

Title: The Cross: An Alternate Orthodoxy
Text: I Corinthians 1: 17 – 19
Date: April 14, 2019

I would like to start by pointing out that if you consult the lectionary regarding this Sunday before Easter, you will be given an option of two tracks to run on. One is referred to as Palm Sunday, with an emphasis on Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. This is the track that many churches choose. The other track for this day is referred to as Passion Sunday, with the emphasis being on the crucifixion. I am going to focus on the cross today, since it seems to be filled with assumptions not deeply explored. I would also like to ask your forgiveness in advance since this might end up feeling more like a lecture than a sermon.

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There is an old hymn written in 1899 by Lewis Jones that goes:

Would you be free from the burden of sin?
There's power in the blood, power in the blood
Would you o'er evil a victory win?
There's wonderful power in the blood

Over the years it has been published in 285 hymnals, but it is not found in our current hymnal. Do you wonder why that is? Has all this talk about blood become somehow distasteful?

Since Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church thinks of itself as a "progressive" congregation, it might not be a stretch to consult the website *ProgressiveChristianity.org* to see what they have to say. There they highlight 8 points of progressive Christianity, and interestingly enough, not one of them refers to blood, atonement, or even the cross for that matter. So what's up with that? Have we modern folk become so loosey-goosey that we simply set aside notions that strike some as primitive?

If we were to study the New Testament, it is hard to deny that the cross plays a central role. We don't have time here to review all the passages where the word "cross," or "blood," or "sacrifice" come up, but our passage today might be emblematic of them all.

One translation of verse 17 refers to ". . . **the mighty power there is in the simple message of the cross of Christ.**" The *simple* message? Really? So what *is* that simple message? While there is consensus that there is something central about the cross, in no place is that meaning ever spelled out in any comprehensive, unified fashion in the New Testament. One verse might emphasize one perspective, while another verse might emphasize another perspective.

So then it wasn't until hundreds of years later that our ancestors in the faith started grappling with what we might think of as a systematic theology. For the sake of simplicity here, let me say that the common Christian reading of the Bible is that Jesus "**died for our sins**," but even this thought seems to have evolved over time. In the first millennium there seemed to have been a notion that Jesus died to pay a debt to the devil. Beginning with Anselm of Canterbury (1033 - 1109) the thought was then developed that Jesus died to pay a debt to the Father. This idea seemed to gain a lot of traction. In both cases, though, the commonality was that there was some kind of weighty transaction.

Now if we were to have a "man on the street" interview with someone about this idea, it might strike them as a little odd. In the days of Anselm, though, this might be readily understandable.

This was a feudal society, and if there was an offense against the honor of a knight, satisfaction was required in terms of a heavy penalty. Knights could not simply forgive an offense because it would indicate that it didn't matter much. In Anselm's mind, sin was an offense against the honor of God, and just as a King could not ignore an affront to his honor, neither could God ignore our affronts to his honor. They had to be punished. However, Jesus' death on the cross satisfied that honor, so that his death paid for our sins. So the argument was that Jesus suffered punishment as a substitute for the punishment we deserved.

Of course, for those who believe this, troubling questions arise: Is God fundamentally angry and vindictive, and can his anger only be assuaged by what seems to be a horrific act of child abuse? Why would God need to set up complex rules that He does not have the power to rescind? Was God surprised by the so-called sinfulness of mankind, making Jesus his Plan B? I fear that unconsciously, and often consciously, many people do not trust or even like this God, much less want to be in union with this Divinity.

Now I could just say that there are new ways of thinking about these things. Upon my recommendation, someone in this congregation is now reading a provocative, weighty book entitled *The Nonviolent Atonement* by J. Denny Weaver. (I was shocked when I learned he took my recommendation seriously!) Or go read Jürgen Moltmann's *The Crucified God*. But instead of saying there is **now** "new, improved truth," I think you would be interested to know that for all these centuries there has been an "alternate orthodoxy" that has been embraced in the Franciscan tradition. For all these years there has been a lesser known theory of atonement that the church has been aware of, and never condemned as heretical. It has been there all this time, yet most people know nothing of it.

John Duns Scotus was a philosopher theologian who joined the early group of Franciscans who had first come ashore at Canterbury in 1224, not long after the time of Anselm. Scotus disagreed with the "substitutionary atonement theory" of Anselm: the idea that before God could love his creation, God needed and demanded Jesus to be a blood sacrifice to atone for a sin-drenched humanity. For Scotus, Jesus was not a mere problem-solver after the sad fact of our radical unworthiness. Scotus insisted on the absolute and perfect freedom of God to love and forgive as God chooses, which is the core meaning of grace. For Scotus, the incarnation was not a *reaction* to man's sinfulness, but the exact opposite: the free and proactive work of God from the beginning. As Paul says in Ephesians (1:4), we were "**chosen in Christ before the world was made.**" So *perfect love* was the motivation for the incarnation, not "the sin problem." Rather than a Plan B, it was God's first idea to pour out divine infinite love in finite, visible forms. "The Big Bang" is our scientific name for that first idea, while "Christ" is our theological name, and it is all about love exploding itself in all directions. For Scotus, God never merely reacts, but always supremely and freely acts, and acts totally out of love.

This is also why Jesus said that Temple religion had to go, including all attempts at the "buying and selling" of divine favor (John 2:13 – 22). In that scenario, God has to be placated, and reparation has to be paid to a moody, angry, and very distant deity. This is no longer the message that Jesus came to bring – though this view has influenced much of our spirituality over the last millennium.

It has been said, "**Jesus did not come to change the mind of God about humanity. Jesus came to change the mind of humanity about God.**" For Scotus, Christ was God's Plan A. God in Jesus was trying to move people beyond the counting and measuring that the ego prefers, to a place where God's abundance makes any notion of sacrifice or reparation both unhelpful and unnecessary. Jesus undid "**once and for all**" (Hebrews 7:27; 9:12; 10:10) all notions of human and animal sacrifice, and replaced them with his new economy of grace, which is at the heart of

the gospel revolution. All we need to know is that God does not love us because we are that good. God loves us because God is God.

This is an important conversation! Wrong ideas about God create wrong ideas about everything else too!

As you know, I don't like to tell you what to think, but I want you to know that there is wonderful precedent for taking the focus off a need for blood sacrifice. For those of you who want to do follow-up study on this, another name to be aware of is René Girard, a French historian, Stanford professor, and philosopher of social science whose work belongs to the tradition of anthropological philosophy. He has written important books that explore violence and scapegoating in religion. Girard persuades us that even as our world grows increasingly violent, the power of the Christ-event is so great that the evils of scapegoating and sacrifice are being defeated even now. A new community - God's nonviolent kingdom - is being realized even now.

This isn't to say that the cross isn't tied up in God's act of salvation in Jesus. It's just worth considering how we have so simplified the cross that it has become nothing more than a convenient solution to our rather basic salvation math problem. And the reason that's problematic is because salvation is a lot more complicated than that, and the cross means a whole lot more than that. When we choose to see the cross only as a means of fulfilling our personal salvation needs, we sidestep all the things that make the cross difficult, uncomfortable, scandalous, and incomprehensible. Rather than squirming, we sentimentalize it.

We remember that Paul says that **“Christ [sent me] to proclaim the gospel . . . so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power.”** So rather than a complex theory of atonement, might the power of the cross be something else?

Is there not power in knowing that God's love for us – expressed in Jesus – moves forward and is not deterred by the power of a world that rules by power and domination? Is there not power in knowing that Jesus is more than just another “good teacher,” but he was able to fully empty himself (Philippians 2:5 – 11), and absorb the worst suffering that the world can throw at him? Is there not power in knowing that his very life and death was itself a witness to the fact that the temple system of negotiated settlements is no more?

So this Sunday as we enter Holy Week, I would invite you to think afresh not only about what you believe, but *the implications* of what you believe. What does it say about the nature of God? Is it *really* Good News?

Amen

I Corinthians 1: 17 – 19 (NRSV)

For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power.

For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written,

“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,
and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.”