

Where's the Cross?

One of the perks of being pastor of this church is that, from time to time, I get to show the sanctuary to folks who have never seen it before. What visitors say when they first enter this house of worship depends on which door they come through.

If they come from the west door near the elevator, the first thing they say is, "Wow! That's some organ!" If they come through the east door, looking toward the pulpit, font, and table, they tend to say, "Hmmm . . . Where's the cross?"

There are complicated historical reasons why this sanctuary is missing a cross prominently displayed for all to see, but if we were to add a visual symbol of what is at the heart of the gospel, it might not be a lovely wooden cross, carefully proportioned and finished to match the walnut of the organ case. That would be far too anachronistic for the modern age.

The cross, after all, was an instrument of torture, humiliation, and political repression. If we really want to represent the gospel of Jesus Christ to modern eyes, it would be more honest to hang an electric chair over this pulpit, or perhaps a guillotine – or even more to the point for us in Florida, a gurney next to an oversized hypodermic needle.

We have become accustomed to seeing crosses in houses of worship, but in the world in which Christianity began, a house of worship would have been the last place where you would expect to see a cross. The cross was a sign of humiliation, disgrace, failure, and defeat. It was a powerful tool employed by an empire that put a low premium on human life. You might well see crosses on the outskirts of towns or by the side of the road, some with rotting corpses still pinned to them, but never in a house of worship.

The earliest depiction of our Lord's crucifixion comes from around the second century. It was scratched on a wall in Rome and found by archeologists in 1857. It shows a man with a donkey's head strapped and nailed to a cross, and next to the cross a very badly drawn figure of a man wearing the tunic of a slave. Scribbled above the cartoon are the words, "Alexamenos worshipping his god."¹

¹ The information in this and the preceding paragraph is drawn from Rowan Williams, *The Sign and the Sacrifice: The Meaning of the Cross and Resurrection* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2017) pp. 1-5.

Probably this bit of graffiti was drawn by one of Alexamenos's fellow slaves to make fun of him, but it illustrates very clearly the problem Christians faced in the early days of the church. The person they called their "Lord and Savior," died in a way that proved to everyone else that he was anything but a Lord or a Savior. Their god was a crucified God -- a jackass of a God -- and back then, that made absolutely no sense.

Times have changed, but the cross still offends. However much you and I might prettify that "symbol of suffering and shame," it remains an embarrassment, doesn't it? And, I'm afraid, certain efforts through the centuries to explain the mystery of the cross have done more harm than good.

I believe that, through the cross, God was reconciling the world to God's own self. I learned this from the gospels and from the Apostle Paul. I believe that, through Christ's life, death, and resurrection, the great gulf between us and God has been bridged, and the alienation caused by sin has been overcome. There are many ways to express that gospel truth, but none of them will make the cross less offensive or intellectually comprehensible.

The reconciliation that was accomplished by Christ's death on the cross has a fancy theological name. It's called the doctrine of the atonement. The word "atonement" is derived from three words: "at-one-ment." "Atonement" is the church's way of speaking about God's work in Christ.

There are many so-called "theories," or explanations of the atonement. I learned them in seminary, and any candidate for ordination had better learn them by heart because they are bound to come up in an oral examination.

The most familiar, and for many people, the least helpful, theory of atonement has dominated western Christianity for centuries, and is the go-to theory for American evangelicalism. It's called the "substitutionary theory of the atonement" and it runs pretty much like this: On the cross, Christ suffered and died in our place, as a human sacrifice for the sins of all humanity.

To borrow from the liturgy of the temple in Jesus' time, "Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us." Like the lamb slaughtered on the altar at Passover, Jesus serves, once for all, as the "Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."

That language resonated with people who lived in a culture familiar with animal sacrifice, and it still speaks to many today. I would never suggest that we abandon that old language.

The problem with that way of speaking about atonement, however, is that it conjures up for many an angry God who is out to do us in – a God who must be dissuaded from punishing us for our sins. And the only way to placate that God's anger is to see his own Son suffer and die a terrible death.

That's hardly the God revealed in the overall witness of scripture, is it? You might fear such a God, but you would never love a God like that. How different that God is from the God of John 3:16, the God who loves the world so much that he gave his only Son.

Any so-called theory of atonement that does not begin with God's love and mercy revealed in Jesus Christ is sure to distort the gospel and muddle already cloudy waters. As hard as it is to put into words, the cross is the sign of God's love for us, not God's wrath against us. It shows how far humanity will go to reject the God whose face we see in Jesus, and how far God will go to meet us with suffering love.

Luke tells us that as the nails were driven into Jesus' hands and feet, he prayed, "**Father forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing.**"² Whatever else it signifies, the cross is the sign of God's mercy and forgiveness.

If you try to make the cross a symbol of God the Father over against God the Son, you miss the essence of Trinity. The ancient Greeks believed that God was above suffering. The cross says otherwise. The cross says that all three persons of the Trinity – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit -- are present in the agony of Calvary.

Jesus does not die to propitiate the wrath of the Father. Rather, in Christ's death and resurrection the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are one in love for the world.

The cross reveals a divine love that cannot be defeated by violence. At Golgotha humanity did its best to reject and obliterate the one who bore the love of God in everything he said and did. Not only does our crucified Lord reveal the true nature of God the Father, he also shows us how to be fully human. Not by violence. Not by hate. Not by lashing out in retaliation, but by embodying God's own love and mercy.

² Luke 23:34

The message of the cross has always been a scandal. For those sophisticated, well-heeled Corinthians, who loved to hear a skilled orator, the cross was an embarrassment because there was no way to dress it up in lofty language. The fact that the Apostle Paul was a mediocre orator didn't help.

Paul admits right away that he is no barn-storming orator, and that **“the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing,”** that is, to those who are so full of themselves and so confident that they know better than God.

When you think about it, it is the height of presumption for us to tell God that God cannot come to us in the person of Jesus Christ, cannot challenge the limits we would place on divine freedom, cannot take upon God's own self our violent resistance to love and mercy.

Who are we to tell God how to be God?

“Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?” writes Paul? **“... we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are being called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.”**

If the Apostle Paul himself could not explain away the foolishness of putting one's faith in the crucified Christ, I would be even more foolish to try. And if we, the very people for whom Christ died, were to wait until our minds could fully comprehend the height and depth and breadth of the love of God revealed in the cross before bowing our knees before it, we would never know the peace which passes understanding.

At the cross Jesus surrendered himself, and at the cross you and I are called to do the same – to lay aside our pride and our presumption, our flawed intellects and our oversized egos. At the cross, we are given a gift of pure love and utterly undeserved grace – love that defies human wisdom and grace that dissolves human pride.

In the cross, we see we see our worst selves and through the cross we see our true selves in the flesh and blood of our crucified Lord.

