Sunday, February 12, 1989
THE CROSS OF JESUS (No. 1 in a Sermon Series)
I Corinthians 1:18-25

Upon graduating from Seminary and having been newly ordained as a minister, my first assignment was to organize a new church in a suburban area south of Chicago. When I arrived, there was no congregation, no church building, zero members, so I spent the first several months knocking on doors — calling on people, doing a kind of religious survey. Some of my standard questions were: "What is your religious affiliation, if any?" "Are you a member of a church in this community?"

One day, as I was interviewing a family in their new home, the man said to me that he wasn't a member of any church and never had been. Then he continued, "I suppose you wonder why I don't go to a church. Why should I?" I could see that he was devoted to his family and also learned that he was active in civic affairs. He went on to say, "I've got it pretty good — a nice place to live, a wife, and kids, and we're crazy about each other. We live in a good country and we have lots of friends. I've got a good job. It seems to me that if we'll only use our heads and be careful, we'll soon have a way of life that will make religion and the church unnecessary."

I did my best not to be defensive and encouraged him to continue. He said, "I don't understand why you're in this religion business anyway. You seem like a nice enough fellow. It would seem to me that you could get into something more interesting and useful — something more relevant to the real concerns of living."

I decided not to interrupt, but to let him talk it out. So he continued, "I hope I'm not being too hard on you, but there's something else I want to say. It has to do with the kind of lives church people live in contrast to the kind of living they say they believe in. It seems to me that they're always looking down their noses at people they think are not good enough to sit in the same church with them."

"And another thing is you church people are always arguing among yourselves as to who is right. Roman Catholics disagree with the Presbyterians and the Baptists say you aren't really baptized unless you've been totally immersed, and fundamentalists claim only they know the truth. Why don't you get down to your real business whatever it is?"

"And what's all this stuff about people being saved by the blood of Jesus? What do I need to be saved from? I never could understand how the death of Jesus could do me or anyone else any good. What does the cross of Jesus have to do with my everyday life?"

Most of us have heard people both in and outside the church voice these complaints and questions. I believe that underneath such comments is an honest, although unconscious, more basic question: "What is the real business of the church anyhow?" One answer frequently given is that our real business is to "Go into all the world and spread the Gospel." But what is the "Gospel?" The word "Gospel" means "Good News." And then comes the question, "What is the Good News? We have not heard any good news."

To some people, both in and outside the church, what the church teaches and preaches is interpreted as bad news. The bad news of the Gospel is seen in the demands it makes. There are those who think that Christianity is imitating Jesus. They try it and discover that the effort to be like him is most discouraging.

Others hear the great commandment, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and strength, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself,” and see following it as pure demand, and wonder how that is good news.

The simplest way to put the Good News is that God loves us. The shortest and most profound definition of God in the Bible is in the first letter of John, “God is love.” (I John 4:16). The Gospel of John says it another way, “God so loved the world that God gave the only son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” (John 3:16)

Let me say it in yet another way — the Gospel is the Good News that God, who is love, in the person of Jesus, lived and died and lives again for us and in us. It is not what we have to do, but what God has done, and still does.

St. Paul wrote in his letter to the church at Rome, “But God shows love for us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.”

Thus in this sermon series beginning today, we are going to be looking very specifically at how the death of Jesus on the cross is Good News for us. I will be attempting to answer such questions as: What does the cross of Jesus, that is, his suffering and death on the cross, have to do with my everyday life in today’s world? How can the suffering and death of Jesus, which took place 2000 years ago, have any relevance for me and the problems which I face every day?

I need to caution you at the outset of this sermon series that in looking at the subject of the death of Jesus on the cross and how that is Good News for us and saves us, we are delving into one of the deepest mysteries of the Christian faith.

Despite the centrality of the cross from the earliest days of the Christian church, there has never been agreement on the way in which the cross saves us. The New Testament of the Bible has a lot to say on the subject of salvation through the death of Christ, but it never explains precisely how that death works. There have been a lot of attempts through the centuries to explain how the cross saves us, but none of them seem adequate.

Here are a few of the so-called classical explanations. For the most part, these theories of how the death of Christ on the cross saves us fall into three main categories.

The Bearing of Penalty. The death of Christ on the cross pays the penalty for the sins of all of us. In some form, this view has probably always been found in the church. This explanation assumes that we are all sinners and need to be saved. The man I talked about earlier in this sermon who said to me that he didn’t understand how the death of Jesus could save anyone, had no idea that he needed to be saved from anything. We’ll be looking at sin and evil and how all of us are involved in that in more detail in a subsequent sermon in this series.
This understanding of how the death of Christ on the cross saves us sees sin as an outrage, an insult to the majesty of God. Because God is so majestic and righteous, a penalty must be paid, thus the suffering and death of Christ (the perfect man) pays the penalty on our behalf. The emergence of this view as a full-fledged theory of the way the death of Christ on the cross works is usually traced to a man named Anselm, the 11th century Archbishop of Canterbury.

Anselm’s theory was written in a time when medieval ideas about the way kings behaved influenced people’s thinking about how God behaved. An ordinary citizen in that time might

perhaps overlook a wrong done to him or her, but God being the Almighty Ruler could not overlook sin or wrong.

Anselm also wanted to emphasize that sinners cannot themselves make satisfaction for sin and that only Christ can do this on our behalf.

Thus the Roman Catholic church, in medieval times, developed a wide-ranging penitential system, and when the Mass was celebrated, official doctrine held that in the Mass, Christ was literally crucified again on our behalf to pay the penalty for our sins.

The Reformers (Luther, Calvin, and others) saw the death of Christ on the cross as being effective along some of the same lines as Anselm, but where he thought of God's wounded honor, they thought of God's broken law. People sinned and thus incurred the penalty of death, but Christ's death pays the penalty for us.

Although this understanding of the death of Christ on the cross has its weak points, as we shall see in a moment, it also has some strong points. As Paul Tillich points out, whenever believing Christians pray that God may forgive their sins because of the innocent suffering and death of the Christ, they accept both the demand that they themselves suffer infinite punishment and the message that they are released from guilt and punishment by the substitutional suffering of the Christ. It is a system of symbols which gives individuals the courage to accept themselves in spite of their awareness that they are unacceptable.

While this explanation of how the death of Christ on the cross saves us takes the matter of sin and evil seriously, it raises several questions. We can ask, "Why does God not simply forgive? Earthly rulers can do that. Cannot God do whatever God wants? Does not this view of Christ's death on the cross make God too legalistic instead of a God of love and mercy?" Others have pointed out that while this idea of the death of Christ puts emphasis on justice, in fact, it is not just that one should suffer in the place of another.

A Demonstration of the Love of God. A second way of understanding how the death of Christ on the cross saves us is that his suffering and death is a demonstration of the love of God. This idea was especially emphasized by Abelard, a contemporary of Anselm in the 11th century, and it is still a widely held idea today.
In this view, the death of Jesus does not necessarily pay a penalty or win a victory, other than symbolically. What it does is show us the greatness of the love of God and move us to love in return. It moves us to love God, and because we love God, we also love other people and God's creation. When we look at the death of Christ on the cross, we see ourselves for what we are, sinners, and what our sin has done and continues to do to God. We are therefore moved to repentance and to love.

For some people, Holy Communion reminds them of how much God loves us. Jane Ellefson was telling me the other day that she remembers as a child sitting with her mother in church, and when communion was served, she would see tears rolling down her mother's face. When she asked her mother why she was crying, the reply was, "Because Jesus loves us so much."

The words to the hymn, "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross," emphasize this view more than any other. The last two lines of the 4th verse sum it up, "Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all."

Victory Over Evil. A third way of understanding how the death of Christ saves us is that his death and resurrection have destroyed the power of evil. This point of view is always found in the words of our Easter hymns in which we celebrate Christ's victory over sin and death. Let me explain it this way. There have always been those within the church who have believed that when we sin, we are then in Satan's possession. But God, so to speak, made a bargain with Satan. God agreed to give Christ as a ransom for sinners in Satan's possession. Satan, of course, eagerly accepted the bargain, for in Christ, Satan was getting greater value than that of all of the sinners. So on the cross, Christ was, in effect, handed over to Satan. But then the evil one found that Christ could not be held captive. On Easter Sunday, Christ burst the bonds of hell and Satan and rose triumphant. Some theologians have said that what this view of the death of Christ does is replace the legal imagery of the Reformers with military imagery, picturing a battle rather than a lawsuit.

Although today, many of us would not use this kind of imagery, what this understanding is emphasizing is the idea that in the death and resurrection of God in Christ, all the forces of evil were defeated. And that is certainly part of the central meaning of the death and resurrection of Jesus and how we are saved by that event.

My own belief is that no one of these three understandings is sufficient all by itself. It is also worth remembering that the various theories seem to have evolved against the background of the ideas that were widely accepted at the time they appeared or in the period when they won wide acceptance. The early church delighted in the thought of ransom and found imagery drawn from that process more congenial than we do. The medieval church placed a lot of emphasis on satisfaction, which fitted in with contemporary penitential practice and feudal ideas of honor. The age of more liberal thinking found it congenial to think of atonement as a subjective process in which we can dwell on the miracle of God's love for sinners.

The fact is that we need elements from all of them to help us understand how the death of Christ on the cross saves us and the whole creation, and even that is not enough. We'll be exploring some other ways of understanding how the death of Jesus on the cross relates to our life here and now in the sermons that follow in this series. And still, there will be mystery.

The Apostle Paul put it this way: "Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?" But we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than us, and the weakness of God is stronger than us. Amen.