

SEEING IS BELIEVING - CROSS
A SERMON BASED ON MATTHEW 27:27-55
PREACHED AT CHIPPAWA PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
NIAGARA FALLS, ONTARIO
FRIDAY, APRIL 11, 2020
10:00 a.m.
'Good Friday'

I always enjoyed the television series,

'The Antique Road Show' when it was on.

There was something just intrinsically captivating
about people bringing something they knew little about
putting it before an appraiser,

and finding out it is a piece worth a small fortune.

There was always amazement,

and a little crowd gathered in the back whispering to each other.

"She didn't even know."

The appraiser usually could provide a little history

or story about the piece,

where it was made, why it was valuable.

The person would then share that the valuable piece had been

up in the back of Grandma's attic.

or sitting in a box in the basement,
or found at a garage sale.

They didn't know what they were seeing.

They didn't understand the value underlying what they had in front of them.

The show always stirs up a feeling of low grade anxiety,

along the lines of

'Maybe I should check those boxes in the basement again.'

Maybe I'm missing something valuable.

You see things in church.

You see things at Easter.

You may not really know what it is you are seeing.

If you don't know the value of what you are looking at,

Last night we looked at the table.

Today I want you to look at the cross.

Do you know what you are looking at when you look at the cross?

In our mostly secular culture now,

I would venture that many, many people really
have little to no connection to the account,
and story and roots of this central Christian symbol.

They will get it tattooed onto their bicep,
or buy a pendant for their necklace,
because they think it looks cool, or nice.

I remember hearing someone call it a special letter t.

There are some gorgeously stylized versions out there.

Many don't realize what they are looking at is a tool of execution.

If you have been a resident of churchland for a while,
you at least know that.

But even in church,
we have cleaned it up.

Made it tidy.

The cross up on our wall, top and centre is also crisp and neat.

It is made from the pews that were in our pre-renovation sanctuary.

We can think it nice and attractive.

knowing it was made out of former pews
can even makes us feel a little nostalgic.

We had the one behind me made a little rougher.

It's a little less neat, a little more authentic,

in order to bring it a little closer to us,

and to the account of it.

so we could see it a little better.

What is it we are seeing when we look at the cross?

It is a tool of execution.

Jesus' execution started with a flogging, a whipping.

with a crown of thorns pushed onto his head.

He was made to carry his cross until he couldn't,

then Simon the Cyrene carried it the rest of the way.

The cross reminds us that nails were put through Jesus hands

nails were put through his feet.

A spear was put in his side.

His blood was shed.

His life ended.

The cross wasn't neat and crisp, nor nostalgic,

nor stylized and cool.

Why a tool of execution as our symbol of salvation?

Why so much blood?

Why so violent?

Why such a depressing thing to hear about,

when life has plenty of depressing things to tell us right now.

It's hard to take, for sure.

Not everyone wants to see the cross, messy and bloody.

I've seen a church filled with crafted butterflies at Easter season.

It was pretty. Pink and blue and yellow and green.

Pretty and happy. It wasn't disturbing at all.

It made you feel good.

For me, it missed the point.

It was too pretty.

There was no discomfort.

There was no having to turn your head in dismay.

There was no pain.

There wasn't even the struggle to squiggle out of the cocoon.

Just wings and pretty colours.

When you are looking at the cross

what you are looking at,

what you need to see,

and what we hear less often anymore,

is that Jesus died for us.

That he took our sin upon himself.

In the Old Testament, the prophet Isaiah looked ahead,

and saw what the servant of God, the son of God

would accomplish

God says in Isaiah,

“My servant will act wisely;

he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted.

I will keep you and will make you

to be a covenant for the people

and a light for the Gentiles,

to open eyes that are blind,

to free captives from prison

and to release from the dungeon
those who sit in darkness.

Then he describes how it will be accomplished.

He speaks in the past tense. It is will be finished and complete.

It is a fait accompli.

“He grew up before him like a tender shoot,
and like a root out of dry ground.

He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him,
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.

He was despised and rejected by mankind,
a man of suffering, and familiar with pain.

Like one from whom people hide their faces

he was despised, and we held him in low esteem.

Surely he took up our pain

and bore our suffering,

yet we considered him punished by God,

stricken by him, and afflicted.

But he was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was on him,
and by his wounds we are healed.

We all, like sheep, have gone astray,
each of us has turned to our own way;
and the Lord has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.

The punishment that brings us peace.

The wounds that are our healing,
were put upon Jesus, on the cross.

The cross reminds us of an ugly truth.

Our sin wounds.

It hits. It whips. It flogs. It cuts.

Our sin draws blood. It scars. It wounds.

Our sin nails us down.

Ultimately, our sin takes our lives. It kills.

This is not butterflies.

This needs to be seen.

It isn't politically correct to describe something as sin anymore,
to look upon something as sin, to talk about sin.

Barbara Brown Taylor in her book

'Speaking of Sin' describes what she calls

the downsizing of the number of things we call sin.

She writes,

'Suicide, divorce and addiction are no longer considered sinful
by large segments of the population.

Nor are cohabitation and having children out of wedlock.

Sex before marriage is so routine

that virgin brides and grooms are as rare as comets.

We call lying, 'spin', and greed 'motivation'.

What is to be gained from condemning such things

when people are going to do them anyway?

Why not respect the individual's freedom to choose?'

Gambling. Gluttony. Sabbath-breaking. Drunkenness.

Aren't those just good times?

Just hearing things called sin has probably agitated you.

Isn't calling it sin a little severe?

Is Doug going to go all hell-fire and brimstone on us?

He's sounding, the worst word you can be called these days,
judgemental.

But when you look at the cross,

you need to see more than inspiring self-help lessons.

What you need to see is that sin wounds.

Sin whips and cuts.

Sin makes us bleed.

Sin leaves us staggering.

Then it nails us down.

Ultimately sin kills us and destroys our souls.

If you've been wronged.

At work. In a relationship.

If someone or something has bitten in deep
and released its venom.

You know. Sin cuts, poisons, hurts.

If you have wronged someone else,
you know first-hand the wounds and the blood that gets shed.

You know the strikes of the whip

that lead to the cries of outrage.

The repeated cuts and wine vinegar

of going over it again and again in your mind.

You know the painful scope of self-examination

of trying to understand

what went wrong.

Of wishing, if only I had chosen differently,

or followed a different lead, a different path,

it wouldn't have turned out this way.

Sin is a horror show.

And so we never really look closely.

Or if we do, we look through our fingers

with our hands over our faces.

It's too uncomfortable otherwise.

Sin hits. It whips. It flogs. It cuts.

Sin draws blood. It scars. It wounds.

It nails us down.

Ultimately, it takes our lives from us.

This is true of all sin, I don't want to or need to pick on any particular sin.

Not one of us is spared.

We all carry sin. We all commit sin. We are all sinned against.

Take any sin and I can show you the wounds,

some are immediate, some are insidious.

Because it is possible to get away with the awful stuff we do for a long time,
sometimes it can take decades for the wounds to show,

but they will, like a slow growing tumour.

It may not even grow in you,

it could manifest in your family, in your friendships,

in the unfolding of consequences.

When you are looking at the cross

what you need to see is that sin whips, cuts

nails down and kills.

The Bible uses three different words for sin.

One means to miss the mark.

The second means to act wrongly.

The third, to rebel.

All of them mean to go against God's will.

Sin is to be out of sync with God.

There are those things you do that can bring you closer to God.

There are those things you do that push you away from God.

Sin will drive your soul back and away

from the God who were meant to be near.

At the cross,

what you are seeing,

is the sin which whips, cuts, scars and wounds.

what you are seeing is the sin which nails us down.

attacking not us, the ones who have sinned,

but Christ,
who stands in our place.

It is exactly what Isaiah 53 describes.

“Surely he took up our pain
and bore our suffering,
yet we considered him punished by God,
stricken by him, and afflicted.
But he was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was on him,
and by his wounds we are healed.

We all, like sheep, have gone astray,
each of us has turned to our own way;
and the Lord has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.”

There are so many people
who don't know what they are looking at,
when they look at Jesus on the cross.

Some people look at the cross and see,
something that would make a good tattoo or necklace.
If they know the account of Jesus on the cross,
they may see a fairy tale,
some weird brutality that made Mel Gibson rich,
a historical incident blown out of proportion
by people who can suspend all rationality,
they are so desperate for something to hold onto.

Some people look at the cross and see theological problems,
a God who has to kill to forgive,
and they think, who wants to worship a god like that?

But present in today's passage are those who saw it.
those who saw something most others didn't,
and what many don't see.

They saw one who did not despise suffering,
but who accepted suffering
so that others might be free and be given peace.

The Roman centurion saw it.

‘Surely this man was the Son of God.’

The women from Galilee continued to see it, watching from a distance.

‘Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the younger, Salome.

Many other women were also there.

Not in this account, but in Luke,

the second criminal sees it too.

Listening to the first criminal taunt Jesus, the second criminal speaks.

‘Don’t you fear God?’

Our sentence is right.

We are getting what we deserve for what we did.

He has done no wrong.’

The second criminal sees the man immediately beside him.

He sees Jesus on the cross.

He sees the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

The one who took our pain,

bore our suffering

pierced for our transgressions

crushed for our iniquities.

He sees that the Lord laid on him,

the iniquity of us all.

Make sure you see not just the cross,

but all that it holds beneath the surface.

Understand that what you are seeing here,

is Jesus, the Son of God,

who was without sin himself

taking your sin, your wounds, your death

upon himself,

so that you can live, be free and have peace.

When you look at the cross,

You are seeing your means of redemption and your Redeemer.

When you look at the cross,

You are seeing your means of salvation and your Saviour.

Sin is your enemy.

It would whip you, cut you, make you bleed and be the death of you.

At the cross, you are seeing God take that sin from you, for you
in order to return to you,
and return you to,
Life.

The cross is our means to life, our path to eternal life.

Jesus quotes Psalm 22 from the cross.

'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'

When we look at the cross, are we looking at one who was forsaken?

Are we looking at one who has been abandoned?

Are we looking at one who was defeated?

Psalm 22 starts as a question

'Why have you forsaken me?'

But it is answered with,

'He has not despised or scorned the suffering of his afflicted one.

He has not hidden his face.

The poor will eat and be satisfied.

The rich will feast and worship.

Those who go down to the dust,

those who can't keep themselves alive

will kneel before him.

Posterity will serve him.

They will proclaim His righteousness,

declaring to a people yet unborn.

The last line of the Psalm is beautiful.

He has done it.

He has done it.

It is finished.

Do you see it?

The cross is not a sanctuary decoration.

Or a nice pendant for a necklace.

Do you see it?

The cross is your deliverance.

Your redemption.

Your salvation.

He has done it. Amen.