Sunday, March 5, 1989
THE CROSS OF JESUS: THE ANSWER TO SELFISHNESS (No. 4 in a Sermon Series)
Luke 9:23-25, 22:40-46

What does the death of Jesus on the cross have to do with my everyday life here and now? That's the basic question I've been attempting to answer in this Lenten sermon series.

In the first sermon in this series, I noted that the answers to this question historically have fallen into one or more of three categories:

The bearing of penalty. There have been those who have held throughout the history of Christianity that the death of Jesus on the cross pays the penalty for the sins of all of us. This explanation assumes that we are all sinners and need to be saved, and it further assumes that we cannot be saved from our sins unless a penalty is paid.

This understanding of how the death of Christ on the cross saves us sees sin as an outrage, an insult to the majesty and holiness of God. The only way that insult can be removed is to pay the penalty. Jesus did that with His death on the cross on behalf of us. The majesty of God is satisfied, and we are forgiven.

A demonstration of God's love. A second way of understanding how the death of Christ on the cross saves us is that His suffering and death are a demonstration of the overwhelming, unlimited, unearned love of God.

In this view, the suffering and death of Jesus do not necessarily pay a penalty or win a victory other than symbolically. What the death of Jesus does is to show us and all the world the magnitude, the depth of the love of God, which moves us to love God and others in return. According to this idea, when we contemplate the death of Christ on the cross, we see ourselves for what we are — sinners — and we see what our sin has done and continues to do. We are therefore moved to repentance and to love.

Victory over evil. A third way of understanding how the death of Christ on the cross saves us is that His death and resurrection have destroyed the power of evil. In putting Christ on the cross, it looked as if evil had won the day. The most loving, self-giving individual who had ever lived among us was killed and didn't even fight back. But then came the resurrection. Evil had not won, but rather the love of God in Christ had absorbed evil. This point of view is especially found in the words of our Easter hymns, in which we celebrate Christ's victory, which is God's victory over sin and death. But the victory is not won in the way in which we human beings usually think of winning a victory. God's ways are not our ways.

We have noted that no one of these three understandings of how the death of Jesus on the cross saves us is sufficient all by itself. A study of the history of how Christian doctrine has developed shows that each one of these explanations, in addition to having grown out of the study of the New Testament understanding of the cross, was more fully developed by taking cultural ideas from different periods in history and applying those theories to the cross. For example, 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.

The fact is that we need elements from all of these explanations of the death of Jesus on the cross to even begin to understand how that death is effective in our lives here and now. And there are additional ways of understanding how the death of Jesus on the cross relates to our lives here and now.

Thus, in a second sermon in this series, we looked more specifically at a Christian understanding of sin and how the cross of Jesus is an answer to sin. We noted that according to our Christian faith, sin in the world always has a dual focus. There is personal, individual sin, and also impersonal sin or evil.

Sin as personal is that which violates relationships, resulting in a state of alienation from God, nature, one another, and the self. But there is also a sense in which sin precedes us. We are born into a world where sin and evil already exist. The Christian faith calls this “original sin.” 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.

It is the testimony of the Christian faith that release from sin needs to come from beyond ourselves as a counterforce to sin. We cannot save ourselves. It is the good news of the Christian faith that the cross of Jesus is that power which can save us and thus is God’s answer to sin and evil.

God was in Christ reconciling the world to God. God overcomes sin and evil not by fighting the way the world wants to fight—“an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth”—but by taking the sin and evil and overcoming it with love. The love of God in Christ absorbs all of our cruelty, sin, and evil in forgiving love. We are invited to accept God’s acceptance of us even though we are unacceptable, and once we do that, a new power takes over in our lives.

In last week’s sermon, we came to see how the cross of Jesus is also the answer to our suffering because now we know that in our own deepest suffering and pain, God is there suffering along with us. God is in us in our suffering, and we are in God’s suffering. The cross says that God does not stand at a distance from where we are, shouting encouragement, but God is involved in our pain and hurt.

In addition to sin and suffering, the cross of Jesus is also the answer to our selfishness. That’s our specific topic for today.

According to our Christian faith, there is a right kind of selfishness and a wrong kind. Jesus said that we are to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. There is a proper kind of self-love, a proper care of the self. For example, we are to care enough for ourselves so that we develop our God-given gifts and skills to their fullest potential. We are to care enough for ourselves so that we maintain good spiritual and physical health. Frequently, Jesus went off by Himself to pray. We are to care enough for ourselves so that we are able to receive gifts from others with thanksgiving. Life is both giving and receiving.

But there is another kind of selfishness, sometimes called self-centeredness, that which sees the individual self as the center of the universe and which does not seek God’s will, but only one’s own will in everything. Our self and its own self-seeking desire become the measure of all things.

The cross of Jesus calls us away from that kind of self-centered selfishness. Jesus put it this way: “For those who would come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who would save their lives will lose them, and those who would lose their lives for my sake will save them.” In other words, Jesus was saying, you truly find your life and find meaning in life by giving your life away, and in giving your life away, you might very well have to take up a cross.

This is the first mention of the cross in Luke’s Gospel, and it must have come as something of a shock to the disciples to have this shameful instrument of execution suddenly introduced as the pattern of service in following Jesus. It comes equally as a shock to us today.

Those who have been saved by the cross find that they are to take up a cross of their own, and the suffering which may follow is not something they seek, but something which comes to them because they insist on doing what they believe is the right thing to do for themselves and on behalf of others. It is unearned suffering. Here’s an example.

In 1962, Fannie Lou Hamer, along with numbers of other Black citizens, began to attempt to register to vote in Mississippi. As part of the registration procedure, each person was given a section of the Mississippi State Constitution and asked to interpret it correctly. They usually failed the test if they were Black, but many Black people continued to make the long bus ride to the County Seat to try again.

In the coming months, as Fannie Lou and others continued to attempt to register to vote, she was driven out of her home and fired from her job. Even though she moved into the next county, the terrorism against her continued. But this didn’t stop her. She said, “I don’t know why I kept coming, but I knew I wasn’t doing anything wrong.”

The next time she went to register to vote, she told the registrar, “Now you can’t have me fired because I’m already fired, and I won’t have to move now because I’m not living in a house owned by a white man. I’ll be here every thirty days until I become a registered voter.” After many more months, she was finally officially registered, but now it was as if she had become a criminal.

One day, while traveling to another town, the bus on which she was riding stopped for a rest stop. Some of the passengers got off to get food, and others to use the washroom. Fannie Lou made the mistake of going in the wrong door and used the door to the white side of the restaurant. She was one of seven arrested. They carried her to the County Jail and put her in a cell. Soon, she heard screaming like she had never heard before, and she heard the sounds of another woman prisoner being beaten. She also heard someone say to the woman, “Can’t you say ‘Yes sir,’ nigger? Can’t you say ‘Yes sir’?” And the woman’s response was, “Yes, I can say ‘Yes sir,’ but I don’t know you well enough.” And the beating continued. Finally, Fannie Lou heard the woman start praying. She asked God to have mercy on them because they didn’t know what they were doing. She knew if she responded to hate with reciprocal hate, she would do nothing but intensify the cleavage in broken community. She could begin to close the gap by meeting hate with love.

Next, it was Fannie Lou’s turn. They had discovered that she had been persistent in her efforts to become a registered voter and to get others to register and told her they were going to make her wish she was dead. They put her on a bunk and had two other prisoners take turns beating her. She was so badly beaten during the next half hour that she almost died. Fortunately,

Fannie Lou Hamer recovered, and after some months went back to work helping other citizens register to vote.

Fannie Lou Hamer, like many others, discovered what it was to take up her cross and follow Jesus. Her suffering was redemptive suffering on behalf of others. She was seeking to follow God's will rather than her own will. God is especially at work in such people on behalf of all of us.

So the cross of Jesus is the answer to selfishness in at least two ways:

For Jesus and for us, the cross is the symbol of seeking and following God's will instead of our own. As our second reading from the Gospel of Luke reminds us, Jesus prayed in agony in the Garden of Gethsemane that He would be able to follow God's will. "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; nevertheless, not my will, but thine, be done." That prayer is the end of self-centered selfishness.

Secondly, the cross is the answer to selfishness because on the cross, God identified totally with all of us, and as we saw last week, God identified especially with our pain and suffering. In following Jesus, we are asked to do the same. And when you identify with someone else, that is the end of self-centered selfishness. This kind of identification is what we frequently call empathy or compassion. Thomas Merton once said, "The whole idea of compassion is based on a keen awareness of the interdependence of all living beings, which are all part of one another and all involved in one another."

This is what Francis of Assisi felt when he got down from his horse and embraced the leper — identification, compassion. From that time onward, lepers became for Francis what the untouchables became for Gandhi—"The Children of God."

The world may or may not respond to our identification. That is not our business. Loving others, especially the unlovable; refusing to multiply evil by reacting to it in a spirit of anger or hatred, that is our business, and that's a large part of what it means to take up our cross daily and follow Jesus. It is also the answer to selfishness. Amen.