
Why the Cross?

A sermon by Dean Sam Candler
Good Friday – Year B

Why do we carry these crosses everywhere?

We wear them around our necks and on our arms. Some are made of the most ordinary materials, and some are made of the most expensive. Some are as simple as two plain lines. Others are ornate and complicated, with no end to their beautiful variation. We lift crosses up into the air, and we process in lines behind them. We place them on our walls and doors.

But what do they actually mean? Do they mean simply that we are pious? That we are warm and cozy, soft-hearted people? Do they mean that we harbor some long lost spiritual dimension in our past? Do they mean simply that we are from a religious family?

No, the cross means more, much more, than those things. Sadly, regrettably, tragically, the cross has also been used wrongly. It has been used, for instance, to justify violence. It has been used in acts of racism and anti-semitism and prejudice. It has been used in ways that are directly antagonistic to the way that Jesus used it.

In his book, *Constantine's Sword*, James Carroll delivered a scathing critique of the manner in which the cross has especially been used in anti-semitic ways. Today, some well-meaning Christians are reluctant to display the cross, out of sensitivity to its anti-semitic history.

However, that is one of the attitudes towards the cross that I seek to redeem. The cross means something different. The cross means something that is the very opposite of violence, and it means something that is much more profound than mere emotional pietism.

Today, Good Friday, is the day of the cross. I know that Easter is a lovely and delightful day, but I feel closer to God on Good Friday. Let me tell you why: Good Friday is a day of love. Unfortunately, throughout history, many of us have tried to explain the meaning of the cross without love. We have discussed crude blood sacrifice, and we have developed grand “atonement” theories, and we have tried to explain rationally just how the sacrifice of Jesus, the blood of Jesus, has saved us.

Listen to three of these popular theories.

A first theory has been called “the fish hook theory.” Some say that “Satan was owed something because of the sinful nature of humanity. Someone had to pay Satan a sort of ransom, and that someone was Jesus. Jesus died on the cross and paid the price. But then Jesus tricked Satan by being resurrected.” This view was once described with the image that Christ was a worm on a fish hook that finally caught Satan. So, this view has also been called the fish hook theory. But this theory has a real problem: why should God have to owe Satan anything at all?

A second type of theory has to do with satisfying God's justice. Some say that “it wasn't Satan who had to be satisfied. Rather it was God's justice that had to be satisfied. The perfect righteousness of God demanded that someone

suffer for sins which had been committed. Therefore (according to this theory), Jesus's death on the cross satisfies the justice, the righteousness, of God." But this theory has a similar problem: Would God kill Jesus in order to satisfy a harsh and impersonal justice system? That can't be.

A third theory is the blood theory. This theory maintains that "sin—somehow—can be transferred to another's blood. The Old Testament sacrificial offerings of lambs and such were designed to be a sort of transference. In those ceremonies, the sins of humanity were transferred to the animal and so offered to God and removed from people. Thus, sins can be transferred to Jesus's blood because he was a perfect and sinless offering; he was able to take away the sins of the world."

Alas, as Rene Girard has shown us, this theory runs the risk of perpetuating scapegoat systems. When we believe that Jesus's death is just another example of the scapegoat sacrificial system, we perpetuate scapegoating and violence to other innocent people. We run the risk of making the cross a sign of violence towards others again.

Perhaps you recognize the language of these three sorts of theories. Elements of each theory appear in our theology and in our liturgy. Some of us may believe parts of all of them.

Let me suggest, however, that none of them captures the essence of what is going on today. The cross is not about a legal contract or a heavenly transaction. It is not "blood for sin." We betray the cross if we analyze it in quantifiable and crude transactional terms. Good Friday is not an intellectual day, and the cross cannot be fully explained with an intellectual theory.

The cross goes deeper than our brains.

The cross, indeed, is a starkly violent image; there is no getting around that. But the point is that Jesus transforms that image. Jesus "made an instrument of shameful death to be for us a means of life and peace." That transformation declares that even the most painful suffering and most gruesome death are not stronger than God. God is greater. God defeats violence at the cross; and God defeats death at the cross.

Well, how does that transformation happen? Why the cross? Today, I have three words with which to answer that question. The cross, the holy cross, means three things: pain, paradox, and passion. And by "passion," I mean "love." Pain, paradox, and love.

Let's start with the human experience of pain, and death. Why do we suffer pain? Where does evil come from? What is death? These are eternal questions of humanity, whether that humanity lived two thousand years ago or today. The eternal questions of humanity have had to do with suffering, have dealt with evil, have been about facing death. Wherever we have lived, at the beginning of humanity in sub-Saharan Africa, in the ancient kingdoms and dynasties of China, in the crowded streets of Atlanta, in the comfortable homes and apartments of Buckhead, wherever we humans have lived, we have faced similar questions.

There are some people of the world who do not believe in pain. There are some religions of the world which do not believe in pain. Some do not believe in sickness or disease. Some religions believe that evil is an illusion, that evil does not actually exist. Some religions do not acknowledge death.

Let them be, those religions. Christianity is not among them. Christianity's answer to the eternal questions of pain, death, and evil is not simply to claim that they do not exist.

Rather, Christianity's answer is the cross.

The pain and suffering of the cross is Christianity's acknowledgement that suffering, and evil, and death, really do exist. This might seem obvious to you. "Of course evil, suffering, and death exist," you say. But I am not speaking so simplistically. I have known hundreds of situations in which good-willed people have been unable to acknowledge their pain. Our tendency is to hide those embarrassing parts of ourselves, places which have not matched our ideals of perfection and happiness. Suffering is painful, yes, but it is also embarrassing. Pain is also humiliating.

Our tendency is to hide. We would rather not admit those times when we have been betrayed, when we have lost, when we have been defeated. Husbands and wives live hidden from one another. We show up to work in misery. We collapse in the evening from fatigue and bewilderment, unable to keep up with our dreams. But somehow, we dare not admit those

problems. We are scared.

Then, worse, we tend to explain away evil. Such an act was due to a lost childhood, we say. Such an atrocity was a sign of sickness. Such horrific behavior is a symptom of a sick society, we say. No; pain and suffering are inherent parts of being human.

So, first of all, the cross means that we Christians acknowledge the real existence of pain and suffering. In fact, we share an important tenet with Buddhism in this regard. Life is suffering. Of course, we believe that life is also much more than that; but life does involve suffering. None of us gets around pain and suffering. The way to the other side of pain and suffering is not around it, but through it.

It is Jesus who shows us how to go through, not around, pain and suffering. The holy cross, then, reminds us that Jesus himself encountered pain, and betrayal and false witness and innocent suffering, too – more so than most of us ever will. We follow Jesus and the cross because they show us the way through. Remember: the cross never gives us permission to inflict pain; it gives us the strength to live through it.

Secondly the cross means paradox. This is more complex. It starts with the very paradox between suffering and joy, and between death and life. The cross means both death and life. Christians are supposed to know how to deal with both. The cross, two simple intersecting lines, represents the truth that life always has two lines going through it, at least two lines, usually many more.

The very shape of the cross, an intersection of two lines, can be seen as paradox, as the meeting of two different worlds. Many people have understood the horizontal axis of the cross to mean reconciliation with each other, and the vertical axis of the cross to mean reconciliation of humanity with God, with the transcendent. Perhaps the cross means the paradox of reconciliation.

Christianity is a deeply spiritual way, not a rational way. People who wear the cross care about the reconciliation of “both/and”, not “either/or.” Paradox means the ability to live with opposites. In Jesus, for instance, we live with both humanity and divinity. Humanity and divinity are concepts that are often seen as opposites; but, to us, paradoxically, they are not.

Finally, passionate love. The cross means love. It was love that brought Jesus into the world, and it was love that led him to the cross. The reason we follow Jesus to the cross is because we want to love like he loved.

In short, wearing the cross around our necks means that we choose to love. In the midst of pain, we choose to love. In the midst of paradox, we choose to love. In the midst of things we cannot hold together, things we cannot understand, we choose to love. In the midst of life, we choose to love, to give ourselves for each other. Love was the choice Jesus made, and he made that choice most powerfully at the cross, the holy cross.

The holy cross means pain, but it means paradox even more; and even more still, the cross means love. Jesus loves us, this we know, for the cross tells us so. The cross is where Jesus sacrifices not just himself, but all of humanity.

But here’s the catch. The word “sacrifice” does not mean to kill something. Sacrifice does not mean violence. The real meaning of sacrifice, the deep meaning that lies behind all the ways the word is used in Scripture, the deep meaning of the word, “sacrifice,” is “to make something holy,” “to bring something close to God,” “to take something near God.”

The sacrifice of Jesus, then, is not simply that he died, or that he shed blood, or that he experienced evil. The sacrifice of Jesus is that he took the human experiences of pain, violence, and death, to God. This is Christianity’s answer to the eternal questions of death, pain, and suffering. Jesus is the evidence that pain and evil really do exist, and even God knows about them. In fact, God has touched pain and evil, and is transforming them.

If Jesus took pain and suffering to the cross, it should be no accident that we today who are in pain should end up in the church, here at the cross with Jesus. Whether we are innocent or guilty with pain, we end up in the same place as Jesus does: before the loving mercy of God.

Again, Christianity is an honest and realistic and incarnate religion. There are places in our lives where we bleed. There are places where we hurt, where we are in pain, where we suffer. Those horrifying, and even gruesome places, are the very

places where God—in the person of Jesus Christ—pours out his love for us. God does not love us in theory. God loves us personally, in the person and life of Jesus Christ, in the very blood of Jesus Christ.

Today, we see suffering, but we also see love. It is love that looms so much larger over the landscape of intellectual theories of atonement. It is love that generates the power of Good Friday. It is love that compels Jesus Christ to take the despair and pain and suffering and blood of humanity near to God.

Sacrifice means to make holy. Jesus has made holy the human experiences of torturous pain, or bloody death, by taking them near to the very heart of God.

And Jesus took something else close to the heart of God. He took the human experience of sin. When God was touched so closely with that sin, God was affected. To be passionate means to be moved, to be willing to be moved. God himself suffered when touched by human violence. God was affected.

God's response, however, was to forgive.

It is at the cross, then, that we discover, the true nature of God. The true nature of God is passionate love. When touched by sin, God forgives – he does not condemn. When touched by despair, God perseveres. When touched by evil, God instigates the Good. When touched by violence, God turns it into peace. When touched by death, God turns it into life. The true nature of God is passionate love.

This is why we can say with deep conviction that we are saved by this blood of Jesus. This is why we can say with passion that Jesus is the perfect offering for our sins. His offering—his sacrifice—makes holy even the awful aspects of humanity, his offering takes all of human experience to the very heart of God, and in that heart of God we meet... perfect love.

Jesus on the cross is an offering of love. And there is nothing more perfect than that love, nothing more powerful than that love, nothing more passionate than that love. To be loved by a suffering Jesus, on the cross, is to be loved. To be loved where we suffer is to be loved. That kind of love is deep, and broad, and high; that kind of love is the perfect offering for our sins. That kind of love lifts us close, so very close, to God. That kind of love is why we call this Friday Good.

AMEN.

The Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler
Cathedral of St. Philip
Atlanta, Georgia