

The Sacrifice of the Cross

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Texts: John 3:16

Here's the question from a member of the congregation I am addressing today, which I quote as presented to me: "Jesus, my Savior? I have never understood how a man dying on a cross 2,000 years ago saved me from my sins. The business of atonement baffles me, in that if God is Love, how could a loving God send a son to a horrible death?"

Asked in different variations, this was the most common question given to me by you, the congregation, for this sermon series. The question was asked by young and old, by those with little church background and looonng church background. I hope, therefore, that none of you feel alone, and certainly not ashamed, if you too might have such a question. Asking about something that seems so basic to Christianity - what the cross has to do with salvation - is not a problem, at least not in this church. And, in fact, as you will hear now, given what a dumpster-fire most Christian thought about this is in our world today, asking the question is a wise and wonderful sign of love for God.

Speaking of a dumpster-fire, I ask you to think with me for a bit about the first twelve days of the new president's administration. Now, I'm sorry. I apologize for disrupting whatever repose you are able to muster in this hour of worship, and in this holy place, but you will see why we need to talk about it.

For the past two weeks, the new president has been finding ever more hideous ways to enact the hateful rhetoric about immigrants that was a key foundation of his presidential campaign. He has increased targeted enforcement actions, including ending longstanding U.S. policy, based in fundamental human rights, that schools, health care facilities, and churches would be safe places for anyone, no matter their status. Detentions and arrests by ICE and related agencies are up over 300%, and each new day brings infuriating examples of how inhuman this administration is.

But for the purposes of my message today, the terrible reality on the ground isn't what really matters. It's the rhetoric that goes with it. People who have come to this country from other places have been, and are, being dehumanized and demonized, spoken of as threats, "others" to be feared, and thus to be removed from "our" midst. The rhetoric suggests, no, explicitly states, that in order for "us" to be safe, in order for order to be restored, "we" must get rid of these "others." I could, grievously, go on and on, but you know the routine here.

If such vile speech sounds familiar, or more importantly, in case it doesn't sound familiar, let me note that the reality is that all of this is in the rhetorical realm of the blatant racism we associate most quickly with the American South in support of slavery and in resistance to civil rights. Such rhetoric is in the realm of how Hutus spoke of Tutsis before the Rwandan genocide, how the Nazi's spoke of Jews, how settlers right here, our ancestors, spoke of the native people of this land. In order for "us" to be safe, "we" must get rid of these "others."

And if you know our sacred story, you will realize that this is also how the allied power-players of the day spoke of Jesus. This is exactly the rhetoric that accompanied the execution of Jesus on a cross.

What we see in the execution of Jesus is a classic human tale, a classic human play of violence. The one (person or group) must be sacrificed for the many. Jesus was seen as, and honestly, as subsequent history revealed, he probably was, a threat to public order. In some strange, slow, organic way, he represented a revolution – not just challenging the Roman Empire, but revolutionizing the realm of human values. It was a revolution whose very essence was love – not the beautiful and noble, but limited, love of humanity, but the unbounded love of God. Drawing together in himself the whole history of Israel, whose very corporate life was an attempt to return to God the love with which God created all things and in which God chose them, the descendants of Abraham, to reveal that love to the world – holding in himself that ultimate Divine love, he was a threat to every social order, including that of first century Roman Judea, based on violence and fear.

In the story of Jesus, it is the High Priest Caiaphas, well-schooled by his Roman masters, who reveals the deepest human truth about the cross of Jesus: “You fools! You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed” (John 11:50).

This is the rhetoric of our days. Our leaders proclaim, quite openly, that it is better for one group of people to be cast out than for “our” nation to be destroyed. It is among the oldest tropes of humanity. Take a marginalized person or group, whip up fear and distrust with dehumanization and othering, blame them for all that is wrong with the world, and cast them out, sacrifice them. Ostensibly, this is for “us,” but anyone with a somewhat intact moral sensibility, or even just historical awareness, knows that it’s really for the powerful to maintain their power.

From the human side, this is exactly what it means to speak of the sacrifice of Jesus. He had to be sacrificed for the greater good, for the maintenance of order, sacred order as well as political – which were really the same thing. Did you know that in the Roman Empire, criminal executions were also offerings to the gods? If a general had to punish soldiers for desertion, their execution was not merely a legal matter, it was a sacrifice to the god Mars (from a lecture by David Bentley Hart, “Death, Sacrifice, and Resurrection,” available several places online). When political power and sacred reality are intertwined, crucifixion was a sacred duty.

But on the cross of Christ, a different meaning of sacrifice was also at play: not the sacrifice of the one for the sake of the many, not the sacrifice of “them” for “us,” not the sacrifice of the truth for a world grounded on the lie of violence. Also at play on the cross was an entirely different rhetorical and theological realm. These different realms shared the word “sacrifice” but meant very different things by that word. From the human side, the sacrifice was about debt, order, sin, fear, other, power. From the divine side, the “sacrifice” was about gift, relationship, love, grace and gratitude.

The sacrifice of Jesus was a whole life lived in self-giving love (see classic Christian discussion of *kenosis*). As the embodiment of God among us, his whole life was a gift, a gift received from the one he called Father, embraced, and gratefully offered back, “sacrificed,” to God, in the form of love for every being in this world. The cross was not *in itself* a unique sacrifice resulting in salvation, but it was an inevitable result of the sacrifice that was the whole life of Christ – again, a life received as Divine gift, embraced, treasured, lived, and in that living, gratefully returned, sacrificed, to God in the form of unfathomable love for all the world. The crucifixion was the response of humanity, and let’s be real, the response of political power, to Jesus’ offering, “sacrifice,” of his whole life, even his death, in love for the world.

But, of course, the story doesn't end there. On the third day, the tomb was empty. The resurrection reveals God's declaration of which one of these versions of sacrifice is true, real, and ultimate. One order of sacrifice is raised up, the other cast down. Jesus' life of unfathomable love, of outpouring grace, of generous peace, that life can be crucified, but it can't be defeated. That life leaves an empty tomb behind – "the powers of death have done their worst, but Christ their legions hath dispersed; let shouts of holy joy outburst; Alleluia!" as we will sing in a moment.

The resurrection is God's judgement on the judgement of the world. "No matter how much you reject me, no matter your 'sin,' no matter how desperately you cling to your power, your pain, your fear, your shame, your sacrifice of those who are actually your neighbors, your human family – you can't bring an end to my love."

Our sins are not forgiven by the cross as a unique sacrifice resulting in salvation. *(The following bit, in italics, was not in the "live" version due to time and focus, but is added here for further clarity.) The cross was not about paying a debt of moral credit caused by our sin, nor restoring Divine honor after it was offended by our sin. Such transactional theologies do nothing but accept the human version of sacrifice – sacrifice of the "other" for the sake of maintaining order. They turn the cross into something God wanted, or at least needed – which fundamentally contradicts God's very nature, which is love. But our sins are forgiven by the different kind of sacrifice we see embodied in Jesus' whole life, death, and resurrection. In that life is the perfection of the human, the full revelation of who we most deeply are: children born from divine love, and called to embrace that love, and offer it back ("sacrifice" it) to God through loving all of creation. As long as we do not embrace that love, as long as we do not offer it back to God, we are living in "sin." But the resurrection shows that it is impossible for God to let such sin abide. Upon the cross we did our worst, all the while claiming it was our tragic best. But the resurrection reveals that irresistible and transformative forgiveness, that is, love, is the way of God.*

Beloved, right now, the world's powers, political and economic, seem hell bent on making another sacrifice for the sake of order, of power, of so-called freedom, all for "our" sake. May we be strong in living by a different sacrificial logic, the logic of sacrificial love.

In the name of the Living God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Mother of us all. Amen.

