

## THE CROSS BRINGS VICTORY

*a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, March 19, 2017*

*based on Colossians 2:15, I Corinthians 15:56–57, Colossians 1:11–14, 19–20*

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.” In the past installments of this sermon series, we have noted several key aspects of the meaning of the cross, and we have noted how each of these can be visualized by thinking of the various points or arms of the cross—with each beam of the cross representing a particular aspect of what Jesus does for us on the cross. We have noted that the cross means connection—how Jesus on the cross fully connects with our brokenness and our suffering—that connection being well illustrated in the downward beam of the cross. The cross also means sacrifice—Jesus offers himself as the atoning sacrifice for sin, taking upon himself the punishment that is due for all sin—and this is illustrated in an outstretched arm of the cross. The cross also is a perfect offering—Jesus offers his life up to God as a perfect offering on our behalf, offsetting the lack in all humanity, and so lifts us out of brokenness into fellowship with God—this being well represented in the upward arm of the cross. And the cross is revelation—a powerful revelation of the love of God for us, which inspires us to respond in faith and to join in God’s outreach of love for the world—that movement well illustrated in the other outstretched arm of the cross.

This morning we are looking at another key aspect of the cross, which in a way is at the center of everything—that the cross is victory. Let us begin with a moment of prayer. . .

The idea that the cross is victory is a theme in many of our Christian songs about the cross. But the cross does not look like victory; it looks like sheer defeat. In fact, that was something of the main idea of Roman crucifixion—crucifixion proclaimed the victory of Rome and the miserable defeat of the one being crucified. Crucifixion was the ultimate humiliation—the condemned being nailed onto a stake and left to hang there and slowly

die. To add to the humiliation, Romans generally crucified their victims naked, so that they would be exposed to the world. In Jerusalem, the Romans accommodated Jewish sensibilities on multiple matters; and since the Jews abhorred public nakedness, it is likely that Jesus was crucified with a loin cloth as is depicted in paintings from every age. But the humiliation was still there. In the eyes of everyone around the cross, Jesus was beaten.

This is a point where the cross connects profoundly with our human condition, because there are many points in life where it appears that we are not winning. We may encounter health troubles or relationship troubles or difficulties in our work or school or in our financial circumstances where trouble appears insurmountable and there is no sign of victory; and the same is true when we look into the world at large—it often appears that the good is not winning. Twenty centuries ago, the Roman Empire was a brutal regime that terrorized and oppressed people; and now the world is still full of brutal regimes that terrorize and oppress people—from the savagery of ISIS to the madness of North Korea to the repressive regimes of Russia or Turkey or Venezuela or Iran, and the list goes on. It seems that evil just rages, and the good suffer. That is exactly the picture we get when we look at the crucifixion of Jesus.

Yet the New Testament declares that the picture is bigger than what first appears. The cross finally is victory. As the apostle Paul said in I Corinthians, when he was talking about the apparent power of sin and evil and death, “The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the Law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!” (I Cor. 15:56-57)

But how can what looks like defeat be victory? People often struggle at this point because of how we typically imagine that victory will look. In the ancient world, the average person would have imagined that victory looks like a phalanx of armed warriors, banners high, marching over the foe. This weekend we might be more inclined to use sports metaphors. Victory should look like Kent State defeating UCLA (too bad that did not happen). Victory, people think, should be the glorious elimination of whatever big obstacle or trouble is presenting itself, and it should be the triumph of the good people

(however we define them) over the bad. So when we look at the world today, and we see all sorts of trouble and all sorts of evildoers, we imagine that if we could just charge forth and get rid of the evildoers, and if we could somehow solve the problems at hand, we would have victory. But it never works. Even if we have temporary success, one group of evildoers is always succeeded by another; and one problem always seems to follow another. Trouble persists.

The Bible has a deeper picture of what real victory must be. The Biblical perception is that the real battle for humanity is not just against today's wrongdoers or the particular problems that confront us right now. The real battle is a spiritual one. The fundamental problem that we all confront, as we have discussed previously in this sermon series, is the spiritual brokenness in humanity. We have talked during this series about that brokenness in the heart of each person, which the Bible calls sin; but then the problem becomes even bigger, as the sin that is in every person rolls together into powers of evil. A classic example today is ISIS, whereby the anger, resentment, and hatred in individuals becomes channeled into a movement that exalts anger and hatred and promotes a false ideology that captures the hearts of still more individuals, to cause ever greater trouble. This sort of phenomenon happens in many areas of human life, where the spiritual weakness in individual human hearts feeds into forces of trouble and evil that persist on a grand scale in the world at large. In the end, what we confront are powers of evil, which take many forms—temptation, falsehood, hatred, envy, greed, prejudice, fears of all kinds,—there are destructive spiritual forces at work in the world which come at us from all sides and which assail us continually. The apostle Paul put it this way: "Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against . . . the powers of this dark world, against the spiritual forces of evil on a cosmic scale." (Ephesians 6:12)

This is why even our best efforts never get rid of evil. Human beings are always trying to fight back against the various symptoms of evil—the bad guys or the troubles of the day—but the spiritual forces of evil persist.

It is these powers of evil that Christ confronts on the cross. If you think about the various actors in the crucifixion story, you see on the one hand the Sanhedrin, the Jewish leadership, which saw Jesus as a threat, and which acted out of envy and the fear of losing control. You see the Roman leadership, which despised the Jews, and which acted in callousness and brutality in order to maintain power. You see the mobs, captivated by falsehood and incited to hatred, who called for crucifixion. Embodied in all these actors you see the powers of evil moving with destructive force against Jesus. On the cross, Jesus confronts every negative spiritual force that arises out of human sin; he is the object of hatred, envy, prejudice, falsehood, fear . . .—but rather than lashing out against the wrongdoers, which is our typical human response, Jesus absorbs it all into himself. He takes all the wrong and the pain, all the sinfulness of the world, onto himself; and he returns for it all—mercy, truth, and love.

So Paul could say, “Christ disarmed the principalities and powers and made a public example of them, triumphing over them on the cross.” (Colossians 2:15) There is a climactic spiritual battle that occurs on the cross; but what happens there is the precise opposite of what we typically imagine should happen in such a battle. We imagine that the good guy should smash the bad guys (although what then happens is that resentments and hatreds are aroused in those who are defeated which then feed into further evil which leads to more battles). But what happens on the cross is that Christ does not fight against the Sanhedrin or the Romans or the angry mobs who were attacking him; rather Christ confronts the spiritual powers of evil that were motivating them, and, as Paul says, Christ “disarms” those powers. As Christ absorbs hatred and returns love, as he absorbs false human judgment and returns mercy, as he absorbs our human brokenness and returns healing, he empties all those evil spiritual forces of their power. Finally, Christ takes on death and then rises from the grave, and so empties death of its power. Evil now may still rage in the world, but its power over us is vanquished by Christ on the cross.

The original Greek language of Colossians 2:15 is actually a play on what the Romans had tried to do to Jesus on the cross. We noted that the Romans had stripped

Jesus, down to a loincloth at least, and the crucifixion was meant to be a public example or display of the condemned criminal which would convince everyone else of the justice of Rome. But on the cross, Jesus “disarmed the principalities and powers.” The word “disarmed”—from *apekduo* in the original Greek—means to completely strip off, and when applied to a soldier would mean to strip off every weapon and piece of armor. So Jesus finally is the one who strips evil of all its power. And the public example or display of the cross now becomes the declaration—which the cross makes to the whole world—that the powers of evil are defeated and that the justice of God reigns.

So, as Paul says, the cross is triumph. It is the victory that we need—the triumph over the spiritual forces of evil which arise out of human sin, which continually plague humanity, and which lead finally to death. Christ wins the victory in the way that we have been following in this sermon series, by engaging in a profound spiritual struggle. Christ identifies himself with us, joining in our human condition. Christ then takes all the consequences of our human sin upon himself, and offers himself on our behalf to God, bridging the gap between ourselves and God. In all this Christ reveals to us the wondrous love of God; and it is this merciful, self-sacrificial love which finally wins the victory. Victory in the end comes not through violence or through a momentary exaltation of today’s winners over today’s losers. Victory comes through the grace of Christ, as he disarms the powers of evil, and thus as Paul said, “Christ rescues us from the power of darkness.”

So when we find ourselves in times in life when it seems that the good is not winning, we need to look to the cross. In the cross it initially appears that good is not winning. But the good does win; and the way that good wins can give shape to our lives today; for we see that the way that good wins is through the forgiveness and transforming love of Christ. So we are inspired to follow in that way. We can trust that Christ will give us the strength to stand against the negative spiritual forces that assail us, and that Christ by his grace will deliver us from the power of evil; and we can say then with the apostle Paul, “Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”