

TWO SIDES OF THE CROSS

“... and so Jesus too suffered outside the gate to sanctify the people with his own blood. Let us go to him, then, outside the camp, and share his degradation. For there is no eternal city for us in this life, but we look for one in the life to come.” (Jerusalem Bible)

There is a common phrase that carries the message of this verse from Hebrews. It is quite offensive to some, and powerful and appealing to others. I am hoping that because of where we are and why we are here, most of you are among those who find it deeply meaningful, as the old phrase had it, “to stand at the foot of the cross.” The implication is that though we were not physically present at the crucifixion, yet we are participants in this pivotal event in human history. Time and space are not powerful enough to prevent us from being there, though sometimes we wish they could be. Sometimes we try to focus on all the events and developments that have happened since, in the desperate hope that they might provide us with sufficient distance to leave us unmoved and unchanged by what happened on Good Friday those many years ago. But it is to no avail.

Being physically present at the crucifixion is not what makes it important. We do not hear about it from anybody who was there. The eleven were off running or hiding. John may be the exception, but we have no first-person account from him either. Judas had already taken himself out of the picture. And God *only* knows where the Apostle Paul was this long before his conversion – he who would later decide to know nothing among the Corinthians “*except Jesus Christ and him crucified.*” (I Corinthians 2:2) But Paul was not an eyewitness to the crucifixion any more than you or I were.

The point is, no matter how important the Cross became to the early Christian followers, none of our top witnesses – not the apostles or Paul or any of his amazing friends – were physically present at the crucifixion, and it did not save them from the glare of the Cross any more than it does us. But from that day to this, whether offensive or appealing, Christians go to the Cross. The only real barrier to doing this is the sheer fact that it is so incredibly unnerving. For the most part, we go there when we ourselves are in great travail or need. Most often we do it alone, when we will not have to worry about having our emotions discovered, misunderstood, or derided. Yet here we are

together, in this place, with emotions under tighter rein. So we will not be able to go to the Cross as completely or to open ourselves to it as fully as we need to. On the other hand, the day is not over, and some of us may yet find quieter times or alone times before Easter morning dawns. In one way or another, most Christians know they need to revisit the Cross before Easter comes each year. It is wonderful to be able to gather in Jesus' name, but sometimes we also need to be alone with our Lord, to get some really deep things straight and clear between us.

How can we get ready for such a time? As is often the case with our Faith, it's like trying to put into words what cannot be put into words. Nevertheless, I invite you to come look with me at two sides of the Cross. There are more than two sides, of course – many more. There is more to the Cross than we can ever fathom. But even two sides are more than I can handle at one time.

I.) FIRST SIDE OF THE CROSS: WE DIE WITH HIM

The first side of the Cross is when we go there and, after sufficient time to get ourselves collected and let the awareness start to seep in, we begin to realize that, as the old phrase puts it, “***I crucified Him.***” One side of the Cross is the recognition that we do not want God telling us what to do or how to live; we do not want Jesus having influence or impact on us or our affairs; we do not want to be faithful or committed or obedient – and if pressed on such points, at certain times we would and do react just like those others did in our history. That is, we prefer Him dead – or at least out of our way: forgotten, neglected, ignored. The problem with Jesus is that He will not get out of the way. Caiaphas and Herod and Pilate and all the rest would have been glad to let Jesus live, if He would only have been sensible enough and cooperative enough to get out of the way. But Jesus was always pushing things – teaching and healing – and that thing on Palm Sunday was unforgivable. He keeps pushing it pretty hard with some of us, too.

“*I crucified Him.*” It is not very hard to understand why we might feel that way at times. Why is it so hard to *admit* (even to ourselves) that we feel that way at times? It is not easy to see ourselves lining up on the wrong side – against the Christ of God – but we do. And since we do, we need to know it and admit it and to face it for what it really is.

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I would agree with you, by the way, if you are thinking to yourself that sometimes in the history of the church, people have come to this side of the Cross and stayed there too long. They have turned the whole Christian Message into a thing of guilt and shame and self-deprecation. Nobody can endure this spiritual “cobalt treatment” for very long without starting to disintegrate. But is that really the danger in our churches today? I suspect that in this present age, a lot of the cancer within the church rages unchecked because so few of the church’s members visit the Cross *at all*. Or if they do, they do not stay long enough to feel it very deeply or to let its meaning sink in. I have some understanding and sympathy for those who have been “put off” by our clumsy attempts to speak of the Cross and what it means. Many such explanations have certainly put *me* off. But Jesus was indeed crucified, and human explanations about what it means cannot overshadow that fact. Nor can poor explanations or even wrong explanations take away the importance of the Cross to those of us who want to follow Jesus into the LIFE and into the Kingdom that He invites us into.

Please do not misunderstand. I am not asking you to think about the pain or the shame or the horror of the crucifixion itself. That has often been overdone, and not often with much benefit coming from it. It is part of the story, and we must know that part too, but dwelling on it makes it harder, not easier, to see clearly or think straight. It can even be a way to avoid the deeper meaning by getting into the emotions and the suffering as compassionate and sympathetic *observers*: A tragic event, to be sure, but we are used to tragic events. Many have died, down through all the ages – everybody, in fact. Some died bravely or nobly; others died senselessly.

That is not the heart of this event. Go past the horror. He hangs there dead. The pain is over. The thing is done. The world is quiet again. Death comes like peace after the trial and the storm. On this side of the Cross, we stand in the quiet and we stand there alone, trying to fathom what has happened. And on this side of the Cross, we remember only *one* of His sentences: “*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.*” *Abba ...* Father (the same father from the “Our Father”; the same father we begged to deliver us from evil) – “*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.*” On this side of the Cross, He is talking about you! And He is talking about me, and I know it.

I can barely stand to see that Cross and hear that sentence when I myself am the subject. I like to be forgiven, but to be forgiven at this place ... for this deed? **If I can receive this forgiveness, there is NO forgiveness I cannot receive! If I have received this forgiveness, there is NO forgiveness I cannot give!** That is why, if I am to follow the Christian WAY for very long, I must come to this side of the Cross. There is no other source for such forgiveness, coming or going. But to admit to the need for such forgiveness – how can any human survive the realization of *that*?

It is marvelous and beautiful for Him to forgive others – the ones who really need it: the ones who did not like Him, who never tried to help Him, who even hated and killed Him. But on this side of the Cross, He is talking about ME. “*Father, forgive them*” means me! And you, if you go there too.

And aside from the love revealed on His part, the rest of the statement also happens to be true: “... *for they know not what they do.*” We think we know what we do, and often we are even proud of our judgments, our opinions, our decisions. Yet truly we do not know. We do not know the magnitude of or perceive how far-reaching is the “murder” caused by our independence and our aloofness from God: jealousy, pride, fear, denial, and all the threat syndromes that divide us from spiritual reality, from each other, from our own true selves ... and from Him. That is, we do not know UNTIL ... until we see it crystallized, until we see the summarized results: the Son of God hanging there dead – murdered.

On this side of the Cross, we stand staring in disbelief, wondering how it could possibly have happened. We have made some mistakes, sure, but certainly we are not *this* evil. How could He have ended there ... like that? How could someone as talented and special as Jesus have failed to succeed – as we are succeeding, or hope to succeed – in this lovely world of ours? Right at this point, Satan always screams at me to RUN! And oh, how I need to! Radio, television, read a book, visit a sick friend, do a good deed, lose some weight, run on the beach, improve my behavior – anything, anything at all to make noise and distraction. Just get me away from here – away from this side of the Cross!

We not only rebel against God, you know. Sometimes we rebel against Satan and all his good advice. On occasion, no matter how terrifying, one or another of us stays to ponder and to ask: “Why this Cross? Why is HE, of all people, dead upon it?” So the clouds begin to gather ... and we hear the thunder of our foundations crumbling ... and the light changes ... until the thing comes slowly into focus, and the brain waves tremble at the shock. He is there for one reason and one reason only: Because we are what we are. Because I am what I am. And we live and breathe and think and decide and act in ways and manners that kill Him; that cannot find any other solution to His presence; that cannot react in any other way to who He is, what He means, and what He is. His coming necessitates the revealing of our true selves. That is a beautiful and wondrous thing – eventually. But in the beginning, it smokes us out from behind all the lies and all the denial patterns we have tried to hide behind. WE are the killers. We do not really mean to be, but it keeps happening. And once we see it, it is terribly difficult to un-see it. Every person on the face of the earth who is hated, starved, killed, shamed, avoided, violated – and everyone who goes unforgiven, unloved, unclothed, undefended – reveals it all over again: it is the sign and seal of His hanging there.

All the people in need whom I pass by; all the hungry whom I do not feed; all the sick or hurt or lonely whom I leave alone in order to go on about my business. But that makes it sound generic. It also gets personal: the specific times and bad memories I try to bury, and yes, the times I was the one doing the injury. We live in a world way wrong with God, and I am part of it. I am deeply rooted in it, and I can never extricate myself. But He is there too! There is no injustice He has not suffered, no evil He has not endured. And He still says, “*Father, forgive them*” And in this place, I know He means me.

We cannot help it, we say. We are caught in systems and structures and necessities that seem like reality to us. We get hurt ourselves, and we are helpless to change it, or at least all of it. And that is absolutely true! That, in fact, is part of what His dying reveals. The rules and realities of earth are not the same as the rules and realities of Heaven. We feel caught here. We cannot seem to help it. Maybe God can change it, or change us, but we cannot help it on our own. Our not meaning to be evil – not wanting things to come out the way they do – does not change anything. He still hangs there. What is true is true, and that is part of what we have to know. We cannot help it, but that does not keep it from being true. It is true just the same: “*I crucify Him.*”

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That is what we see from this side of the Cross. If you think you have a solution or that trying harder will help, you have not been to this side of the Cross – not yet, not at all. At the foot of this Cross, we see, know, admit, confess this hardest of anything there is to confess: *“I crucify Him.”* Without this awareness, none of the rest of the Christian Faith is available to us or open or useful to us. It all begins here. We have to know. He died to get it really clear. When He says *“Father, forgive them,”* He is talking about you and me. If I go to the Cross at all, I have to know He is talking about me, or there is no message or meaning here.

I can never extricate myself, but Jesus enacts the deep depths of forgiveness with me and for me. There is no way I can follow Him if I do not come here – if I do not go through this with Him. There are no words, but this is the deep cleansing. Never again will I have to run from my guilt or try to cover up things so they look okay on the outside. I am no longer in control, but neither am I afraid of compassion, with all its inadequacies and limitations. No longer am I afraid of need or of evil – not that I like them any better than before. In many ways, the Cross brings me to the secret part of my life with Jesus. And from now on His Spirit has the right to direct me to minister to anyone He sends me to. This will never heal a broken world, but I am not the Savior – He is. Never again will I be confused about that either.

Something in me dies with Him. That is what happens on this side of the Cross. I hear Paul trying to say it too: *“Have you forgotten that when we were baptized into union with Christ Jesus, we were baptized into his death?... [W]e were buried with him, in order that, as Christ was raised from the dead by the glorious power of the Father, so also we might set out on a new life.... We know that our old humanity has been crucified with Christ”* (Romans 6:3-6) *“I have been crucified with Christ: the life I now live is not my life, but the life which Christ lives in me; and my present mortal life is lived by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself up for me.”* (Galatians 2:20)

II.) SECOND SIDE OF THE CROSS: WE DIE TO THIS WORLD

We are skipping over the most familiar side of the Cross – the “Why did He do it? What was His motive?” side. The love of God, by way of the Christ of God, is the best and most powerful side of the Cross. We need endless reminders of that too, but let’s assume, though it is not fully true, that we have awareness of the love side of the Cross. With that as prerequisite, let us go to another side of the Cross. We come into the same quiet and peace – the terrible deed already done. Only now, we have stayed for a little while, the perception has seeped in, and things begin to shift and look very different. The fear and the murder have been healed by His love and forgiveness. The “*Father, forgive them*” has taken hold, and we have accepted it and received it – trusted it like drowning people discovering a lifeboat.

This moves us to another side of the Cross. We begin to taste what it means to see our best friend, our greatest Mentor, our Savior ... killed. Once forgiven, with the guilt and shame and anger and fear beginning to fall away from us, we begin to see the whole drama through the eyes of this wondrous friendship. This is the only One who has ever fully loved us – the only One whose very life carries authentic truth. This is the One in whose presence we find meaning and hope and worth – the One whose love spills over us and into us and into our living.

Having been forgiven, we no longer feel like the enemies. We are the friends, the disciples, the followers – and that brings us to a very different place. We come to the Cross and discover that He has been killed, destroyed, and taken from us without cause, without justice, without reason or sanity – really only because, and precisely because, He was *too good*. Some folk did not like Him. His goodness scared them, threatened their power, brought forth a blind and irrational vengeance. Nothing in life shows our evil more blatantly than our jealousy of goodness. And here was a man so good that most humans could not tolerate the comparison. Still today, many of us wrestle with the high honors Jesus receives. We would like to reduce Him down closer to our level, so that the contrasting glare is not so troublesome. It is hard if our mates love Him better than they do us, or if our friends love Him more than they do us. The competition is unfair. There is no way we can compete or win.

From this side of the Cross, we forget that we once had these very same problems. Now we need the Christ, we love Him, and we

know Him as the bringer of LIFE ... only to discover that “they” have killed Him – killed THE FRIEND, THE SAVIOR, THE MESSIAH. What most often comes from this side of the Cross is a deep and quiet *rage*. The New Testament, more politely, calls it “*dying to this world*.” At the point of this rage, people want nothing more from this world. It has lost its luster, its appeal, its power and authority, its ability to bribe or coerce us. It is no longer possible to seek or want fame, greatness, or honor from the world or on the world’s terms. This world has killed THE FRIEND: THE MESSIAH OF GOD.

The anger of the normal rebel or revolutionary is a minor twitch of emotion in comparison to the rage of a person on this side of the Cross. The rebel or revolutionary still wants something from this world – still hopes to set things right or to come out on top. From this side of the Cross, the Christian wants nothing more from this world. The cord is irreparably broken. The rage is deep and quiet. It is only seen when the world tries to win back such a person to its ways and its service. If the hand is forced, the world gains a new martyr – an exquisite summation of what the Christian really thinks of this world.

What also comes from this side of the Cross is *despair*. The New Testament, more politely, calls it “*dying to self*.” It is no longer appealing to hold goals and hopes and images and pictures of our own ambitions or desires. They have killed THE FRIEND, who already was(!) and is more than we could ever hope to be. If *that* is the reward this world gives to the One who is already more than all of our aspirations, what is left of *our* aspirations? It does something on the inside that cannot be undone; it breaks something that can never be mended. The old Persian proverb said: “God’s club makes no noise. When it strikes, there is no cure for the blow.” It is called “conversion.” Suddenly there is nothing left to be done – nothing to become. Who can go on seeking acceptance, approval, or rewards from a world that has rejected and killed THE GOD/FRIEND, THE SON OF GOD, THE MESSIAH? If the world’s judgments are this bad and wrong, who wants the world’s approval or rewards any longer?

Such rage and despair would make new Christians extremely dangerous, except that these emotions are not controlling them. Their effect is felt, but there is something much stronger still: We cannot stay with hatred, rejection, and negation because HE was not that way. THE FRIEND was not like that, and He would not want that. The only thing left is to try to do life His WAY. Sometimes that begins with the hope that we will not last very long here either – that we will

not have to stay here much longer. But staying or leaving, HE is the only meaning left. On this side of the Cross, there comes – past the rage and despair – the quiet, total, simplistic birth of a new will: to honor, to pay tribute to, to emulate, to follow, to please ...
THE FRIEND.

Is that not stupid? I believe Freud called it an “infantile regression.” (Someone should have told *him* about projection.) On top of everything else, the Christian’s reaction is irrational and paradoxical in a world like ours. But what does a Christian care what definitions and labels this world puts on things? Was it not stupid – and irrational, and worse – to kill the truest Lover and Guide this world has ever known? Why would I want to be considered “sane” by a world insane enough to kill Jesus, Lord and Christ? If this world makes me rich and famous, how can I endure the insult, knowing the opinion it holds of my Savior and my Lord?

And yet, after a while, we go back to the world from this second side of the Cross. We go because He sends us, *and for no other reason*. We go back – how can it be said? – softly ... quietly. Not asking or expecting very much; maybe daily bread. *“In but not of the world.”* We go back not because the world calls, but because this FRIEND sends us. Not because the world appeals, but because *He* cares. Not because the world has anything to offer, but because *His* offering leaves us no choice.

So we try to love, forgive, care, help – as He did, and as much as He is able to direct us, despite all our foibles and awkwardness. Not with any deep understanding or virtue or discipline, like He was able to do. But in sheer tribute and out of allegiance and obedience, because that is the image we have of Him, and it is the only way we have to in any way “stay close” to Him, say “thank you” to Him, or go on knowing Him.

This note we also hear from the early followers: *“God forbid that I should boast of anything but the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world is crucified to me and I to the world!”* (Galatians 6:14) *“Did you not die with Christ and pass beyond reach of the elemental spirits of the universe? Then why behave as though you were still living the life of the world?”* (Colossians 2:20) *“Were you not raised to life with Christ? Then ... fix your thoughts on that higher realm, not on this earthly life.”* (Colossians 3:1-2)

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One side of the Cross breaks our pride: the broken world is too wrong to be fixed by little human solutions. The Cross breaks through our aloofness from God and our pretended devotion that still crucifies Jesus. On this side of the Cross, we die with Him. We are killed by what kills HIM. His forgiveness and love are the only things that can heal us.

On the second side of the Cross, we die to this world: all the siren calls and false idols that try to distract us from the love and worship of God. If we go to the Cross, we die with Him and we die to this world.

So here we are: still turning in our broken hearts for healed souls ... and finding each other ... and saying within ourselves and sometimes together, "Jesus, we love you."

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ARE DUE TO COMBINING REWORKED VERSIONS OF THIS SERMON
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