

First Presbyterian Church

Marianna, Florida

Lenten Luncheon March 2, 2010

Reflections led by Huw Christopher, Pastor

Question for Reflection: What Does the Cross Mean To You?

Recording of “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross” by Cor Y Penrhyn, Bethesda, North Wales.

Welcome

Prayer:

Gracious God, we thank you for this opportunity during Lent to pause in the middle of this day to share this food and fellowship together, and most of all to reflect on who we are as your beloved children, and as the followers of Jesus Christ. Guide us in our reflections together that through them we may come to appreciate more who we are and be able to live more fully into that reality each and every day, for we ask these things in the name of Jesus, your Son and our Lord, whom we seek to follow. Amen.

As we think about the question, “What does the cross mean to you?” we have heard Isaac Watts try to answer that question with his hymn, “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross.” This hymn was written in 1707 in England, and was inspired by the words of Paul when writing to the Christians in Galatia he says, “May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.” (Galatians 6:14). Although written now over three hundred years ago this hymn still helps many people as they reflect on the question, “What does the Cross mean to

you?” Not only, of course, is this a popular hymn but as we heard from one of our Welsh Male Voice Choirs there are many anthem versions of this familiar hymn.

Today as we continue to reflect on the question, “What does the cross mean to you?” I would like to invite us to sing two stanzas of a hymn which many ladies of this congregation ranked as one of their favorites.

Opening Hymn No. 25 “The Old Rugged Cross” stanzas 1 and 2

Unison Prayer:

Gracious God, we gather here to learn your ways, and to follow you more closely. As we move deeper in this season of Lent, give us hearts that humbly and thankfully ponder the mystery of the cross. Give us ears to hear your word, eyes to see your face, and courage to follow the path you set before us. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

The hymn, “The Old Rugged Cross,” was written almost two hundred years later than Isaac Watts’ hymn, “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross.” It was written by George Bernard in Michigan in 1913. He writes of having written the music first and then the words coming to him in answer to his own need. It has generally been seen as the most popular of all twentieth century hymns.

Although George Bernard went on to write many other hymns none has stood the test of time like, “The Old Rugged Cross.” (*Singing with Understanding* by Kenneth W. Osbeck, Kregel Publications, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1979, pages 288-290)

Last week we thought about the baptism of Jesus followed immediately by his temptations, and suggested that the temptations were really his trying to come to grips with that it meant for him to be the Son of God, in other words, to live out his true identity.

Today as we continue to think about what Jesus saw to be his true identity

I would like to invite you to read with me the words from Luke 13 that are on the sheet. In this congregation and in many others these were words that were also heard last Sunday as the Gospel lesson. As we read them together think about what they say about how Jesus understood his true identity:

Reading from Luke 13:31-35

Leader:

At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to Jesus,

Men:

"Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you."

Leader: Jesus said to them,

Women:

"Go and tell that fox for me, 'Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.'

Leader:

Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!

Men:

How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you.

Women:

And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say,

Unison:

'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.' "

If those last words sound familiar they are, of course, the words that we hear on Palm Sunday as we celebrate the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. This is the event that prepares the way for all of the events of Holy Week. As we hear these words of Jesus it is clear that he sees that he cannot fulfill his true identity without going to Jerusalem and being killed. Although in these words he does not make any reference to the cross it is very clear that he understands that if he goes to Jerusalem it will be suffering and death that will be the result.

However we may answer the question “What does the cross mean to you?” we cannot escape the fact that if we are going to know Jesus, who he is and what he has done, we cannot escape the reality of the cross. His true identity is only fully known as we join with Isaac Watts in surveying the wondrous cross on which he died.

As we hear Jesus speak of his suffering and death in Jerusalem as reflecting his true identity I would invite you to read with me the words of Paul written to the Christians in Rome as printed on the sheet.

Leader:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death.

Unison:

Therefore, we have been buried with him in death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.

These words of Paul remind us that our own true identity as the baptized children of God and followers of Jesus cannot be separated from his suffering and death and his resurrection. The question then is not just what did the cross mean to Jesus, but what does the cross mean to us as his followers today. The cross speaks not just to his true identity but also to our true identities as his followers.

The question, of course, that has challenged Christian men and women down through the centuries and still challenges us today as we think about what the cross means to us is how does the cross change our relationship with God as God's beloved children?

In his book, *Mere Christianity*, the twentieth-century Christian writer C. S. Lewis noted that the exact meaning of Jesus' death would always lie beyond any theory. He wrote, "The central Christian belief is that Christ's death has somehow put us right with God and given us a fresh start. Theories as to how it did this are another matter. A good many different theories have been held as to how it works; what all Christians are agreed on is that it does work." (*Mere Christianity* New York, Macmillan, 1952, page 57.)

The theories to which C.S. Lewis alludes have generally been considered under the title, the "theories of the atonement." This was not the way Jesus spoke of his death. This is also not the way in which Paul spoke of the death on the cross of Jesus. The word atonement does not appear in the Bible. It did not come into use until the sixteenth century. As you will see on the sheet, it is a compression of two English words *at* and *one*, with the Latin suffix *-ment* tacked on. The term is used to reflect on the way in which the cross of Jesus has made us at one with God.

In thinking about the death of Jesus and developing these theories of the atonement Christians down through the centuries have generally centered their thinking in three particular directions.

Michael Lindvall in his Lenten study, *Pausing on the Road to Jerusalem*, reminds us that "Atonement theories have always been couched in ideas that made sense to people at the time of their development. But often when worldviews shifted, a way of understanding Jesus' death that one generation of Christians thought to be profound became remote, even senseless or offensive, to another generation."

When thinking about the theories of the atonement or what the cross of Jesus means to us Christian men and women down through the centuries have

developed three main theories.

The first speaks of forgiveness. It was developed about a thousand years ago by a theologian named Anselm. Anselm reasoned that just as God cannot overlook the offense of human behavior and remain God, God's mercy simply cannot countenance the destruction of the humanity that God loves. Humans really ought to pay the price, Anselm said, yet the offense of human sinfulness is so great that only God could ever pay it. Jesus, who was both God and man, lived a life of such value that he and he alone could satisfy justice and set the order of the universe right. According to Anselm's reasoning, by his death Jesus takes our place; he is "substituted" for us, hence the common name of Anselm's theory and its descendants, "substitutionary atonement." Anselm's theory was clear and consistent to medieval minds imbued with feudal concepts of honor and satisfaction. It has been refashioned by later generations of theologians and is still both evocative and normative to many Christians.

The second theory is that of inspiration. When Anselm was formalizing his "cross as forgiveness" theology in the language of substitutionary atonement, a younger contemporary was thinking through the meaning of Jesus' death in a very different way. Abelard, a popular priest and teacher at Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris, found Anselm's reasoning outrageous. He thought it "cruel and wicked" that the justice of God would demand the shedding of the blood of an innocent to bring about forgiveness. He worked out an alternative understanding of the cross. Abelard said Jesus' death was an enactment of God's unrelenting love for undeserving humanity, a love so powerful that, in his words, "our hearts should be enkindled by such a gift of divine grace," and by this example be inspired to "true charity" that "should not now shrink from doing anything for him." Abelard's thinking and similar understandings of the atonement have often been called "moral influence theories." Jesus himself speaks in terms of inspiration when he hints that following him means claiming your own cross, self-denial, and self-giving inspired by his sacrifice. Christians have sometimes understood the cross as the inevitable result of Jesus' conflict

with an oppressive power structure. In the deadly showdown with local and Roman power that final week in Jerusalem, the choice before Jesus was either cross or compromise. So by this second set of theories his death becomes an inspiration to live with like consistency and courage in the face of oppression.

Finally, in the third family of atonement theories, Jesus' death offers revelation, a disclosure of profound truth. At its simplest the death of Jesus, like the life of Jesus, is an event that reveals the way of God with the world. By this theory, the cross discloses the heart of God. In traditional theological language, the cross becomes a "revelation" of central truth about God. There are two sides to this understanding. First, the cross portrays in starkest terms a divine love so vast that it offers to descend to any depth for the sake of beloved humanity. And, second, the cross is a sign that God has passed through the very suffering that is bound up with the human condition. By this understanding, the death of Jesus becomes revelation of God's love for us and disclosure of God's presence with us even in the most anguished depths of our lives. Thus, the cross never permits Christian faith to be naive about suffering, injustice, and loss. Planted squarely at the center of the story is this high-water mark of evil's flood tide. It stands there, silently insisting that this faith goes as deep as human experience goes. In the death of Jesus, God descends into human suffering and incorporates—takes in God's *corpus*, God's body—the whole of mortal brokenness and pain. By the death of Jesus, God is saying, "There is no pain that you might bear that I have not borne, no darkness that can overshadow you that I have not seen, no fear that might grip you that I have not known. I have been there and I am with you."

The death of Jesus might just have been another installment in the sorry human epic of torture, injustice, and death. But by the resurrection, it is transformed into a death with profound meaning. First, *somehow* this death bears forgiveness. Second, *somehow* this death brings inspiration. Third, *somehow* this death brings revelation. There is indeed a range of theories, often complimentary, seldom mutually exclusive, and they matter. But what really matters is this: *somehow* on the cross the love of God reaches across the chasm

gouged between humanity and the divine, and *somehow* it pulls us across the divide into eternally outstretched arms. *Somehow* it does this, and we come to find our true identity as the beloved children of God.

Michael Lindvall reminds us, that each of these theories are by no means mutually exclusive. At one point in life's journey, as followers of Christ we may ache for an understanding of Jesus' death that offers a grace radical enough to forgive what may seem unforgivable. In another life of passage as a follower of Jesus Christ we may find inspiration in the courage that led Jesus to the cross. And again, in the midst of suffering, as the followers of Christ people have been comforted by the cross's revolutionary and revelatory declaration that God is not aloof from our pain, loss, and disorientation, but that God somehow suffers with us.

Down through the centuries through hymns, through theological writings fellow-Christians have sought to help all of us to reflect on the true identity of Jesus as this is seen in the cross, and how our true identity as his followers cannot be separated from his death upon the cross. We can be grateful for all who have helped us and continue to help us today to answer the question, What does the cross mean to you?

Some of these reflections are based on Pausing on the Road to Jerusalem by Michael A. Lindvall, copyright © 2007 www.TheThoughtful Christian.com and are used by permission.

Closing Prayer

Holy God, God most high, you stooped down to us, and came and shared life with us here on earth in Jesus Christ your Son. We thank you for the mystery and wonder of your love for us revealed in his rejection, his suffering, his cruel death upon the cross, and in his glorious resurrection. Help us always to be open to the greater awareness of your love for us as we continue to ponder it through this season of Lent. Above all, help us to live our lives in ways that reflect our gratitude to you for all that you have done for us in Jesus Christ, your Son, for it is in his name that we pray.

Amen.

Closing Hymn No. 28

**“Onward Christian Soldiers”
Stanzas 1 and 4**