

## **“The Promise of the Cross”**

*Sermon preached by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt*

*Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean VA*

*March 29, 2009*

*Hebrews 5:5-10, John 12:20-33*

Over the course of the past several weeks we have been looking together at the cross of Jesus - beginning with examining how central it was to Jesus self-understanding as the gospels portray him and as the early church understood him. We then looked at how the cross and the self-giving way of life to which it calls us can be perceived as foolish or nonsensical by some. Radically self-giving love, does not make sense to everyone. Then last week, we talked about the saving power of the cross to help us see our deepest fears in a new light, and in so doing to offer us not just quantity of life, but quality of life. The cross draws us close to God by keeping our focus on a vulnerable love that is with us in the midst of suffering and inspires us to be willing to take risks for the sake of God and others. Today I conclude this series by looking at the promise of the cross.

Our first passage is from the book of Hebrews. It links Jesus with a figure from the shadows of the Old Testament book of Genesis - a priest of God named Melchizedek, the King of Salem, who after a battle, appears out of nowhere and brings the patriarch Abraham a meal of bread and wine, then pronounces God's blessing on him. Melchizedek just as quickly disappears and is mentioned in just one more verse in all of the Hebrew Scriptures, which says, "You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek." The author of Hebrews refers to this verse from Psalm 110 in describing Jesus as our great high priest - our ultimate example of what it is to be chosen to mediate God to human beings, and human beings to God. Listen for what this brief passage says about who chose Jesus for this work of being a priest and how Jesus fulfilled it, not by glorifying himself, but by bringing glory to God and doing this through his willingness to listen to God and to be open to suffering for the sake of others. And think, too, about the concept near and dear to the Reformers, the idea of the priesthood of all believers, the notion that all of us are called to mediate the presence of God. *Read Hebrews here.*

Our second passage is from John's gospel. It comes immediately after John's account of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. Jesus uses a couple of words in this passage that need to be properly understood as you hear them. One of them is the word "hate". When you hear Jesus say, "*Those who hate their life in this world keep it for eternal life,*" bear in mind that he is speaking in a hyperbole common to that day and age. It is akin to how we might talk about sports. If my team wins a game handily, I might say, "we really killed them today." An observer from another culture, hearing me say that might wonder why I felt the need to actually take the life of my opponents, but I am really just using a figure of speech. When a Redskins fan says, "I hate the Cowboys," or a Duke fan says, "I hate the Tarheels," they don't literally mean, I hope, that they *hate* the individuals on the team. They dislike the fact that the team sometimes beats their team. Likewise, to hate one's life in this world is to be dissatisfied with the things and influences that sometimes keep us from experiencing the fullness of life that the God we have come to know in Jesus would have us know.

There is a second word that needs to be understood in this passage - the word "glorify." To glorify something is to demonstrate how worthy of praise it is. The Hebrew word for glory literally means weight or weighty. So you show how important, or meaningful, or weighty something is when you glorify it. When Jesus says, "*Glorify your name,*" he is saying something like "Show the world the full weight of who you are." It is John's contention that God does this in Jesus and does this most fully when he is lifted up on the cross. Listen now for God's word in the twelfth chapter of John. *Read John here. Then pray.*

Not long before her husband's death, the twentieth century hymn-writer Natalie Sleeth penned these words, which her husband asked to be sung at his funeral.

*In the bulb there is a flower; in the seed, an apple tree;  
In cocoons, a hidden promise: butterflies will soon be free!  
Unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see.*

*There's a song in every silence, seeking word and melody;  
There's a dawn in every darkness, bringing hope to you and me.  
From the past will come the future; what it holds, a mystery,  
Unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see.*

*In our end is our beginning; in our time, infinity;  
In our doubt there is believing; in our life, eternity,  
In our death, a resurrection; at the last, a victory,  
Unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see.<sup>i</sup>*

It is a lovely song, one which speaks to the cycles of life. The dark night eventually yields to the morning light. In all but the coldest of climes, thank God, the chill and ice of winter eventually give way to the warmth of spring. The future does emerge from the past. And a tiny seed does carry within it the potential to become a plant, which produces flower and fruit, which then produces more and more seeds, as on and on the cycle goes.

But what the song doesn't say, at least not explicitly, is that the seed has to be planted in soil in order for the apple tree to grow. The bulb has to be buried for the tulip to bloom. Now, to be fair to Natalie Sleeth, the hymn certainly implies that. But the truth is, not every seed gets planted in the soil. And to make matters worse, sometimes the squirrels and chipmunks dig up the bulbs we so carefully place in our gardens.

So the gardeners among you will be glad to know that Judith and I have discovered a surefire, foolproof way to keep daffodil bulbs from becoming food for our furry friends. In our coat closet by our front door, less than ten feet from the flower beds which line the sidewalk leading up to our home, we have several boxes of bulbs that have not yet been planted. Here is our secret. If we don't put the bulbs in the ground, the chipmunks can't get them. There's a tiny little problem with that approach, however. In the bulbs, there are some flowers, but we will never see those flowers unless we put them in the ground.

It was a real delight for me to be able to hear and sing with the A Capella Choir from my alma mater, Austin College, on Friday night. It really took me back. Back in the day, we didn't get to hold folders. We had to memorize all the music or we didn't sing. And back in the day, the choir didn't have the smaller vocal jazz groups that we heard sing. That made me wonder how those groups got started. I'll bet what happened is when they hired the current choir director fourteen years ago, he came in with a love for vocal jazz that I can assure you would have been anathema to the previous director. He came in and he tried something new. He took a risk, planted a seed, put himself out there.

If you were here Friday night, you know that one of the songs one of the vocal jazz groups sang was called "Big Bad World." I'm not going to sing it, but the words went something like this. *Don't you, don't you step on a snake, don't you, don't you ride on a plane, don't you, don't you eat a steak, it might kill you. Don't you, don't you stay in the sun, don't you, don't you open the door, don't you, don't you have any fun, it will kill you. If you want to get to the end of the day, before you die, here's what I say.*

*Lay down, stay down, because you can't fall off the floor. Play it safe, play it safe, life is truly wonderful but slippery when wet. Stay inside, stay and hide, life can give you everything but don't forget to stay low.*<sup>ii</sup>

That is one approach to this thing we call life. It is not the one Jesus modeled for us, mind you, nor is it the one he calls us to emulate, but it is one approach. In speaking of the cross upon which he is days from being hung, and calling his disciples to follow in his way of self-giving love, Jesus speaks about the importance of a seed being planted. I love how Eugene Peterson renders Jesus words in today's text.

*"Unless a grain of wheat is buried in the ground, dead to the world, it is never any more than a grain of wheat. But if it is buried, it sprouts and reproduces itself many times over. In the same way, anyone who holds on to life just as it is destroys that life. But if you let it go, reckless in your love, you'll have it forever, real and eternal."*<sup>iii</sup>

That is the promise of the cross, and the life of self-giving love it demonstrates for us. When we live that way, we bear fruit. We become a blessing to others. We have quality of life and not just quantity of life. But it does involve the risky step of becoming vulnerable to being hurt. Faith that isn't practiced, love that isn't risked, is like a seed encased in plastic that we wear around our neck.<sup>iv</sup> Unless we plant the seed, it stays just a single grain of wheat.

Over the past several weeks, I have talked about theories of the atonement, the way in which we become "at one with" God. And one of the theories I've talked about is the theory of substitutionary atonement, which I have acknowledged is not one of my favorites. Put simply, substitutionary atonement is the idea that Jesus died on the cross to fulfill a legalistic equation, paying a price in blood that we would otherwise have to pay with our souls in order to make us right with God: a God who needs someone to pay for sin. It is one of the theories, and it does work for some people, and it is part of the tool box of atonement theories that we possess.

With Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, I am convinced that a better way to look at the idea of atonement is to see it as participatory rather than substitutionary.<sup>v</sup> When we participate in it, when we follow in Jesus way of self-giving love, we can experience the oneness with God that he experienced. The trick is, we have to participate in it. We have to plant the seed. In order for us to really experience that oneness, we have to let go of some things. We have to die to some things.

I was with the McLean Clergy on Wednesday morning for a gathering, and we were talking about the economy and how it is affecting our congregations. We were discussing things like whether attendance is up or down. How is the giving, is it up or down? What about individuals in your congregation, what's going on with them? Are they experiencing any pain because of this recession?

We went around the table and we were able to talk about the giving patterns and the attendance patterns. But when it came to specific instances of individuals in our congregations suffering hardship because of the recession, the clergy gathered around the table were relatively quiet, even in general terms. I think there is probably a reason for this. The reason, I think, is twofold. Number one, in this area, we are relatively recession proof compared to the rest of the United States. But the second thing I thought is that there is probably pain out there that is going unreported. There is hurt that people are experiencing, loss that people are experiencing that is not being acknowledged because people don't want to admit their weakness and need. You don't wind up in McLean by acknowledging your vulnerability. So I wonder if one of the things we need to do is to acknowledge our vulnerability. Perhaps we need to die to our need to project an aura of invincibility. One of the most remarkable examples of that, a kingdom of God

moment if I have ever seen one in this congregation, was when Mark Fowler stood up a couple of days after Eric's accident and shared his pain, his need, and his deep concern for another family that had been deeply impacted by Eric's crash.

*I can't experience the oneness with God that is my inheritance when I am hanging on to fear.* That doesn't mean God doesn't love me. But I can't experience my oneness with God when I am hanging on to fear. Because God is love and perfect love casts out fear. But when I let go of my fear of being hurt, my fear of rejection, even my fear of dying, I am set free to really live.

Many of you know that Flynn Bucy's daughter Ally died three years ago about this time. She was in her early twenties. She knew that she had a genetic condition that meant that her body at any point could basically give out, it could crash. After several episodes when she did in fact almost die, her body finally gave out. She had an aneurysm, and that was it. Yet she lived fully and the weekend before she died, she had a blast with her family in New York City. She told Flynn once that life is like an hourglass filled with diamonds. Each day, each minute is precious, and she knew it better than most. There is no time to waste on worrying how long it will last, or to try to rush it along. Just savor each diamond. Flynn says that we spend so much time trying to grind those diamonds into sand so that time passes more quickly that we miss so much of the preciousness of life. That was one of the seeds that Ally planted with Flynn, and through Flynn now me, and through me, now you, that life is like an hourglass filled with diamonds.

*I can't experience oneness with God when I am hanging on to anger and resentment.* Again, that does not mean that God doesn't love me. But I prevent myself from fully knowing that divine spark within me when I am obsessed with getting revenge. Jesus demonstrated the power and the promise of that when he said from the cross, *Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.*

Last Sunday's *Washington Post Magazine*<sup>vi</sup> had an amazing article about a man who forgave a neighbor for shooting his seventeen year old son. The man who learned to forgive was Bernard Williams, and the man who did the shooting was William Norman. Here's what happened. In the middle of the night, Norman's car alarm went off because this young man bumped into his car. Norman woke up, picked up a rifle, and from his window, he shot this seventeen year old boy and killed him.

Understandably, Bernard Williams wanted to see that man punished. In fact, he was. He was sent to prison. Meanwhile, after Norman was sent to prison, Bernard Williams went into a spiral - depression, addiction, and then, finally recovery. But that resentment just hung on and hung on. Finally, years later, Bernard Williams decided that he had to confront and ultimately forgive this man who murdered his boy. He wound up arguing for Norman's early release from prison. I don't know how many people could do that. I'm not sure I could. But he let the resentment go. From reading the article, you can tell that Bernard Williams is really happier, healthier, and freer because he did.

*I can't experience my oneness with God when I am hanging on to feeling like I am somehow better than other people.* One of the best parts of the Presbytery meeting I went to on Tuesday evening (and not all of the parts of a Presbytery meeting are particularly fun, by the way), was hearing a retiring minister speak. Graham Bardsley, served three churches in this presbytery over the course of thirty-six years here. Graham was born in London, in 1938, which, as he reminded us, was the year before the war started. We think World War II started in December of 1941, but in Europe, in England, it started in 1939. He remembers being terrified as a little boy in London as bombs fell on his city. When he came to the United States in 1947, he was a scared, anxious, insecure young boy. And as he tells it, he found some comfort and security in religion, in Christianity.

He had security. He knew who was in and who was out. That is what Bardsley said to us. But then he began to give his testimony. He said that over the course of his years in ministry, he came to recant a number of the positions that he took. He was against the Civil Rights Act in 1964, because he knew who was in and who was out. He was against anything in the church that stood for inclusiveness, because he knew who was in and who was out. But Bardsley told us that over the course of the years, he has come to understand that God's love really is radically inclusive. To hear that, from a man who is seventy years old, having been on the journey that he has been on, was worth the whole trip to the presbytery meeting.

The promise of the cross is not that we are somehow better than anyone else, or that we avoid all pain and suffering in life, but that in the midst of pain and suffering we are able to have the privilege of being a blessing to other people.

I thought about seeds being planted on Monday when I went down to Garden Memorial for the funeral service for Wendell Eric Wallace, Wendell and Florella Wallace's son. He died at forty-five, due to an aneurysm. Wendell Eric Wallace never wrote any books, he never made a lot of money. He was a pretty quiet, unassuming man. I came to know him through some of our joint ministry experiences with Garden.

Roxanna Atwood preached at his funeral. If you don't know Roxanna, she leads a wonderful African-American funeral. Even though she is a short, white woman, she sounds like a big, black woman. She knows how to speak to an African-American congregation. She said, "Church, this is a day of confirmation. A confirmation of Wendell Eric's life, a confirmation of God's grace, a confirmation of God's promises. She just went with that. But what moved me most of all was near the end of her sermon.

She was talking about how Wendell Eric confirmed the promises of God in his life. She had worked with him during his own confirmation process as a youth. She talked about how respectful Wendell Eric always was. She said that really came through when the confirmation class went to Miriam's Kitchen, at Western Presbyterian in D.C. Miriam's Kitchen is an outreach ministry to homeless people. It is a soup kitchen.

Wendell Eric went with the rest of his confirmation class and he received the instructions for serving the food. When they come through the line, only one helping. Just give them one helping, that's it. Now, if there are left overs, you might be able to give them some seconds later, but they can only expect one helping. Eric said, "I'll serve on the line the first time through, but I will not be up there after that. At Garden Memorial, where I go to church, you can go back for seconds, and thirds, and fourths, and nobody tells you no. I don't want to tell anybody that they can't have seconds." Roxanna said, "Now there's a kid who knew about respect."

I think about all the people who were there at that particular funeral on Monday. I think about that story. And I think what happened is that Wendell Eric Wallace, through the way he lived, planted a seed in Roxanna Atwood. And Roxanna planted that seed in those of us who were gathered at Garden. And now I'm planting a seed in you. I wonder how it will grow.

*Amen.*

Aaron D. Fulp-Eickstaedt

---

<sup>i</sup> "Hymn of Promise" was written by Natalie Sleeth in 1986. For more information on the hymn, and to hear the tune, go to <http://www.cyberhymnal.org/htm/h/y/hymnprom.htm>

<sup>ii</sup> The song “Big Bad World” was originally performed by The Real Group, a five-person jazz vocal group from Sweden. It was written by a member of the group, Anders Edenroth, in 2000.

<sup>iii</sup> Eugene Peterson, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* (NavPress: Colorado Springs, 2002), p. 1945

<sup>iv</sup> I am indebted to Barbara Brown Taylor for the idea of the seed encased in plastic. I believe you can find her using that metaphor in her book *God In Pain: Teaching Sermons on Suffering* (Abingdon: Nashville, 2008).

<sup>v</sup> See Borg and Crossan *The Last Week: A Day by Day Account of Jesus Final Week in Jerusalem* (San Fransisco: HarperOne, 2006)

<sup>vi</sup> Karen Houppert, “The Truth about Forgiveness” *The Washington Post Magazine*, (Sunday March 22, 2009). For a link to the story on-line, see:  
<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/story/2009/03/20/ST2009032001795.html?sid=ST2009032001795>