not your sufferings; they are My sufferings. All I ask of you is the loan of your body.

The privilege of serving Christ through her sufferings overwhelmed Dr. Roseveare. After she was delivered, she wrote about her experience with God:

"He didn't stop the sufferings. He didn't stop the wickedness, the cruelties, the humiliation or anything. It was all there. The pain was just as bad. The fear was just as bad. But it was altogether different. It was in Jesus, for Him, with Him."

CONCLUSION

What difference does the Cross make in our sufferings? It changes everything. Even a cross drawn in the dirt by an enemy guard gives a believer a whole new perspective. In closing, here are the three things we want to remember about the Cross and suffering:

1. It reminds us that evil, man's cruelty, and even war itself with all its horrors will not continue for ever. To our questioning heart, "Why doesn't God do something?" in the Cross we realize God has done what is needed.
2. In the meantime, we wait for the full out-working of this saving work in our world. In our suffering, He is with us and can help us in our time of need for He has experienced it all. He is on our side to strengthen us and guide us through it all.
3. He gave His promise that no matter what happens, His power is great enough to turn it to that which is for our ultimate good. And, while we catch glimpses of the blessings found in adversity now, the full picture won't be seen until we get to heaven.

CONFLICT

This passage is here to let us know conflict happens. From all indications, the Philippian church was one of the best and healthiest New Testament churches. It is portrayed as vital, alive, giving— a church Paul has just referred to as his "joy and crown." We have no idea of the issue between Euodia and Synctyche. But the strain and tension is so great, Paul heard about it in prison in Rome, 1000 mi. away. So, it is probably not a minor difference over the color of the carpet in the nursery. This serves as a reminder that as long as we're human and have different personalities, conflict is just bound to happen. Often times it may not be a matter of right or wrong but of just being different or seeing things quite differently. Even the theological issues we sometimes use to define our positions are often minor compared to the issues of control and power. So often the real energy driving our disagreement is one of control. While the church is ordained by God and is a spiritual institution, it is also a human organization, and thus not immune from all that happens in human relationships.

I used to have a sense of despair when I'd hear about conflict in a church— thinking the church has somehow failed to be what it's meant to be. Then it dawned on me, our closest relationships are where hurt, misunderstanding and conflict are most likely to occur. If you're married and have never had hurt, misunderstanding, or conflict in your relationship— you are indeed in rare company. Parents, do your children ever fight? What is more important than eliminating any possible discord is how we handle it. In fact, there is often a creative dimension to conflict. It means we're dealing with real feelings. Just sweeping issues under the rug is detrimental to closeness between people. Denial and pretense are deadly in relationships. In fact, in my premarital counseling I have a section we cover on "How to Fight Fairly." The issue is not *whether* you argue, but *how* you argue. Successful couples resolve things without leaving scars.

In this passage, Paul offers a model of handling conflict:

- 1st what he does not do;
and 2nd what he does do.

WHAT NOT TO DO

Paul does not do **two important things**. He doesn't take sides and he doesn't attempt to diagnose the problem.

First, he does not take sides. He loves them both, and refuses to side with one or the other. We need to listen to that. In that divorce, or disagreement between two people we love, we can still love both of

them, and refuse to take sides. Besides, usually no one is all right or all wrong. It is almost always a complex mixture of some right and some wrong. Also, there is no way for us to get into the emotional brokenness that may be coloring the judgement of either side. We can be the biggest help in not taking sides, but insisting on loving both people, being present to them and praying for them.

And, if you are in the midst of a conflict with someone yourself, respect you friends and others by allowing them to be friends with both sides. Don't require them to take sides.

Second, Paul does not diagnose the conflict or explain the issues. Don't we hate it when people say:

"Your problem is..."; "You should/ shouldn't feel..."; or "What you need to do...." We're way too prone to "fix people up," or offer quick prescriptions for the problem. Besides, Paul realizes he's too far away to really understand and know issues. And, the issues are never static but always changing. The way things were two weeks ago aren't the same as they will be two weeks from now.

WHAT TO DO

Paul speaks directly to the situation and boldly names names. Apparently everyone knew of the problem. But Paul brings it out in the open so it can't just smolder. He moves them past denial. Remember, these letters were to be read to the assembled congregation, so they all have to listen to this. And, they all have to face the issue together– it can no longer be ignored.

Then, he tells them their basis of agreement should be at the deepest level– not based on shallow, surface things. Paul pleads with them to "agree with each other in the Lord (4:2)." "In the Lord" is the reason and basis for agreement. They may agree to disagree on the particulars, but come together "in the Lord." Acknowledging Jesus as Lord means they both submit to what He wants. The word for "agree" in the Greek is interesting and helpful. There are two Greek words possible: *homologia* meaning "think the same" and *phronea* meaning "to have the same mind in the Lord." He uses *phronea*, implying more the same perspective, goal and focus. This is not identical thinking (*homologia*), but a coming from the same place, that is, "the Lord." There may still be some differences. That is OK. "The Lord" is common ground for our thought and allegiance and becomes the judge of right and wrong.

There may be issues we simply agree to disagree upon. It is not that truth is relative, or there is no right answer. But our paradigms (the lens through which we view life and interpret events) distort things in such a way that we may never reach agreement. Maybe the limitations of our experience hinder our understanding or we maybe only see part of the picture.

One of the best illustrations of this is that familiar poem I remember from grade school of the five blind men encountering an elephant for the first time. The first blind man grabs the elephant's trunk and says the elephant is like a snake. The second grabs the leg and declares the elephant is more like the trunk of a tree. The third runs into the side of the elephant and observes the elephant is like a wall. Another one grabs the tail and insists the elephant is like a rope. And the fifth blind man gets a hold of the ear and proclaims elephants are like a fan. Then, the five blind men got into a big fight over what an elephant was really like. All of them were right, and all of them were wrong, because their experience was incomplete, limited. What they thought was contradictory actually could be integrated into a whole beyond their imaginations.

I believe many of the issues of theology and truth about God are way too big for any of us to fully understand. We may all be right and all wrong since we see only small piece of a larger reality. It may be far different than any of us can imagine. Our discussions of free-will vs. predestination or infant baptism vs. adult-only baptism or the mystery of the trinity may suggest something far bigger than we can put together. It always behooves us to be cautious and gracious on any issue where there are large numbers of

sincere Christians on both sides. Our finite understanding will never be able to comprehend God.

Paul gives broad guidelines, leaving specifics to those there who are closer to the issue and the people involved. He doesn't really try to control the outcome. He makes his appeal, and then trusts them with the process. He uses an interesting term, "Yokefellow." It is singular, a reference to the whole church. The image is as with a yoke of oxen, pulling a common load. Here, Paul is affirming trust and responsibility in them as they both (he and the church) are under the leadership of Christ.

He asks the church to "help" them (Euodia and Syntyche), not sit in judgement. The word for "help" in Greek is literally, "lift with them."

Finally, he reminds the church how important these women are. Here, Paul does a remarkable thing. Controversy is embarrassing, and demeaning. These women are a "problem." Everyone seems to know, even Paul, 1000 mi. away. To be discussed by others as a problem is dehumanizing, isn't it? Paul reminds the church how important these women are and is very affirming of them. They have "contended at my side in the cause of the Gospel..." While we are not sure of their role, we know it must have been major, important, and not just some little behind the scenes thing. It is a reminder that women did play a key role in the New Testament church. Lydia, helped found the European church, and Priscilla taught Apollus. Out of 28 saints mentioned at end of Romans, ten are women, evidently holding significant positions in the church in Rome. And, Paul reminds them, don't forget, their names are in the book of life— they are saved.

REJOICE

Now that their dirty laundry has been aired for the whole world to see and for 2000 years of Christians following, Paul says, "Rejoice in the Lord!" And, in case you missed it, "Again I say, rejoice." Not only is this in the imperative, but he uses a doublet for emphasis.

There is probably no time we feel less like rejoicing or feel further from inner peace than when we face conflict. But this context reminds us, joy and praise are not conditioned by circumstances. Even conflict and controversy shouldn't take it from us. Joy is volitional— a choice we make. Next week, we'll get into a fuller exposition of this section in the verses 4-9 and the wonderful keys offered in it to overcome anxiety in our hearts.

CONCLUSION

Certainly there is no shortage of disagreements in the world or among friends. All of them are chances for us to practice what Paul prescribes by not:

taking sides

or trying to fix everyone up.

And by:

facing the reality— not sweeping it under the rug, or denying it;

Remembering the basis of agreement needs to be "In the Lord" for Christians. This isn't identical thinking or mistaking conformity for unity.

don't be critical, or sit in judgement, but help, "lift with them;"

and keep in mind the importance of the other person.

When you hear the name Nobel, what do you tend to associate it with? I hope you're thinking "The Nobel Peace Prize," since that's the point I'm trying to make. But that began just over 100 years ago. Swedish chemist Alfred Nobel awoke one morning to read his own obituary in the local newspaper. The caption read, "Dynamite King Dies." The article went on to say, "Alfred Nobel, the inventor of dynamite, who died yesterday, devised a way for more people to be killed in a war than ever before, and he died a

very rich man." Actually it was Alfred's older brother who had died. But, the bungled obituary had a profound effect on Alfred Nobel. In the article, he was identified as a "merchant of death," amassing a great fortune in the manufacture of weapons of destruction. He decided to do his best to change his legacy. Thus, he used his fortune to encourage peaceful creativity and endeavors through The Nobel Peace Prize and Nobel prizes for scientists, writers, and others benefitting and building up humanity.

In closing, remember Jesus' words:

*Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they will be called the sons of God (Mtt. 5:9).*

Let's invite the Lord to use us in peacemaking with St. Francis of Assisi's prayer printed in the bulletin: