

## **The Centrality of the Cross**

*Sermon by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt  
Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean VA  
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*Romans 4:13-25 and Mark 8:31-38*

Today I start a series of sermons on the cross and the crucifixion that will cover the next four weeks. As you hear the assigned lectionary passage from Paul's letter to the Romans, you will not hear much about the cross. Paul is in the middle of making the case to the church at Rome that Abraham should serve as a model of faith for the Christian. The realization of God's promise to Abraham, says Paul, was not based on what Abraham did to deserve it through obedience to the law or rules, it was based on Abraham's ability to believe that God was able to do what God had promised. At the end of the passage, listen for how Paul understands Jesus death on a cross and his resurrection - and how important it is, in Paul's eyes at least, to believe in the one who raised Jesus from the dead. *Read Romans here.*

As you listen to the passage from Mark's gospel, keep a few things in mind. First of all, this is a passage that occurs in each of the first three gospels. In each instance, the disciples have been traveling with Jesus for quite a while now. They have listened to his teachings about the kingdom of God. They have seen him helping to realize that kingdom by doing such things as healing lepers, casting out demons, restoring sight to the blind, and helping lame people walk. They have watched him come into conflict with the religious authorities of the day by doing such things on the Sabbath. At this point in the story, Jesus has just asked the disciples who people say that he is. The disciples respond by saying, "Some say John the Baptist, some say Elijah, some say one of the prophets." Then Jesus says, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter replies, "You are the Messiah." Listen as Jesus explains what an affirmation like that means for Jesus' own life, and for the life of those who would follow him. Hear how in the gospel writer's account, Jesus understanding of himself is tied up in a cross. *Read Mark here.*

It is somewhat ironic, given the serious nature of Mark 8:31-38, that it is the source of one of the best preacher jokes of all time. The story goes that a woman went out shopping and found a dress that she really, really liked. It was \$600. She decided to buy it. She came home and her husband said, "Uh, nice dress. How much did it cost?" She replied, "Well, it cost three figures." He said, "Okay...What three figures?" She responded, "Well, actually it cost \$600." He told her, "What were you thinking? What possessed you to buy that dress?" She said, "Well, the devil made me do it." He replied, "You should have said, 'Get thee behind me, Satan!'" She said, "I did, and he said, 'Looks pretty good from back here, too.'"

I start with that bit of humor, because over the next four weeks we will be dealing with something very serious. We will be looking together at the cross of Jesus Christ, and how we understand it. And I'll be preaching a series of sermons on that cross, focusing on the centrality of it, the foolishness of it, the power of it, and the promise of it. Though Lent seems like a particularly appropriate time to focus on such topics, given as it is often described as a journey with Jesus to the cross, the emphasis was occasioned by a card that came in during the visioning process the Christian Education Council kicked off in January. The card said something like, "The idea that Jesus died on the cross at the hands of a vengeful God who

needed a blood sacrifice to appease his wrath is an outmoded idea that doesn't make any sense. It is time for Immanuel to deal with this."

Now a card like that makes you sit up and take notice. A card like that makes you look back over the past four, ten, twenty, thirty or forty years in this congregation and wonder when or if the message that God is vengeful has actually been proclaimed. And yet, because the Christian faith has at its center a cross, which was an instrument of death - and because Jesus, according to the gospel writers, apparently understands this cross to be somehow a part of his destiny and in some form or fashion tied in with God's will - one can see where the question might arise. Especially when you consider that to a greater or lesser extent over the centuries the Christian church has understood Jesus' death on a cross in light of a theory of substitutionary atonement (the idea that Jesus died in the place of a sinful human beings, in order to deliver us from the punishment that we deserve and would otherwise receive, to make us right with - or at one with - God.) The first hymn we sang this morning—actually it was my Grandfather Eickstaedt's favorite hymn—reflects that understanding of the cross.

“And when I think that God, his son not sparing, sent him to die, I scarce can take it in. That on the cross, my burden gladly bearing, he bled and died to take away my sin.”

That's substitutionary atonement: the idea that Jesus somehow takes our place.

Leaving aside whether or not substitutionary atonement is the best, the only, or even a particularly good way to understand the cross and the atonement, it is the way many Christians have viewed the cross over the centuries. This makes the cross complicated for those of us who understand God as Love and not as a wrathful deity who demands that somebody pay for the sin of humanity. We will get to how we might understand the cross and atonement in a different way over the next several weeks, but for today, let's focus on how the cross is central to the Christian life.

It seems almost silly to have to make the case, given that the entire New Testament was written in light of it. The death of Jesus on a cross, and the promise of his rising again to new life, informed each of the New Testament writers and the communities to which they wrote. There was no getting around the fact of the crucifixion. There is no denying it was somehow central to the way the earliest Christians understood Jesus and his mission on earth. The idea that one could have Jesus apart from the cross would have been anathema to the communities of faith that formed in the first century.

And those earliest Christians understood the cross as somehow inextricably tied to God's will. You can hear it in Jesus teaching in Mark's gospel and the way it is echoed in each of the other canonical gospels, “The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.” It is at this point when Peter jumps in, in Mark's account, and rebukes Jesus. You can almost see Peter grabbing Jesus by the robe and shaking him by the shoulders, “No, no, say it isn't so. This is not right.” In Matthew's version, Peter says, “God forbid, Lord, this must never happen to you.” That's when Jesus unloads. “*Get thee behind me, Satan. For you are setting your mind not on divine things, but on human things.*”

Jesus response to Peter says a lot about how he, and the earliest Christians, understood the centrality of the cross. They understood Jesus' cross not, finally, as the result of human action: the consequences of Jesus being in the wrong place at the wrong time, angering the wrong people with his passion for the kingdom of God. They understood his cross as the result of a life lived in faithfulness to God. At least to the gospel writers, the cross, and the suffering vulnerable love that Jesus displays on it, is God's will somehow, it is not a human accident. The road to that cross is not easy, but the cross is central.

Last night we had our Auction here. The Auction is always a wonderful event, always a lot of fun. I was reminded that at some point in this church's history there was some controversy about whether or not the cross should be hanging up in this space while the Auction was going on. There was some dispute about that and at least once the cross was actually taken down.

I think it is right, very right, to have the cross up while we are having the Auction. Even if there is an adult beverage or two consumed - even if people are having a lot of fun and acting silly. Because the cross reminds us that at the heart of our faith is a love that is willing to give of self. I think that cross can and should inspire giving. It should be up for every Auction.

We are called to follow in Jesus' way. When Jesus speaks to the disciples, he also addresses the whole crowd, and says, *"If anyone would be my disciple, let him or her take up their cross and follow me. Let them deny themselves."* That's a hard message to hear, but it is central to the life of faith.

I have a favorite preacher - cheer up, it is not Tom Long this time, it is Will Willimon, the former Dean of the Chapel at Duke - who once preached a sermon on taking up the cross. In the sermon, he made this case, *"If we or Peter follow Jesus to the cross, you can be sure that we will be protesting all the way. Here is a path nobody wants to take, a burden no balanced person would willingly assume. Our shoulders are too weak to carry such a load."*

Then Will told this story.

*The doctor spared few words. "Your baby is afflicted with Downs' Syndrome, mongoloidism. I had expected this, but things were too far along before I could say for sure."*

*"Is the baby healthy?" she asked.*

*"That's what I wanted to discuss with you," the doctor said. "The baby is healthy - except for the problem. However, it does have a slight, rather common, respiratory ailment. My advice is that you let me take it off the respirator - that might solve things. At least, it's a possibility."*

*"It's not a possibility for us," the mother and her husband said together.*

*"I know how you feel," responded the doctor. "But you need to think about what you're doing. You already have two beautiful kids. Statistics show that people who keep these babies risk a higher incidence of marital stress and family problems. Is it fair to do this to the children you already have? Is it right to bring this suffering into your family?"*

Will says, *At the mention of “suffering”, I saw her face brighten, as if the doctor were finally making sense.*

*“Suffering?” she said quietly. “We appreciate your concern, but we’re Christians. God suffered for us, and we will try to suffer for the baby, if we must.”*

*“Pastor, I hope you can do something with them,” the doctor whispered to Will outside their door as he continued his rounds.*

Willimon goes on.

*Two days later, the doctor and I watched the couple leave the hospital. They walked slowly, carrying a small bundle; but it seemed a heavy burden to us, a weight on their shoulders. We felt as if we could hear them dragging, clanking it down the front steps of the hospital, moving slowly but deliberately into a cold, gray March morning.*

*“It will be too much for them,” the doctor said. “You ought to have talked them out of it. You should have helped them to understand.”*

Here’s how Willimon closes that story: *But as they left, I noticed a curious look on their faces; they looked as if the burden were not too heavy at all, as if it were a privilege and a sign. They seemed borne up, as if on another’s shoulders, being carried toward some high place the doctor and I would not be going, following a way we did not understand.<sup>i</sup>*

That is what can happen when the cross is central. A cross could do that for them. Why? Because the cross calls us to lay down our burdens to pick up the burdens of those who are most vulnerable in our society, just the way Jesus did. It is not just a cold, stark reality. It is a living metaphor. And it leads people into selfless acts of service.

I have to tell you that given the state of the economy, I was really surprised to hear this morning that we, as a congregation, raised more than \$71,000 at the Auction last night. That is money that will go to fund local helping agencies and programs and groups that care for those most in need in D.C., the metro area, and around the world. I have to believe that what inspired that was not just an overabundance of adult beverages. I have to believe that what inspired that was the presence of the cross.

In Jesus’ name.

*Amen.*

Aaron D. Fulp-Eickstaedt

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<sup>i</sup> Will Willimon, “Taking Up the Cross” *The Christian Century* (March 2, 1983), pp. 173-174. You can read Willimon’s whole sermon/article at <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=1692>