

HOW THE CROSS CHANGES THE WORLD
a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, March 5, 2017
based on Ezekiel 36:26-27; I John 4:7-11; I Corinthians 5:17-21;
Matthew 13:33; John 1:10-14

The sermon this morning is a continuation of a sermon series entitled, “The Points of the Cross—How the Cross of Christ Can Save You.” Let us begin with a moment of prayer . . .

Why did so many people not accept Jesus as the Messiah? Should it not have been obvious that he was the Savior? He performed extraordinary miracles. He fulfilled the Scriptures. He spoke with authority. Yet, as the gospel of John reported, “he came to his own, and his own people did not accept him.” (John 1:11) Why not?

The primary reason is quite simple—the world did not look much different after he had come. Most people who were looking for a Messiah expected that after the Messiah came, the troubles of the world would be gone. But Jesus did not get rid of the world’s problems, which is obvious when you look at any day’s news. This is why many people today do not see Jesus as particularly relevant.

When people think in this way, they are defining the troubles of the world as all those problems that we see out there. But as we have noted previously in this sermon series, Jesus offers a deeper view. Jesus knew that the core problem is within us—the core human problem is sin, that is, the spiritual brokenness and alienation from God afflicting every human being, which then results in the endless outward troubles in the world. You can tweak outward circumstances all you want, but nothing will ever be resolved until that root human problem is addressed.

It is that core problem of sin that is directly addressed by the cross. We have noted over the previous weeks of the series how Jesus does this. Jesus enters into our world as God come to us—he is, as John said, “the Word of God become flesh.” (John 1:14) And having entered our human condition, Jesus on the cross takes all our brokenness upon himself. As the passage we heard from II Corinthians put it, “For our sake God made him to be sin who knew no sin.” (II Cor. 5:21) Christ, though himself without sin, takes our sin upon himself, in order to cleanse us from sin and reconcile us to God.

We noted in past weeks that this can be visualized by thinking of the various points of the cross—with each arm or beam of the cross symbolizing a particular aspect of what Jesus does on the cross. The downward beam can represent how Jesus connects with our lowly, sinful condition. An outstretched arm of the cross can represent how Jesus then takes upon himself the punishment that is due for all sin. And the upward beam of the cross can represent how Jesus, having taken from us the penalty for sin, now offers his life up as a perfect offering to God on our behalf. So Jesus on the cross bridges the gap

between our sin and the righteousness of God. Through the cross, we can be lifted out of brokenness and alienation and restored into life-giving fellowship with God.

This is why Paul could say, “If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation.” (II Cor. 5:17) As Christ cleanses from sin, and fills us with the Spirit of God, he fulfills the promise of Ezekiel that God would give us “a new heart and a new spirit.” (Ezekiel 36:26) [*A new heart I will give you, says the Lord, and a new spirit I will put within you.*] Christ has come to change us on the inside, and that finally can change all of life.

Here then is how Christ changes the world—not by addressing the outward symptoms of our trouble, all the wrongs that arise out of human sin, but by addressing sin itself. Christ makes us new—giving us that new heart and new spirit—so that we then can become the instruments of real positive change in the world at large. Thus in II Corinthians, after describing how Christ puts us right with God, Paul goes on to talk about how we now are enabled to go forth to set the world aright. As he said, “All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation, that is, in Christ God was reconciling humanity to himself, not counting our trespasses against us, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us.” (II Cor. 5:18-20)

Christ does change the world, just not in the superficial fashion that many people expected. The way Christ works is well illustrated in the parable of the yeast or leaven that we heard from the gospel of Matthew. In the parable, Jesus says that the Kingdom of God is like yeast that a woman mixes in with dough. Yeast, of course, works from the inside; it transforms what is happening in the dough. It spreads through the dough, gradually affecting it all. It is invisible once it is mixed in, yet it has a tremendous effect, as it finally causes the whole loaf to rise. This is how Christ works in us—transforming us from within, and ultimately having tremendous effect—and this is how we as ambassadors for Christ are to work in the world. We are mixed into the world. We work gradually, and often are invisible, not making the headlines. Yet by the power of Christ we can ultimately have a tremendous effect.

Of course, you can look at a loaf of bread and give no thought to the working to the yeast that made it what it is. In the same way, people often look at our society and give no thought to the people of faith who created so much of the good that we see. Many of the most important institutions of our society—our hospitals and universities and community centers—were founded and shaped by people who were inspired by their faith. The helping agencies in every community—from homeless shelters to the County Clothing Center that had its origin here in this church—those helping agencies were almost all created by people inspired by faith. The bedrock principles of our society—the idea that all people have certain inalienable God-given rights, or that there should be a safety net for the poor and needy—again arose out of the values of faith. When people claim, as they

sometimes do today, that religion does no good, they are looking at the loaf and failing to see the leaven.

But in fact Christ works powerfully; and the way that Christ works—from within—is the one truly effective way to transform the world. We have plenty of historical examples of rulers and revolutionaries who sought with power and force to change the outward circumstances of the world, and they all created a bigger mess in the end. It is Christ, who draws us out of sin into the love of God, who genuinely brings about a better world.

And the decisive place where Christ does this is the cross, for the cross is what brings us out of sin into fellowship with God, and the cross provides the shape for how we now live in the world. The passage we heard from I John describes this as follows: God's love was revealed among us in this way—that God sent his Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that God loved us and sent His Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another." (I John 4:9-11

John says that the cross is an enormous declaration of the love of God. When you look at the cross, and you see how Jesus suffered for you and gave his life on your behalf, you cannot help but be touched by how much God loves you. So when we take the cross to heart, we are inspired to go forth in the same kind of love for others. The cross gives to our life the shape of self-giving love.

Some other passages we heard this morning said that when we are brought into fellowship with God, we are moved to live in righteousness. Ezekiel said that God would "enable us to follow God's statutes and ordinances," (Ezekiel 36:27) and Paul in II Corinthians said that Christ had acted "so that we might become the righteousness of God." (II Cor. 5:21) But what does it mean to be "righteous"? Some people today claim to be righteous while clobbering other people they deem to be unrighteous. But John says that "whoever does not love does not know God." (I John 4:8) Clearly, to be "righteous" means to live in harmony with God's love; and this is precisely what the cross moves us to do. The self-giving love of Christ, poured out upon us so clearly from the cross, inspires us finally to impact the world in the one way that actually will make the world better: through the love of God.

This can be visualized by thinking of the other outstretched arm of the cross. It can remind us of how Christ from the cross is reaching to us in love, and how we now can join with Christ in reaching to the whole world in love.

So on the cross, Jesus joins with us, suffers for us, reconciles us to God, and then sends us forth as instruments of God's grace to the world. The cross changes the world because it changes us, and inspires and empowers us to be genuine change agents in our time.

All this is expressed in a powerful way in Communion. In the sacrament of Communion, we remember how Jesus gave his life for us on the cross. Then we receive

the bread and the cup, which is an acknowledgment that the number one place where Christ needs to work is inside us. Then finally, having received the grace and love of Christ, we are ready to go forth in his grace and love to the world—as “ambassadors for Christ, God making His appeal (of love) through us.”