

Calvary United Methodist Church
February 3, 2019

THE CROSS

Rev. Dr. A. Robert Cook

Children's Message:

1 Peter 2:21-25

This is my favorite time. I like hanging with you guys. How are you? (Good.) Well, I'm glad. That blanket is pretty important, isn't it? I get that. That's really important. I honor it.

Well, did you know that everybody in this room has a special gift; that God has given everyone here a special gift? Now, there are people here who are hands on folks. They fix things, they create things, they repair things, they come up with solutions to problems in the building or the parking lot or just amazing things happen here with some other folks who are good at hands on things.

Then there are people who are really great at organizing. They run the finances of the church or they keep track of the budget or they watch over what is going on in this area or that area and other areas.

Some people are really good at just caring for one another, like if you are feeling bad, they will go and they will put their hand on you and just say "I'm sorry you are feeling bad" and they hug you. Doesn't it feel good when you are feeling bad to have someone hug you? Kind of? Or just to say, "If you need a nap..." Well, a guy came up to me one Sunday morning and he said, "That was a great service." I said, "Really?" He said, "Yep. I had the best nap all week." Thank you. You can take a nap in church.

Some are just really good at caring by cooking. We have some amazing cooks here. And candy makers...we have great candy makers, right? So, do you like this stuff? You need to share it with your friends. You do. And they will buy it too because it is good. It's on sale now.

Some people are really good at teaching. They might teach in school or they might be your Sunday School teachers teaching you about the Bible, about Jesus, about God. They might share with you things that they have learned in their lives that really are important. That's just as important for me, you know.

Some people are really good at singing, playing music. They guys...they did a good job, didn't they? Give them all a thumbs up, right? They are going to do it again later on.

Some people are really good at leading people in choirs, bell choirs, kid's choirs, kid's bell choirs and that's Mrs. Benedict over there. She is really good at that. That's not my gift, but it's a lot of people's gifts.

So, I had this little tool here. It's called the Leatherman. Maybe one of your parents might have one, put it in the car, keep it at home. This tool has lots of little tools in and each one has something...have you seen these before? Okay. Well, pull this out and it becomes a pair of pliers. I keep this in my desk, it's really handy and... (Child speaks.) You're in scouts but you can't use the knife part until you get your merit badge in knife and ax, right? (It's different because they have the whittling chip and I think I get that in Bears?) Do you? Wow. I was a Cub Scout too. It's like the coolest time, you know? It has a file here. I got a little screw driver. I got a Philips head screw driver, I got a can opener in here. I'll leave the knife blade in because you shouldn't be playing with knives or running with scissors. Anybody run with scissors? Okay, that's a bad idea. This has another kind of screwdriver and a little old pike here for something. Another screwdriver and then the knife blade in there. So this tool has lots of stuff going on. (There's a ruler.) There's a ruler? You know, you are right, there is a ruler in there. Where have I been? I've had this for years and I didn't know there was a ruler there. Alright. There is, do you want to see? It's in metric and in inches too. But I'll put it away.

This has a lot of gifts all in one and at church it is just like that: we have all these gifts, all under one roof, all these people working. Now, here's the cool part, right? Each of you have a gift; that God has put a gift in you, a wonderful thing to do. You may not know what it is right now, but part of growing is to discover that gift.

Now, other people have gifts that you might think are cool, but if it's not your gift, it's not going to be cool, so you don't have to be jealous of someone else's gift, like I know that I am not going to do anything more on the piano than play chopsticks, so I'm glad when Mrs. Benedict plays the piano because none here want to hear chopsticks every week, right? So I don't want to envy her gift. I have gifts that God has given me and you do too. They don't want me to run the sound. They definitely don't want me to use their spreadsheets and start entering stuff from there, it's not going to be pretty. You know, that's not my gift. But it is the gift of others. So each of you has a gift. I don't know what that is going to be, but God starts giving you hints that the things that interest you, the things that you feel moved towards in school, like when I was six I had the first idea of a call to ministry. I didn't give it much thought until I was in high school. Then I thought it was pretty crazy, but at 20, that's when I really discovered it, that God wanted me to be a pastor, which is still kind of funny actually to me, but this is where we are and it's been good and that's my gift.

So, each of you have a gift and as you discover it, this is what happens: it makes you really happy to use it. And not only does it make you happy to use it, it blesses other people and it makes everybody here the richer, just like when the church comes together and all of us use our gifts, it's a beautiful things.

So, let me pray with you here, we'll have God help you discover your gift. So, thank you for our kids and everyone here with these amazing gifts of all kinds of abilities for the good of the church. Help our kids to discover their unique gift and bless them in it. Amen.

Now I have a lady who has a gift for being the worship chair and she always makes sure that you have a fruit snack. And I made sure to have plenty.

Message:

Join me in a word of prayer: Gracious Lord, help us to understand this Word that we may truly grasp the meaning of the cross and pray that you would guide us, that your Holy Spirit would lead us. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

So the greatest threat to the survival of the human race is our predisposition to violence. And violence against one another. We have actually not evolved into some higher species, instead we have evolved to adapt our technology to kill very efficiently in large numbers in a short time and we've had the means to kill the entire planet since the 1940s, but the foundations of our violence actually begin in the fourth chapter of Genesis. In the fourth chapter of Genesis you have the story of Cane and Able. Cane is very jealous of his brother whose offering was accepted by God and yet God does not love Cane any the less. In fact, he very gently and tenderly warns him: Don't get your anger out of control; sin is crouching at your door. It's such an amazing sentence there. And Cane does not control his anger. He gives his anger vent and the next thing you know he kills his brother because he reasons that the way to feel better about himself is to kill his brother. It didn't make Cane feel better about himself, it made him feel a lot worse and his brother was dead, but it also lead to more violence. But this way of thinking we have to kill someone to make ourselves feel better has become the accepted pattern of the way we deal with conflict.

Now, the basis, actually, for these conflicts comes from our tendency to envy and be jealous over the other. Just like two small children will fight over the same toy, two nations will fight over what the other possesses. There is something deeply mistaken in the human soul that believes the death of a rival is really a good thing and the world is better for it and this is the basis of a lot of bestselling books and movies and video games, all that stuff. The problem is that if we believe this, eventually everyone will want to kill their enemy or their rival until nobody is left and we have the power to do it.

Now because we learn by imitating, the more alike people are, the more likely violence will spring up in our midst. We want what the other person has and if we cannot control ourselves, the conflict heightens and in a conflict what we do is we tend to vilify and demonize and talk down who the other person is, so that if we can dehumanize them, we can feel a lot better about inflicting pain or even death. That's what we do.

And, in this case, when we vilify another person, that's how we conclude. We must assault them or kill them or vilify them in a simple way. In a case of a tribe or a nation going to war, this is the way we think we must resolve our problems. Rome had a peace of Rome, Pax

Romana, that said if you want peace you must have war and we'll win every time. That was their thought.

So the defeat or the death of a rival is perceived as our answer to the problem, but it isn't. The problem actually lies in our desires and as we continue this course we will destroy ourselves and this gift of this wonderful planet that God has provided. And what really happens is that the violence and the suffering and the killing actually cause greater suffering and pain, particularly in a time of war, but also the people who have to do this will feel either guilt individually or collectively and it tears them up. It tears us up. Because it is psychologically debilitating to take another person's life.

The term we've come up to describe the after effects of this you know: it's post-traumatic stress. Not a new experience, it's a very ancient one. This is what Cain and Able were all about. And when it gets so bad they have to develop some kind of mechanism to deal with all this pain and so the mechanism that was created to deal with this was called the scapegoat effect. You've heard of the scapegoat effect. It's in the Bible.

Now, in ancient times, people might take an innocent child and sacrifice an innocent child, thinking this will satisfy the anger of the gods or if it is a member of the community they think has been responsible for illness or plague or some awful thing, that person becomes a sacrificial victim in this time of illness or loss and the killing of this person then is sacrifice for the good of the community, that the sin of the community is projected onto the victim. And then by killing the victim, normalcy is restored. Isn't this crazy? We do it. This is the Salem Witch Trials in the 1600s. And because it is so unbearable, this mechanism has to come back because we continue this violence. It may release the pent up anger, but it is going to come back.

So in the 1930s Hitler blamed the Jews for all the failures of Germany. It was all their fault that they lost the war; it was all their fault that they were in a depression; it was all their fault...and it continued on, because one of his powers was the power of persuasion. He was extremely charismatic. He would start with fear and when he labeled the fear and blamed someone for the fear, then he would move on to describe the glorious redemption that would come by eliminating the threats. But in the 1990s the Bosnians blamed the Serbians and the Hutus blamed the Tootsies and they sacrificed their perceived enemies in genocide and this is how that scapegoat mechanism works; one person or group will take the blame and punishment for the group and the scapegoat tends to be a vulnerable, powerless victim whom the powerful can use for their own purposes. And they reason, therefore, the scapegoat must die for the good of all.

Now, Jesus is the ultimate scapegoat. Now this was not the position of the earliest Christians. This came much later. It was held by mediaeval theologians and they posited that humanity is horribly sinful, condemned by God, destined for judgement in hell. This is nothing new, you've heard this a lot. And that God righteousness had to be satisfied, or God could not be

God and the whole divine enterprise would fall apart, so because God is love, in steps Jesus in our place and God pours the divine wrath onto Jesus instead of us and that's how that happens. But it was really developed by legal scholars who understood the law must be satisfied or the law cannot be the law. Therefore, it must have also a way of relating to God that way. And so they came up with the theory called: the Substitutionary Atonement theory. You may have heard of that, too, that Jesus becomes our substitute because someone had to take the punishment for our sin because God demands this or God can't be God.

There are better ways of looking at this. And what if the meaning of the cross isn't that God was punishing Christ. What if it's not that God wants to punish humanity, that human beings want to punish human beings? When you get this, the cross begins to take on a new meaning. It begins to make sense in a brand new way. And you begin to see what was really taking place on that hill that this church is named after, Calvary. So go back to the Garden of Eden story and you go back to Cain and Able. It's not God expelling us from God's presence. Instead, God is the one whom we expel preferring our desires, walking away from God. And God does not leave us on our own. God stays with us. That's so integral to the Bible, that God doesn't leave us; that God begins to work with obscure people, like Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and Joseph, or all those kings in Israel and the prophets. And that God begins to reveal who God really is, that God is not this awful judge. He's a lover. He's a shepherd looking after his sheep, seeking the lost. He's a spouse who has been two-timed and loves all the more. And God does this to provide a revelation of what God is really like but also to expose to us what we do to one another with our violence against each other. That God most clearly reveals the Divine Self through this obscure Galilean Rabbi, a man considered to be a bastard child, because that's the word, a person of no account who no one really wants to hear or care about because he does the craziest thing: he brings to light the lies and hypocrisy of the religious, the political, the powerful, the everyday sinners and all the rest of us, that Jesus dares to state the truth just as it, and no one likes the truth. You find that in the first chapter of John. He came to his own; his own did not receive him. They didn't want the truth.

Now, at first this really confused the religious people. They didn't know what to do with it and they are wringing their hands over it. But again in the Gospel of John you see this so clearly in the blatant of Caiaphas, this high priest. While everyone is wringing their hands over what to do with Jesus, Caiaphas is the one who says it is better for this man to die then for the whole nation. Now Caiaphas wants to preserve the system that has put him in power, will keep him in power and keep the system going. So, therefore, Jesus has to be the sacrificial victim and then the issue will go away. That's what is going on. It is better for this man to die, he says. So a cross is erected and Jesus becomes just the next sacrificial victim, the scapegoat.

Properly understood, the cross is about seeing God in Jesus as the innocent victim of human violence. Not as the one who had to be satisfied and pours out divine wrath, but the victim of human violence, that Jesus, on the cross, is falsely convicted of sin, he is wrongly executed

and punished not by God, but by the religious and the political and the powerful. In fact the whole human community is there complicit in his execution. But something deeper is going on. It is not God pouring His wrath upon Jesus in our place. It is the human community rejecting God in Jesus, seeking once more to expel God from our world. It is the human powers of sin and greed and injustice and violence trying to push God away. And through the cross, as Paul says later on, these powers are exposed as unjust, unveiling violence for what it is. Are you with me so far? Okay. If you're sleeping it is ok. You can always get it on CD. Get up and buy Easter eggs.

So, Jesus' sacrificial death might have been just one more example of a victim of violence at the hands of the human system, but God does the most surprising thing. This is where you see the love of God, in Christ on the cross, he takes it, but then God raises Jesus from the dead. By raising Jesus from the dead, God is overturning the whole human system, overturning the human sentence of death unjustly given, overturning the whole process of execution and God overturns the earthly powers and their endless cycles of desire and greed and violence and fear and death no longer is in the power of the emperor. Death is transformed and forever changed. Those earliest Christians went to martyr them because they knew that death could not hold them for Jesus had already walked that way and God had raised him with the power amazingly to forgive, to reconcile, to lead people into a new way of being human so this life no longer is stuck in a downward spiral of the powers of desire or conflict or force or violence which we cannot control and lead to death.

Now to be human after the example of Jesus is to learn how to love God, to love neighbor, to love yourself in the way that God created you to do and this new way to a new kind of human being leads to a new kind of human community based on the love, acceptance and reconciliation that God performed on the cross that Jesus now has a power no one else had before: the power to forgive and reconcile. And he gives this power to his disciples.

Now, in a legal system, who has the power to forgive? A victim is wronged. The state can have a case, they can have a sentence, they can mete out punishment, they can parole, pardon, commute, they can do all those things, but the state cannot forgive. Who has the power to forgive? The victim has the power to forgive and only the victim. So when Jesus is raised he comes with love, forgiving enemies, even those who betrayed him, even those who deserted him and he comes with peace and reconciliation because God is not angry at humanity. God was never angry at humanity. We got angry at God. And in the cross you can see the love of God in the way that should just absolutely stagger you because God was in Christ on the cross, that God was seeking us, dying for us, even when we wanted to push him away. So on the cross you see the awesome love of God.

Now, for this reason the church has the most important mission that there is. And that is to proclaim Jesus Christ, crucified, risen and alive in us for the healing and reconciling of the world. That coming to church is not about butts in the pew and money in the plate, having a nice roof, having fellowship, having Sunday School, all those other things. Those are good

things. We like more people in the pews. We like more money in the plate, we'll be honest, but that's not why we are here. We are here because we have been raised up with Christ in our baptism and Christ is alive in us and we bring this message of how to live a human life in a brand new way, no longer controlled by our desires that lead to violence and conflict, but instead reaching out in love, forgiveness, reconciliation, treating people better than they deserve because this how God in Christ has treated us and this is why the cross is the central symbol of our faith and our practice and why it is so important for you and me to know the meaning of the cross and once you get what it means, you'll never be the same. Amen.