Sunday, February 19, 1989
THE CROSS OF JESUS: THE ANSWER TO SIN (No. 2 in a Sermon Series)
II Corinthians 5:14-19

Text: II Corinthians 5:19
"God was in Christ reconciling the world to God, not counting their trespasses against them and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation."

One day, some years ago, as I mentioned last week in the first sermon of this series, a man I was interviewing about his religious background said to me that he was not a member of any church and probably never would be. And then he asked me: "What's all this stuff about people being saved by the suffering and death of Jesus on the cross? 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 here and now?"

That's what we're looking at in this sermon series for Lent — the cross of Jesus and what it means for us in today's world here and now. As I also noted last week, in looking at the death of Jesus on the cross and exactly 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 in the Christian faith from the earliest days of the church, there has never been total agreement on the way in which the cross saves us. In fact, there have been various theories and ideas put forth as we saw in last week's sermon.

At the same time, the New Testament of the Bible and the church through history have both always maintained that in some way, the death of Jesus on the cross does save the world and us from our sins. Or to put it another way, the suffering and death of Jesus on the cross is God's answer to sin. That's what the Apostle Paul meant in his second letter to the Church at Corinth when he wrote: "God was in Christ reconciling the world to God."

This, of course, assumes that there is sin in the world and that all of us are sinners. The man I talked about earlier who said he didn't understand how the death of Jesus could save anyone had no idea that he needed to be saved from anything. One day, this man will discover that he is a sinner and that he needs to be saved from excess pride, from greed, from alienation, from loneliness or a sense of futility in his life, and from the power and fear of death, and all of these are related to a Christian understanding of sin.

Too frequently, we have an inadequate definition or understanding of sin. We think of sin only in terms of ethics or morals, or of breaking one of the Ten Commandments, but sin goes much deeper than that.

Here, for example, is a man who spends 99% of his creative energy and nearly every waking hour trying to make "good" in his business or professional life. One day, it dawns on him that while he has been making good in his career, he has been failing tragically with his family. He reaches middle age and begins to ask what life is all about, and in that awful moment of truth, he wonders, "How can I be saved?" This man has become aware of sin, although he may call it something different.

Or here is a woman who was a victim of sexual abuse as a child and never knew that the world was any different. Then she married a man who also abused her and their children. Yet she

kept blaming herself. Somehow, she convinced herself that maybe she is at fault. She is overwhelmed with guilt. One day it gets to be too much for her, and she asks, “How can I be saved? There must be a better life.” Now she is ready to explore other options, but it will not be easy.

Certainly, God made the world good and there is much that is enriching in life, but who can deny that there is also much that goes wrong in our human existence and especially in our relationships with each other? The very avenues of enrichment can become, and frequently do become, avenues of destruction.

The traditional Christian understanding of sin has always had a dual focus, one personal and the other impersonal. Sin as personal indicates a violation of relationships, resulting in a state of alienation from God, nature, one another, and the self. The condition of alienation, however, is one into which we have been born. If there is a sense in which sin precedes us, then obviously there is an impersonal element in sin. The woman I mentioned earlier was born into a family where physical and sexual abuse was the norm, and it had been the norm for her parents, aunts, and uncles, and for their parents before them. She did not choose the environment into which she was born. The Christian faith has often called this “original sin,” or the demonic. It’s a way of saying that there are powers of destruction at work in the world, which were here before we were born, and these powers can and do overwhelm us, involving us in the condition of alienation, which then often comes forth in personal sin.

The power of the demonic, or what the Christian faith calls “original sin,” can be seen in any situation in which the cumulative weight of the past denies a richness of well-being to anyone in the present. Thus, structures of society that contribute to racism, sexism, poverty, or oppression of any type can be experienced as demonic, shaping one’s present toward an impoverishment of spirit held in bondage to the past. There are times when the structure of the demonic power is so overwhelming, making the individual feel helpless, to the point that the only “reasonable” alternative would seem to be to join that power. Does society say women are inferior to men, not capable of bearing the “burdens” of full equality? Then perhaps a woman will find that her best mode of survival is to develop kinds of dependence that capitalize upon her supposed helplessness. The demonic power will be reinforced.

A metaphor which M. Scott Peck uses in his book, The Road Less Travelled, is helpful here. Dr. Peck uses the metaphor of a map to describe the way in which each one of us perceives the world around us. He puts it this way: “Our view of reality is like a map with which to negotiate the terrain of life. If the map is true and accurate, we will generally know where we are. And if we have decided where we want to go, we will generally know how to get there. If the map is false and inaccurate, we generally will be lost.” No one’s personal map, of course, is totally accurate, but some are more accurate than others. The woman who had been born into a pattern of physical and sexual abuse, which went back several generations, had been born into an environment with an inaccurate map of the way life is supposed to be lived.

We are not born with maps, but we are born into them. We have to make and remake them throughout our lives. And we need help in doing this if we are going to overcome the power of the demonic, or what our faith calls “original sin.”

The problem with some people is that they stop making their maps by the end of adolescence. Their maps are sketchy and small at that time — in other words, their view of the world is too narrow and misleading. Unfortunately, by the end of middle age, many people have given up the effort. They believe their maps are complete, that their world-view is correct, and they are

no longer interested in new information, which means they stop growing mentally and spiritually, and in so doing, never come to see their own sin or their involvement in some of the demonic structures of society.

Sin can become very personal when we continually distort existence with inaccurate maps. Here is a person, for example, who makes her own self the terminal point of all relationships when, in fact, she is not. In God's creation, we are all related to each other, and no one of us is the absolute center. We are all to be receivers and givers in this life. When any one of us violates this by becoming only a receiver or a giver, we sin against ourselves and others. If we attempt to imprison ourselves in the present by making our own well-being the end of existence, it is as if we build a wall against our giving for the well-being of others.

On the other hand, we can be in a reverse situation. There are those who emphasize only what they give and don't want to receive anything from anyone. Some people have a self-understanding that it is more blessed to give than to receive, with a vengeance, and see themselves totally at the disposal of others. Our refusal to receive from others is also a distortion of reality, a false map of the way God has made the world. Whenever we live our lives according to a false map, then we sin against ourselves and others.

It is the testimony of the Christian faith that release from sin needs to come from beyond ourselves in the counterforce to sin. We require a power in the past strong enough to counter the demonic and overcome it, a power in the future that is stronger than death, and a power in the present that can enable us to live in the fullness of well-being as God meant us to live.

It is Good News to the Christian faith that the cross of Jesus is the answer to sin and helps us to overcome it, both in personal terms and to overcome the power of the demonic or what we call "original sin" in the world at large.

Here then, more specifically, are some of the ways in which the cross of Jesus is the answer to sin.

With the crucifixion and death of Jesus on the cross, we are made aware again and again that sin in the world, both personal and in the structures of society, is costly and that it involves all of us.
Most of us know the old spiritual, "Were You There When They Crucified My Lord," and in the deepest sense, all of us were there. Harry Emerson Fosdick wrote: "We were there; in a deep sense, we are there. All the major factors in that tragedy involve you and me. The blindness of religious leaders who cannot see a new and larger truth, the selfishness of a business community that did not want the profitable traffic in the temple courts disturbed, the disloyalty of Judas, who cares more for himself than for Christ, the political shrewdness of Pilate, who does his best to free Jesus, but finding it costs too much, washes his hands of it, the emotionalism of the crowd, stirred by effective propaganda to cry for they know not what, the fearfulness of the disciples who run away — who of us was not there?"

To see Jesus, an innocent human being, on the cross is to see what we human beings are capable of doing to the most loving individual that ever lived among us. And we are still doing it to innocent, loving people among us. The cross is the answer to sin because, in it, we see what sin can do, and hopefully, it causes us to repent, to change our ways.

Secondly, the cross of Jesus is the answer to sin because it takes the worst that we can do and makes it into something good. "God was in Christ reconciling the world to God," wrote St.

Paul. God was in Christ on the cross — that's the mystery and that's the victory. God overcomes sin not by fighting it the way we want to fight it but by receiving it, letting the overwhelming love of God swallow it up.
God's love, even while suffering on the cross in the person of Jesus, does not return evil for evil. This is the miracle. God does not physically reduplicate or multiply cruelty or violence in any way — it's not an eye for an eye or a tooth for a tooth, not bullet for bullet, nor bitterness for brute oppression — but God in Christ rather swallows the cruelty in forgiving love. This is the power of the love of God, and it can work the same in us. With this kind of suffering, forgiving love, a new thing enters our world. The spirit of this love is spread abroad, and sin is absorbed into it.

Thirdly, the cross of Jesus is the answer to sin because it invites each one of us to accept God's acceptance of us even though we are sinners. When we accept God's acceptance, then that suffering, loving power of God, which was present in Jesus on the cross, begins to work even more powerfully in our own lives, and we become changed people. It doesn't happen all at once. It doesn't mean that we will never sin again. It doesn't mean that we simply have to try harder.
To understand the cross is to feel it emotionally as well as to try to figure it out and accept it rationally. It means opening your life to the power of God's love, and you will have a life that will be filled with joy and richness beyond your imagining. Amen.