

THE CRUCIALITY OF THE CROSS

A Sermon

Preached in the Duke University Chapel

by

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Scripture Lesson: Romans 5:1-11

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On a small hill in the city of San Francisco there was once a cross, whether it still stands or not I'm unsure, and upon one of the arms of that cross was a plaque bearing a quotation from the Old Testament book of Lamentations, "Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by?" (Lamentations 1:12)

These words, which were originally written by one who mourned the destruction of Jerusalem as he plaintively inquired of those who looked upon the fallen city whether they understood the significance of what had happened, these words, had been transferred to the plaque and applied to the cross. So that now as one passed by the cross he was confronted with the question of its significance. And it is well to ask, even as we sit here today before the cross in this sanctuary, whether we understand its meaning. Look at it now as I ask, Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by?

We talk a great deal about the cross in the worship, in the ethical service and in the theology of our Christian faith. But what does the cross mean? What is its significance? How does it impinge upon our lives?

I want today to speak about the atonement. In a profound sense I'm sure you wonder whether such a theme can be spoken on with much meaningfulness. It seems so couched in ancient theological language; so traditionalistic (and we are ambiguous about the value of tradition, are we not?) and, perhaps for many it seems quite irrelevant.

But what is relevant? A Durham minister last year spoke on the theme of the "Irrelevance of being Relevant," and as one Duke student was leaving he was heard to say, "Now, that was really relevant, wasn't it." What is obvious is that what is relevant on one level is irrelevant on another. What is basic and unquestionably necessary in one dimension seems to hold no interest on another. What strange creatures we are: we so often cover-over or confuse the dimensions of our existence, and forget those very questions and issues which should be most important for us.

I raise the spectre of relevance because it immediately confronts anyone who dares speak about the atonement. Atonement for what? By whom? For what end? Perhaps we raise such questions because on one level, at least, we seem to be people of such easy conscience; serene in our condition; neither questioning nor exploring meaning beyond the present moment, content to shrug our shoulders at past action and to be wistfully optimistic about what we shall be able to do.

Some months ago I was speaking to a group of law students on campus. I was making an analogy between the comfort and well-being of our ordinary lives and life aboard a ship. We are prospering, well-fed, have sufficient recreation and enough tasks to consume our energies. But I suggested that occasionally there were people who went out to the bow of the ship and looked around; people who gazed across the expanse of water and asked: "Where are we going?" "What does this trip mean?" One of the students replied by saying that this sort of question simply did not interest him, he was satisfied with and fully engaged by the activity of the present, and as for the type of interrogation I was suggesting they might raise, he simply did not "give a damn."

Why do people balk at such questions? It's not that we mind the implication that we might be lost, or estranged for these words are among those which are "O.K." in current university vocabulary. Students who have grown up on Camus, or J. D. Salinger, or T. S. Eliot, or Sartre, or for that matter on Tennessee Williams or Joseph Conrad speak this language. "Very sophisticated" people do not mind being told they are lost or estranged--especially if it's said in French or German.

But to be called a sinner or to be spoken to of atonement is--well, too bourgeois, or churchy or mickey mouse. To be reminded of inauthentic existence, or the brokenness of human relationships, of man's isolation or of every individual's "identity crisis," is all right so long as it reminds us of our desperate situation, our despair and the travesty of our existence. And, sometimes in a certain sense, we rather enjoy our plight. There is, as Robert Fitch has remarked, a kind of ecstasy which we derive from our anguish. And we are proud of having to face the abyss of meaninglessness and of having called life and its significance into question.

A friend of mine who teaches at Yale told this summer of being rudely awakened one night by terrible screams outside his room. He jumped up and looked out of the window. There standing in the middle of the quad was a student, his arm stretching upward and shouting at the top of his voice, "I hate this place! I hate this place!" (It also happens at other schools, you know.) And I was reminded of a student who said with a defiant pride, "I'm really suffering. Oh, my life is terrible." But what was obvious was that he was proud of the fact that his life was so much more difficult than anyone else's he knew.

Don't misunderstand me, I'm not making fun of this condition where it expresses authentic struggling with life and its meaning. And there are some among us today who know the very genuine and thoroughgoing sense of lostness and despair. But the point I want to make is that in spite of our acknowledgment of a strained and estranged condition there is still not a deep sense of need for atonement. Our thoughts may be jumbled, our lives distraught, our relationships shallow--but we muster our strength to face the onslaught of life and rather than ask to be justified we demand that the situation into which we are placed justify itself.

Therefore, when the question is put, "Does the atonement meet your need?" You probably wonder what is being asked? What need? Atonement for what? Atonement to what?

Perhaps the problem has been that we always tend to start with our need. And it may be that thereby we get off on the wrong road from the beginning. At least to start with the fact of man's need has two basic dangers: first, God so easily becomes a projection which serves to simply satisfy our needs (Freuerbach and Freud have claimed that this is all that religion is, a projection of our need upon a screen which we then see reflected as an answer--and who is to deny that when man begins solely on the basis of his need they are not right?); secondly, what we think is a need at one level is not our need at another level. What is relevant at one level is not relevant at another level.

Let us begin, consequently, by going the other way around. Let us start by seeing what the Christian tradition says about the atonement and then see if this at any point touches our lives, has any relevance or helps us to interpret ourselves. Perhaps we shall find that, rather than finding answers to needs we are now conscious of, we shall find that even our needs are reinterpreted in the light of the cross and we are fulfilled in a most unexpected way.

The justification for this approach is that sometimes we do not recognize sickness until we know health; sometimes we do not know loneliness until we experience true friendship; it is possible that we do not really understand lostness and guilt until we come to see redemption and forgiveness. To put it in traditional language, we only know the real meaning of sin and know ourselves as sinners when we see the cross.

There is an old hymn which says:

But none of the ransomed ever knew
How deep were the waters crossed
Nor how dark was the night the Lord passed through
Ere He found the sheep that was lost.

This is, of course, profoundly true. No one, not even those who are most sensitive to the meaning of the cross, understands

fully its cost or its import. But there is another side to this which must also be stressed, and we may do this by simply changing the words of the hymn.

None but the ransomed ever knew
 How deep were the waters crossed
 Nor how dark was the night the Lord passed through
 Ere He found the sheep that was lost.

For while no one of us can hope to comprehend fully what the crucifixion of Jesus meant, the only ones who come close to appreciating the full weight of its significance are those who have also knelt before it, and felt the impact of its power as it pierced their heart.

Only the ransomed know, and they may not
 know fully, but they know! And by that
 knowledge they live.

Socrates is reported to have said that philosophy begins with wonder. Whether or not this is always true of philosophy--and I'm sure that it isn't--I am certain that the sense of the significance of our relation to God often does depend precisely upon wonder. Wonder as we look upon the originator of Christian faith. Wonder at the fact of grace. Wonder at the power of love. The wonder of the Christ!

Let us look at Him. In the New Testament Jesus spoke and the people were amazed; He acted and they were startled; He died and they questioned; He arose, and Mark says they were afraid. The wonder of it all! All of the wonder of it!

Yet...does it have any relevance?

In this man, in whom perfect humanity is revealed we see our own imperfection--and possibility. In this man, in whom perfect goodness is revealed, we recognize our own lack of goodness--and the possibility for goodness. In this man who was perfectly penitent we recognize our own pride--yet need for penance. In this man in whom the perfect relation to God is manifest we recognize our own inadequate relation--and the promise of full relationship.

Look again at the cross.

Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by?

When we see what life can be, life with God and with our fellows, we recognize what our lives are. We are filled with wonder--then with perplexity, with awe--then with grief, with amazement--then, perhaps, with aspiration.

What a strange man this Jesus was. Perhaps we've heard the story so often it no longer surprises us. But He went to the outcasts, He ate with the unacceptable, He cared for the dispossessed. His words of peace and condemnation pierced deeply.

An American theologian not too long dead once wrote some words to a hymn which expresses the remarkableness of this life.

O Son of God incarnate, O Son of man divine!
In whom God's glory dwelleth, In whom man's virtues shine;
God's light to earth Thou bringest
To drive sin's night away,
And through Thy life so radiant,
Earth's darkness turns to day.

Wilbur F. Tillett (1854-1936)
The Methodist Hymnal, 117.

Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by?

Irenaeus, the second century theologian, put the meaning of Jesus Christ cryptically when he wrote, "He became what we are in order that we might become what he is." This coming involved suffering, a suffering love. Heine, the German poet, is reported to have said once, in an off-handed manner, "God will forgive you, that's His business." But the whole Christian response has been that the forgiveness of God is not his business, it is an expression of his grace, and the quotation must be changed so that now we say, "God will forgive you, that's His suffering."

The suffering of God is somewhat analogous to that of a parent-child relation when the child has been disobedient. The more radical the disobedience and the more tragic its consequences, the more the parent--as well as the child--suffers. If the parent is a person of integrity he is not able to shrug off the disobedience and say, it simply does not matter. It does matter! It matters enough that if there is to be an honest relationship and a renewed possibility for fully realized living together as parent and child then something must be done about that which separates the two, namely the disobedience. The parent of ten demands of the child some act of restitution by which the disobedience is overcome, but more demanding than the restitution of the child is the inner struggle of the parent who must hold to his integrity, admit the radicalness of the disobedience and yet accept the child again in love and community. The parent suffers. He or she suffers inwardly, their integrity and love meet and struggle, and love can be expressed only as it acknowledges the reality of the integrity and acts upon the basis of this integrity by suffering acceptance.

And the child also suffers. For disobedience breaks the community which existed and requires both penance and readiness to restore that which disobedience has hurt. There is the suffering of separation and the struggle for renewal on both sides. The uniqueness of Jesus is found in the fact that in His cross He expresses at once the suffering and the struggle from both sides in His own person. The event makes a difference to the Forgiver and the forgiven. And here in one man both are present.

There is a saying which must be spoken with understanding. "God will overlook nothing, but he will forgive anything." It is precisely in this tension that the cross is rooted. God notices everything, He overlooks nothing, for genuine love is not deceived either by the other or itself. Nonetheless, God will forgive anything, and remember, there is no cheap grace, there is a cross. He who is so unlike us and has come to our side that we may be like Him.

Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by?

The offering of Jesus is not a propitiation to an angry God. Too often we have spoken as though Christ's death is a way of appeasing a wrathful, legalistic, unrelenting God. As if God must be induced to forgive us. No! It is God who is the initiator. It is God in Christ who seeks us out and who takes the struggle of alienation into His very heart.

There was a cross in the heart of God, F. W. Dilliston reminds us, long before there was a cross on Calvary. But the cross which was present in God's heart comes to concretion on Golgotha, at this place in human history--in our history--and our renewed relation to God comes to concretion at this same point. A cross which extends from the heart of God to our hearts....

Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by?

As we see the care of God we also see our indifference. As we see the life of Jesus we also see our lives. As we see Jesus' penance and suffering we also see our pride and self-care. So now we have come full round. We are back to the question of our need, only now our need is seen in the light of God's grace as this is revealed in Jesus Christ.

The Divine charity has stooped to our necessity. And in so doing has indicated to us what our necessity is by indicating to us what Divine charity is. And so the wonder. The self-donation of God is the most incomprehensible and yet the most illuminating fact in our history. All other marvels are pushed aside by this one. This is the miracle which stands at the center of reality, the personal center, the center where we lift up our eyes and see the cross, are explained by the cross and are ourselves made cruciform.

O Love divine, what hast thou done!
The incarnate God hath died for me!
The Father's co-eternal Son
Bore all my sins upon the tree!
The Son of God for me hath died:
My Lord, my Love, is crucified.

Behold Him, all ye that pass by,
The bleeding Prince of life and peace!
Come, sinners, see your Saviour die,
And say, was ever grief like His?
Come, feel with me his blood applied:
My Lord, my Love, is crucified.

Charles Wesley (1707-1788)
The Methodist Hymnal, 137

Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by?

Prayer after the Sermon

O God, fill us with the holy disquietude and
the disquieting holiness which true confronta-
tion with thy cross brings.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the
Holy Spirit. Amen.
