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Lent 2 C – March 13, 2022

“Cross”

Read: 1 Cor. 1: 18 – 25 / Memorize: 1 Cor. 1 : 18

A lot of times, we Christians assume that everyone knows about Jesus and the cross. You might remember what is when you assume something. Let's not assume, but talk about the cross and Jesus. Is it a symbol of suffering or salvation, death or victory? Here's what Paul said in 1 Corinthians 1: 18, “The message of the cross is foolish to those who are headed for destruction! But we who are being saved know it is the very power of God.”

Perhaps you wear a cross, have one on a wall in your home or make the sign of the cross as you pray or hear the invocation or benediction at worship? The Cross is a sign that we are committed to Jesus, who has redeemed us from the power of sin, death and the devil. However you use it, to those being saved, it is the very power of God!

We are urged to take up the cross, which some think means to seek out suffering, but that's not so. Suffering came to Jesus. Jesus didn't look for it, but He also didn't flee from it.

The cross is a symbol of our discipleship. There is a very specific sequence in discipleship. So where does it all begin? It begins with self-denial. We are sinful by nature. We want the world to revolve around us. Discipleship calls us away from self-centeredness to care about others.

Every once in a while, we break out of that self-centeredness, but it is a struggle for us. We're afraid that if we don't put ourselves first, we won't get what we deserve. The problem is the only thing we deserve is death. That is the wage we have earned because of sin.

We like to think we can earn our way into heaven. We want to believe that we can become equal to God on our own. Self-denial reminds us that we need to depend on God because we are not able to save ourselves.

Once we accept that we can move to taking up the cross. We don't have to suffer for Jesus. He did it all for us. God calls us to look at how Jesus lived and died and understand that He is calling us to a life of sacrifice. We are servants of the most High

God by His grace. Our joyful response is obedience. Once we have come to that understanding we begin the journey to following Jesus.

Self-denial, taking up the cross, and following Jesus equal the trinity of discipleship, a three legged stool of faithfulness. Will it look the same in everyone's life? No, obviously not. We all live our lives differently. It's the reason for our actions that unites us, the love of Jesus.

We are looking to Jesus, following in the way He walked, recognizing that there will be times of suffering. I was struck by a letter from the Bishop of the Ukrainian church this week. He talks about the pastors and the people of the church maintaining their faith in the face of this onslaught. I wonder how they can do that. Then, I remember that they do so by looking to the cross.

They look to the cross, an instrument of death, humiliation and stark warning for inspiration and assurance. Paul's reminder that it might seem foolish to others is true, but to those who are being saved it is the power of God.

The cross is a sign of radical forgiveness and inexpressible grace that can only be found in Jesus. That view gives us a whole different understanding of the cross. It is a reminder of the peace that passes all understanding.

That's the only way we can explain Jesus' first word from the cross. All around Him there is hurt and pain. In the midst of that, Jesus says words that must have been confounding to them but are joyous to us: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

Our cross is not a crucifix, one that has the body of Christ on it. It is pretty typical of what you see in a Lutheran church. The empty cross spurs us forward to the joy of the resurrection. It is also the reassurance to us that death does not have the final word.

Paul will give us those beautiful words of Romans 8: 37: "No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us." He goes on to assure us that nothing can separate us from the love of Jesus.

Why could those who brought Jesus to Pilate not see that He truly was the Son of God? I personally think they were spurred on by Satan. Satan wanted to sidetrack God's plan. The Jewish rulers wanted to sidetrack Jesus because they were afraid they would lose power. They taunted Him about destroying the temple and raising it up in three days. This temple had taken forty-six years to build. Obviously this man was a lunatic and a loser.

When He was crucified most of His followers disappeared. Satan believed he had won. He had disrupted the plan of God. The Jews were looking for a warrior-king. Jesus was showing power by the vulnerability of sacrificial love. There is nothing more powerful than that love. It is the love of a parent for a child. That's exactly what God was doing in letting Jesus die on the cross for us.

We should not be surprised that people don't understand. In the time of Jesus, a cruciform life goes against everything people thought was best for them. It is the same in our time. Consumerism, competition and tribalism tell us to only think about self. The cruciform life calls us to look to the interests of others, which is counter-cultural.

What will help us? What will help our country? All around us we see evidence of the harm that seeking power brings. Those who have the mind of Christ understand that we are called to put others before us. To look around and see the needs, to offer compassion to those who are hurting and sympathy to those who are grieving.

The way of the cross can be expressed in many ways. Let the person behind you, go ahead of you. Be the first to apologize. Tip generously. Those who are working in service industries are working incredibly hard. They have suffered greatly. Do the thing that is unexpected because that's exactly what Jesus did. It's not dying on a cross but they are signs of God's love and build up your witness.

We have been praying for unity and peace for a long time. Those things only come through reconciliation. That can only come when we talk with each other with humility, rather than self-righteousness. Rather only talking to those who agree with you, talk to those who don't, not to convince them of your rightness, but to listen and learn.

We begin by praying for each other, letting those prayers soften our hearts. The cross holds out the hope of healing even when it is yet unrealized. It is through the cross that God reconciled Himself to us and each of us to all things.

At that cross there were some embarrassments. Where were the disciples? They had fled. Even before that there's a man conscripted into carrying the cross of Jesus. His name was Simon. He was trying to get home see his family. They conscripted him to carry the cross. We only hear of his here. Yet, his two sons, Rufus and Alexander, are mentioned as followers of Jesus Christ later in the Bible.

Simon, the compelled passerby, embodies the power of God to choose any of us, despite our ignorance, fear or reluctance. We can participate in God's Kingdom even when we don't realize it.

At the cross, the very dregs of society are hung on either side of Him. At first, they both taunt. One seeks his own interest, "If you are the Christ save yourself, and us." Remember what I said about self-interest? The other somehow understands and challenges his fellow thief. Then, in humility, asks Jesus to remember him when He comes into His Kingdom.

Perhaps if the disciples had been there they would have better understood. You see, they thought this was the end. On Sunday they were mourning the death of Jesus, having their pity party in the locked upper room, because they were afraid. The thief on the cross knew differently. It would make no sense for Jesus to remember him if the only thing Jesus was doing was dying.

Sometimes, as I read the account I want to call down God's wrath on all the perpetrators. Let God unleash His legions to destroy. I want the bad guys to get their comeuppance but instead Jesus just waits on the cross. I want God to declare boldly that this is wrong do something, but He does not act. Perhaps you feel the same way at times in your life when you see injustice.

There is a very simple reason for God's lack of action: God was planning to save us by the cross. Jesus needs to remain on that cross no matter how painful. He is obedient to His Father's will. In the garden Jesus asked His Father to take this cup of suffering from Him, but submitted to His Father's will.

He remained on the cross so that all would be sure that there is nothing in all creation that will ever be able to separate us from the love of God in Jesus. In the certainty of the cross we can celebrate the Lordship of Jesus and the victory He won through it.