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**Pentecost 10 –August 14, 2022**

**“The Cross: God’s Answer to Our Deepest Needs”**

**Read: Colossians 2: 6 - 15/ Memorize: Colossians 2: 15**

A monk, in the Middle Ages, invited the village to come for a sermon on the love of God. The people waited in silence, while the sun streamed in the beautiful windows. When the last glint of color faded, the monk took a candle from the altar and walked to the life-sized figure of Jesus on the cross.

Without saying a word, he held the light beneath the wounds of his feet, hands and side. Then he let the light shine on the thorn-crowned brow. The people stood in silence and wept. They knew they were at the center of a mystery, the very image of the invisible God, giving Himself for them. It was a love so deep and powerful the mind could not measure it or words express it.

Paul comes back, again and again, to the purpose and power of the cross. Our dilemma may be that we know it so well, we don’t think very often about its importance. I invite you to listen afresh and think about the cross and your deepest needs.

To receive forgiveness.

To love and be loved.

To experience community, to belong

To have a cause for which to live and die.

Our needs are often rooted in these four items and the cross meets us at the point of these deepest needs. As I said last week, we need to remember who we are.

There are some who suggest people are getting better all the time. That doesn’t seem to reveal itself by what we see. Deep down we know this: We’re sinners. We may not mean to be, but we are. Our greatest need is forgiveness.

There is a battle going on within us. It has ravaged our being, torn us to pieces, set us at odds with God and at enmity with each other. We see this played out in the movie, “Amadeus.” Solieri was the court composer for Emperor Franz Joseph. He had dedicated his life and talent to God, wanting to be a kind of angel-artist, a messenger of God through music. He was accomplishing that until Mozart showed up.

When he mounted the stage and Solieri heard him, envy and jealousy began to control him; to consume him in diabolic thoughts and malicious schemes. Solieri’s own gifts and aspirations were destroyed. He ended up a tormented and deranged shell of his former self. It was a telling commentary on what the shadow side of our life, our sinful side of self, can do to us.

That’s what Paul was bemoaning when he said, “For the good that I would, I do not, and the evil that I would not, that I do – oh, wretched man that I am.” Sin prevents us from being what God intended us to be. Sin separates us from God; it also separates us from each other.

So our great need is for forgiveness. To the Colossians, Paul gives this great word. He says that Christ nailed our sins to the cross. That, “God took away Satan’s power to accuse” us of sin, while He “openly displayed to the whole world Christ’s triumph at the cross ...” Which means we are no longer under the power of Satan.

The Living Bible paraphrases Colossians 1: 22 this way, “Now as a result, Christ has brought you into the very presence of God, and you are standing there before Him with nothing left against you – nothing left that He could even chide you for.” That’s what forgiveness does. It takes away our sin, guilt and shame. That’s the powerful work that Jesus accomplished at the cross.

We need to love and be loved. The cross is the symbol of God’s love and acceptance at its deepest and purest. There was a story of a little girl who lived in an orphanage. She was eight years old and had come from an abusive home. The staff was concerned about her.

One day, another girl at the orphanage came to the superintendent, telling him that the girl was sending notes to someone on the outside. He asked her to tell him if it happened again. Two days later the girl returned to report that the little girl had placed a note in the crook of a tree just outside the building. The superintendent and a social worker went out to the tree. They read the note. It read simply: “To whoever finds this, I love you.”

The cross is God's note, written in the blood of Jesus Christ, to say to each of us, "I love you." Hear these words as if you have never heard them before and let them sink into your heart: Christ's love is so great that He willingly died for you.

Our third need is a twin to our need for love, the other side of the coin, our need for community, to belong. The hope that technology and social media would bring us together seems to be unfilled for the most part. Social scientists tell us it actually has the opposite effect, making us feel more isolated and cut off.

Many years ago a pastor was listening to the story of a woman, who had grown up in an orphanage. At 8 years of age, a family took her home to see if she would fit in. They settled her in, sent her to school and made her the happiest child in the world, she said, until one day. That day she came home to find her clothes packed up, ready to go back to the orphanage. Just imagine how she felt.

She also told this to a group of people and there was not a dry eye there. Then she cleared her voice and said matter-of-factly, "This happened to me seven times before I was thirteen years old, but wait, don't cry. It was these experiences that ultimately brought me to God. When I was having so much trouble finding a sense of belonging from other human beings, I was driven to God, there I found what I had always longed for, a place to belong." All our needs of belonging are met in Him, and through Him, in the fellowship of His people.

Finally, we need to live for something beyond ourselves. Our need for forgiveness, to love and be loved and community, to belong, all meet at the cross, but they also focus us inwardly, on our own needs. We must move beyond those to find meaning and purpose.

Paul wants us to understand the power of the resurrection by understanding and sharing in the sufferings of it. He reminds us in Colossians 1: 24: "I now rejoice in my sufferings for you and fill up in my flesh what is lacking in the affliction of Christ, for the sake of His body, which is the Church." The more he knew Jesus, the more Paul realized his needs and limitations. It made him press on in the high calling in Christ that God had given him.

So it is with us: Christ-centered purpose gives us meaning. Paul can say he can rejoice in his sufferings because of the love he received from Jesus on the cross, which gave

him the purpose to love, even if that called for suffering. The cross gave him the cause for which to live or die.

It can do the same for us. Listen to Jesus again: “If any person would come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me.” He’s talking about nothing less than the Kingdom. When we pray “Thy Kingdom come,” we are taking on an apparently impossible task.

So often we think that we have a choice, we have to choose whether to serve God or not. Here’s the dilemma. “As Dr. Chad Walsh, in a preface to a book by C.S. Lewis says, ‘The forces of evil are locked in combat with the servants of God. However humble our status in this world, we are summoned to fight on one side or the other.’” It’s not that we have the choice to serve God. If we don’t choose to serve Him, we will likely, by simple inertia, end up on the side of evil.

We can’t wait until all our needs are met to help others. Theologian and author, Henri Nouwen, talks about a wounded healer in the time of Jesus, who like all the wounded, goes to the gate of the city to beg. Unlike the others, he doesn’t reveal all his wounds, but only one, so that when the call for help comes, he can bind himself up and go to help another in need. Following Jesus calls us to be wounded healers, going, even in our hurts, to help others.

We claim our moments of victory here in the midst of the world which, so much of the time, seems so far from Him. We save a soul here, we teach a young person there. When you wonder if it really matters, think about the power of a little yeast. Put into some flour with the right ingredients, it transforms all the ingredients into bread. Jesus reminds us that it was God’s plan to transform the world. He came to accomplish that. He has commissioned us to be part of that plan. We are called to live the petition, “Thy Kingdom come...” fulfilling God’s plan and helping us to be part of it, through faith in Jesus Christ.

Here’s your question: Even before your own needs are met, will you seek to help others meet their needs?