

David W. Lloyd: The Treasure of the Cross

A Sermon by David Lloyd

Seekers Church

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The Treasure of the Cross

Let me read this week's Epistle from the lectionary to you. It's from Paul's letter to the church in Rome.

In certain ways we are weak, but the Spirit is here to help us. For example, when we don't know what to pray for, the Spirit prays for us in ways that cannot be put into words. All of our thoughts are known to God. He can understand what is in the mind of the Spirit, as the Spirit prays for God's people. We know that God is always at work for the good of everyone who loves him. They are the ones God has chosen for his purpose, and he has always known who his chosen ones would be. He had decided to let them become like his own Son, so that his Son would be the first of many children. God then accepted the people he had already decided to choose, and he has shared his glory with them.

What can we say about all this? If God is on our side, can anyone be against us? God did not keep back his own Son, but he gave him for us. If God did this, won't he freely give us everything else? If God says his chosen ones are acceptable to him, can anyone bring charges against them? Or can anyone condemn them? No indeed! Christ died and was raised to life, and now he is at God's right side, speaking to him for us. Can anything separate us from the love of Christ? Can

trouble, suffering, and hard times, or hunger and nakedness, or danger and death? It is exactly as the Scriptures say, "For you we face death all day long. We are like sheep on their way to be butchered."

In everything we have won more than a victory because of Christ who loves us. I am sure that nothing can separate us from God's love—not life or death, not angels or spirits, not the present or the future, and not powers above or powers below. Nothing in all creation can separate us from God's love for us in Christ Jesus our Lord!

What a glorious passage! God's love for us is a treasure, truly a pearl for which we would sell everything we had.

One of my favorite magazines, which sometimes gets curious glances from my seatmates or fellow standees when I read it on the Metro, is the *Christian Century*. It holds up a broad range of issues from the news to film reviews, from scripture interpretations useful for sermons to poetry, from the perspective of mainline to liberal Christian Protestant denominations and Catholic thought.

I have quoted from the *Christian Century* in some of my previous sermons and I have reflected on some of its articles when I have been reading scripture or listening to others sermons. Recently I have been reflecting over and over on a review of seven books by S. Mark Heim in the March 22 issue, even though I haven't read any of the books mentioned in it, and I confess that I am unlikely to read them. But I have been unable to put the review itself out of my mind.

The review was entitled, "Cross purposes: rethinking the death

of Jesus.” Witty title, eh? It begins,

Is the story of Jesus mainly about his death and a life that leads to it, or is the story of Jesus mainly about his life and a death that flows from it? On one view, it hardly matters: these are just two ways of looking at the same thing. On a more combative view, the difference is as great as night and day. Does the cross belong on the sleeves (and hearts) of Christians, as the glorious core of their faith, or does it belong in the repair shop, in need of drastic repairs, the primary Christian embarrassment for believers and an offense to outsiders.

The first view, in Heim’s words, is

a theology of the cross, a theology that says Jesus’ death is the supreme saving act, and the equation of guilt, punishment and grace worked out through the execution of the innocent, divine victim in place of a rightly condemned humanity provides the essential sum of Christianity itself.

The theology of the cross, also called the theology of atonement, is what we mean when we say that Christ died for us (even if we can’t bring ourselves to say that he died for our sins). Because of Christ’s death, we want to know more about Jesus, what he said and did that made the Romans and the Sadducees want to kill him, and what there is in those teachings and acts that should guide us in our lives. Christ’s resurrection is the proof that we are freed from sin by the cross, and that is good news, that is the Gospel.

The second view, also known as the social gospel, is that the important thing is what Jesus said and did and what there is in his teachings and acts that should guide us in our lives. Christ’s teachings and healings and acts of inclusion are good

news to the poor, proclaim release for prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, and set broken victims free. That is the Gospel. When we do what Jesus did, we are Christ's body, knowing that this made the Romans and the Sadducees want to kill him, and that following in his footsteps will make our modern powers and principalities want to do the same to us. Christ's resurrection is the proof that in living the way Jesus did, we have nothing to fear from death.

What do you think? Let's have a show of hands. How many of you think that the story of Jesus is mainly about his death and then about his life that led up to it? How many of you think that the story of Jesus is mainly about his life and then about his death that flowed from it? Some of you shuddered inwardly when you even thought about trying to vote for the first question! Some of you looked at those voting for the second question and thought, why do you even take communion?

One of the reasons I have been unable to forget this article is that it reminds me of the tradition we inherited from the Church of the Saviour. In that tradition both answers are correct. First, there is the Church of the Saviour commitment to ecumenicity. According to Heim, the theology of the cross as atonement is not very prominent in the Eastern Church, that is, in the Greek Orthodox and Russian Orthodox traditions, and it wasn't even dominant in the Western Church, that is, the Catholic Church and Protestant denominations until the late medieval period. But whether it is dominant or not, the theology of the cross does exist in both the Eastern and Western Churches. This is also true with respect to the social Gospel. It exists in both but is stronger in the Western Church.

The second reason was our experience of the Christian life as experienced in the Church of the Saviour. In his preaching and his pastoral prayers Gordon Cosby has been quite clear that Jesus' death and resurrection is **the** event of human history, that we are redeemed by God's sacrifice of love in Christ's death and by God's creative power of love in Christ's resurrection. This does not mean that we are passive, waiting for our heavenly reward, waiting for "pie in the sky when we die." In his preaching and his discussions and his actions Gordon has been quite clear that we are to live out the Gospel, to become Christ-like in our imitation of his actions.

I feel that I hardly need to say at this point that atonement theology is most strongly held by evangelicals, whether politically liberal or conservative. Social gospel theology is most strongly held by mainline denominations and theologically liberal denominations whether politically liberal or conservative. I believe that the gulf that exists between liberals and conservatives in politics, between Christian social activists and evangelicals, can be bridged if both sides embrace the Cross.

If you believe that the important thing is what Jesus said and did, that the Gospel is the totality of his life, and that the resurrection is proof that we have nothing to fear from the death-dealing powers and principalities, then we get to the resurrection through the Cross. If you believe that that the important thing is that Christ's resurrection is the proof that we are freed from sin, then once again we get to the resurrection through the Cross. Both liberal Christians and conservative Christians proclaim the power of the resurrection, and we get to that resurrection power through the Cross. The Cross is the meeting place for both theologies.

Not only can the cross bridge the gulf, but it can do so without casting aspersion on the other side. Each side can lay claim to the Cross without having to say that its belief is right and the other wrong, that its theology is the good theology and the other side's theology is bad, or that its believers live out their theology more faithfully and with more good result than the believers on the other side.

Thus the Cross itself has worth. You may not think it as valuable as the treasure in the field or as a long sought pearl, but anything that can reduce the enmity within the Church universal is surely something to value.

If each theology can claim the Cross, and if we as Seekers claim to be in the tradition of the Church of the Saviour, then the challenge for us as Seekers Church is to proclaim the Cross. And to proclaim it, we have to give it visibility and voice within Seekers as well as outside the congregation.

So how visible and audible is the Cross in Seekers? My answer would be that it is somewhat visible and somewhat audible, but that we could do a lot more to give it more visibility and voice. And in giving the Cross more visibility and voice, we will become a welcoming community more than merely welcoming people of different races, ages, sexes, genders, and sexual orientation. We would be welcoming conservatives along with liberals, evangelicals along with those promoting the social gospel. We would truly be bringing the world to Christ.

Let me give you several ideas of what I mean when I say

somewhat visible and audible, and I am referring to our life here on Carroll Street. When we first worshipped in this space we knew that we would be experimenting for a while with several different seating arrangements. At first we had a seating arrangement that was more in a theatre style, with the chairs in concentric arcs facing the backdrop and this beautiful cross, and the altar was in front of the backdrop. The processional quilted banner that Margreta Silverstone made and the processional cross that Deborah Sokolove and I made were on either side of the backdrop.

Several months ago, we began using the seating arrangement we have today, with the altar in the center of the room and the chairs in concentric arcs facing the altar. We don't have a cross on the altar and we see the cross on the backdrop only in our peripheral vision when we look at the Word for our children or at the preacher. The processional banner and cross are at the rear corners of the room, so that you can only see one at a time. We may change our seating yet again.

Last year when we came to this building Deborah helped us bless each room by mounting small crosses that we had created on a wall in each room. They are beautiful, and I have the feeling that each room with one has in fact been blessed. Don't you agree? But in some rooms you have to look for them.

If you are outside the front of the building from some distance away you can easily see our windows and near the roofline the beautiful mosaic that Kathryn Wysockey-Johnson and Peter Bankson helped us create from our home crockery. That mosaic bears the motif of the Genesis story, God creating the land out of waters of chaos, as Marjory Bankson preached so eloquently on Easter. There is a white cross, at the level

of the name, "Seekers Church," but you can't see it from a distance, and if you are in your car at the traffic light, waiting to turn left and then come up the driveway, the cross is obscured by the street pole. At the rear of the building, we have portions of that same beautiful mosaic in the first floor windows, but no cross at all.

Our liturgy during the preceding season and the liturgy we are using in our current season do not mention the cross or the resurrection. Our communion liturgy mentions that the bread and fruit of the vine were blessed ritually by Jesus on the night of his arrest, but makes no mention of his crucifixion or his resurrection. And we host a Maundy Thursday foot washing ceremony of extraordinary power, an Easter vigil and a lively Easter worship service. But we don't do anything for Good Friday.

Our children's word rarely mentions the Crucifixion or the Resurrection, or use the symbol of the cross or the empty tomb. Outside of Passion Sunday, it is rare that anyone preaches about Jesus' crucifixion, and except for a few Sundays in Eastertide, we don't have much preaching about Jesus' resurrection.

I have struggled with understanding the meaning and implications of my perceptions, and let me emphasize that they are only my perceptions. I also want to be quite clear that I don't think what I have described as been intentional by anyone or any group within Seekers. I think that we have emphasized ourselves as a "community," assuming without stating that we all knew that we are a community precisely because we have embraced the power and love of God in Jesus' death and resurrection by calling ourselves followers of Jesus

the Christ, that is, Christians. Similarly, when we call ourselves the Body of Christ, we assume without stating that this means that God died with us and for us and that we are collectively raised from death and belong to him.

To sum up, I think that Seekers Church has unintentionally de-emphasized Jesus' suffering and death on the cross. Could this mean that we have also unintentionally de-emphasized Christ's resurrection? I hope not. Jesus' death and resurrection are among our core values. We call ourselves a Christian community, and I have found myself musing whether we are becoming the body of Christ without the Cross, and whether we are becoming a post-Christian community.

There is a lot to be said for proclaiming our key values over and over. I work for the Defense Department. Each of the four Military Services spends a lot of time during basic training teaching its recruits the meaning of "duty," "honor," "country," and other core values so that everyone in that Service believes them. Each of the Services also spends a lot of time during almost every opportunity to conduct rituals that both explicitly name those core values and reinforce them with music, flags, creeds and other rituals. And it works. When you ask an 18 year old enlisted private what he is doing in the Army, he will tell you, "Serving my country, sir." Little children in career military families hear the opening bars of the "Star Spangled Banner" and stop what they are doing and put their hands over their hearts. This commonality of understanding carries over after the service members are discharged. Men and now women who have served in our country's armed forces have a common understanding of those terms and what they mean. Veterans may have come over time to disagree with those terms or their application in our nation's history and political choices, but they all are using the same terms

and concepts.

If soldiers can proclaim their core values, then we soldiers of the cross can proclaim our core value! I encourage us as Seekers Church to depict the cross, to look at the cross, to sing the cross, to pray the cross, to meditate on the cross, to proclaim the cross. The cross is the ultimate way that we know God's love for us.

If God is on our side, can anyone be against us? God did not keep back his own Son, but he gave him for us. .. Christ died and was raised to life, and now he is at God's right side, speaking to him for us... I am sure that nothing can separate us from God's love—not life or death, not angels or spirits, not the present or the future, and not powers above or powers below. Nothing in all creation can separate us from God's love for us in Christ Jesus our Lord!