

Rev. Dr. Anne Epling

Faith Des Peres Presbyterian Church

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Palm Sunday

Matthew 27:11-54

*Merciful God, as we enter Holy Week and turn our hearts again to Jerusalem, and to the life and death of Jesus Christ, stir up within us the gift of faith that we may not only praise him with our lips, but will follow him in the way of the cross.  
Amen.*

### Giving Up Popularity

For most of Christian history people have speculated about the cross. From the very beginning, theologians have grappled with the crucifixion and what Jesus' death on the cross does for us. These atonement theories, as theologians call them, abound.

Some people believe Jesus died because the things he was passionate about put him in direct conflict with the Roman Empire, and this conflict eventually led to his death, because Jesus wasn't going to compromise his beliefs.

Some people believe that Jesus' death on the cross shows us how much God loves us, how much God suffers for us, and how much God cares for us. In this theory, the cross is a symbol of the very suffering that God has endured for us.

And last, but certainly not least, many people believe that Jesus died to save us from our sins. The belief here is that we are sinners of the worst kind, and the only way we can be forgiven our sins is for Jesus to die and pay the price for our sinfulness. So many of our hymns use the language of this atonement theory, and the title of last week's cantata, "In My Place", is a good example of this theory.

What all of these atonement theories hold in common is that they try to explain what the cross shows us or does *for us*. The cross shows us that Jesus stands with the poor and oppressed; the cross shows us that God loves us; that Jesus' death on the cross saves us; and ultimately-no matter what theory you subscribe to-that Christ suffers for us.

What none of them do is expose what the cross says **about us**. *Not what it does for us, but what it says about us*. I suspect we spend most of our time and energy trying to solve the theological equation about what the cross does for us because we don't want to acknowledge what it says about us, because the message isn't good. The cross exposes the worst in us; it says we can behave horribly, and that we're willing \* and able \* to pursue our own self-interests at any cost. Because friends, this isn't just a story about a crowd of people 2000 years ago who called for the crucifixion of an innocent man, this is a story about us (too) and the truth it exposes about the world.

One of the reasons I wanted you to participate in the reading of the Passion story, rather than just hear me read it, is because I wanted you to experience firsthand how much the crowds had to say, and how little Jesus had to say. I wanted you to see that there were no sympathetic people in the crowd. Not a one. Unless, ironically, you count Pilate's wife or the Roman centurion, as sympathetic. But even they didn't try to stop it. Even the bandits who are crucified with Jesus taunt him. If you want sympathetic bandits and the "remember me when you come into your kingdom" tagline, you'll need to read Luke's gospel. If you want the Jesus who is large and in charge and in command even to the end, you'll need to turn to John's gospel. Because in Matthew, and for the most part Mark, Jesus died not only a painful death, but a lonely death, a dishonorable death, and a humiliating death. He was, to the bitter end, a victim of the worst society can dish out on its most powerless members.

I suspect we don't like to talk about what the cross says about us, because it shows us what we're capable of doing. Our shouts of "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" quickly turn to "Let him be crucified." Words of consolation give way to anguish and uncertainty; and the Gospel moves from proclamation to silence. Jesus' voice fades into the background, overshadowed by a crazed crowd, unsubstantiated accusations, and religious and elected leaders who convince the people to demand his execution.

I suspect we don't like to talk about what the cross says about us, and the reason we prefer Palm Sunday over Passion Sunday, is because we can go for parades and celebrations, but death and desolation not so much. To paraphrase Peter Gomes, the late chaplain of Harvard University, we subscribe to the "let's have a

parade theory of Palm Sunday, that discreet form of Protestantism that doesn't much care for the embarrassment and indignity of the cross." (*Sermons: Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living*, pp. 68–69).

In her book, *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith*, Anne Lamott expresses a similar thought: "I don't have the right personality for Good Friday, for the crucifixion. I'd like to skip ahead to the resurrection. In fact, I'd like to skip ahead to the resurrection vision of one of the kids in our Sunday School, who drew a picture of the Easter Bunny outside the tomb; everlasting life and a basketful of chocolates. Now you're talking" (p.140).

Sounds good, doesn't it? So we skip the part about what the cross says about us and go straight for what it does for us: all that stuff about the love and grace of God, the mercy and forgiveness, the acceptance and pardon. But, as Fred Craddock writes,

Sooner or later somebody is going to say to you, "Then what happened to Jesus?" And when you tell them the truth, that he came to the city as a 33-year-old young idealist and stirred the city and the city turned on him and just like that put him on trial and executed him, some people are going to back away. Can't we just leave that part out? Focus on the positive? People aren't interested in a man who dies like that. It's a terrible growth strategy for the church, all that morbid suffering and bleeding and dying.

Craddock then describes a big California mega-church that told the architect for their new building, "We do not want any crosses, either outside or inside. None. We don't want anybody to think weakness or failure!"

But you can't celebrate a resurrection without a crucifixion. Try as we might to save the suffering for the fateful few or choir who will come on Maundy Thursday, it's time to get honest about what the cross says about us.

So let's be honest and admit that the cross exposes some real world dynamics. Innocent people are still wrongly convicted. Elected officials still push through their agendas at the expense of the most vulnerable in society. We still stand by and let these things happen. Religious leaders still abuse their authority and positions; people still march for causes they believe in, but the minute the institution or cause does something they don't like, they pick up their marbles and

go home. Because after all, it is “all about me” and what I want. Or at least, that’s what the world wants us to believe, and we do a pretty good job of buying into that message.

Trials, such as the one Jesus faced, still have a way of exposing what messages society values. Trials can test society, and those tests can reveal an often lot about ourselves, our world, and our shared existence. Think about some of history’s most famous trials: the Salem witch trials, or the Nuremburg trials-and what they say both positive and negative about what society values. But also think about recent trials: OJ Simpson, Timothy McVeigh, George Zimmerman. Or even Supreme Court decisions such as the health care law, marriage equality, Roe vs. Wade, Brown vs. Board of Education. In all of these instances events are reenacted, narratives are reconstructed, ideas are presented, and debates ensue about the validity of ideas, and the trials conclude with some sort of binding decision or verdict. And the ramifications of those decisions radiate beyond the boundaries of the courtroom and back into society. Verdicts have a way of declaring what version of the truth will prevail.

Jesus’ verdict declared what truth the people wanted to prevail. And the truth was, the people couldn’t tolerate the presence of a Savior who was so counter-cultural to their definition of savior. So they called for his execution, because they couldn’t tolerate the kind of life he lived and called others to live. They were so preoccupied with power and themselves and their needs and desires and wants and wishes, that they missed the possibility of a world in which love and compassion could become a reality.

To this day, people are still declaring what version of the truth will prevail and Jesus’ trial is still being reenacted. Whenever we engage in an ethical debate that involves ourselves and our neighbors, God is there. And we can choose whether we’ll stand with the one who came in the name of the Lord and learn from past mistakes, or let history repeat itself and let some lesser God prevail.

Many days it seems like history repeats itself, and we’re destined to cry crucify because we just can’t tolerate a Savior like Jesus. Betrayal, cruelty, suffering . . .at the hands of society’s most powerless members . . .people standing on the sidelines watching it all happen . . . some days it seems like God is facing a never-ending battle/Jesus is being crucified all over

But here's the Good News. (A preaching professor once reminded me, "Don't even forget your job is to proclaim the Good News.") So here it is . . .the cross also says something about God. And what it says is that the love and grace, mercy and forgiveness of God will prevail . . .some day. After Jesus had done everything in his power, and his enemies everything in their power, one power alone remains to act. God declares the final judgment, reversing the status quo, raising Jesus from death, and vindicating the crucified one and his way of loving God and neighbor.

Amen.