

Sermon Text: John 3:14-21

Now, my favorite TV show, some of you know it, and some of you don't, is a detective series called “Monk.” Just a show of hands, do some of you watch “Monk?” All right, a few people understand what it's about. He's an obsessive/compulsive detective, and if you've seen my car and you've seen my desk, you'll think that I have no obsessive/compulsive tendencies, but I do. It just has nothing to do with neatness. I was reminded of him awhile back when I was speaking at a retreat, and I knelt before a makeshift altar and a little handmade wooden cross. Now, I was there to pray before I spoke, just to pray before I spoke, but I looked up, and I could not pray until I straightened the cross beam just a little on that handmade cross. It was just a little off. It bothered me.

Now, many things about the Cross bother us. God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten son. Why? Why? Why the Cross? They used to show a film, years ago, at youth events in this Conference about a little boy. He was laughing and smiling and bringing a package to his father. His father worked as a switchman on the railroad at a river bridge crossing. The boy came running over the bridge, and he was about midway toward his father, all smiles, and you see a train coming the other way. Anybody seen that film? The father had a choice; to let all those people on that passenger train, which you saw going by, their faces in the windows, go into the river or to let the train continue straight and go over his son, and he let the train go over his son. Now, it was an analogy of God the Father and God the Son and the meaning of the Cross. They stopped using that film because all the kids did the rest of the day was cry, and they usually had to cancel whatever events they had. It was a little too powerful.

Yes, somehow God's love for us is in the sacrifice of the Cross. The creed simply states that Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified dead and buried. Why the Cross? The short Biblical answer comes from Colossians, “God was in Christ making peace by the blood of His Cross.” The Cross has been controversial though for millennia. Consider all the uproar a couple of years ago about the movie, “The Passion.” Many pop culture reviewers called “The Passion” a “celebration of violence and death.” They missed the point. They say the plot is too focused on the cross, that it offended them. Well, one reason it offends and one reason the movie was violent is that real history is violent, and we are making more real violent history every day. The Cross reveals who we are and what we have done with God's dream of Eden. We are wife-blaming, husband-blaming, God-blaming, and brother-killing-brother people. That is what the Genesis record recorded shortly after the beginning, and that is what the Cross underlines in red. It is the symbol of our faith.

Frederick Beatner wrote, “While a six-pointed star or a crescent moon or a lotus as symbols of other religions suggest beauty and light, the symbol of Christianity is an instrument of shameful death.” Why a symbol of death for a faith that cherishes life and the hope of life eternal? Why? The Cross is not a mere decorative symbol. It is an

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historic reality. Jesus lived and died, and the way He died was a Cross. It is an improbable symbol for an improbable faith.

An educated man, a physician once challenged me. He said, “If you explain the Cross, then I will believe.” Who is this God who acts in such strange ways? That’s what Moses wanted to know when God sent him to free Israel. Moses said, “Whom shall I say sent me?” God answered, “Say to the people of Israel, Aham sent me to you.” Now, the Hebrew name for God, Yahweh, means Aham. It means existence itself, life itself, the force which animates all there is, the one uncreated being in the universe. Aham means existence uncreated says God. So why did God, the great Aham, create us? God did not need us. God wanted us, and we were created to be in love with God and in love with each other, but we used our free will to reject God and to reject each other. Life and love were God’s plan for all of us.

G. K. Chesterton has written a perfect British understatement, the following. He says, “According to most philosophers, God, in making the world, enslaved it. According to Christianity, in making it, He set it free. God has written not so much a poem, but rather a play, a play He had planned as perfect, but which necessarily had been left to human actors and stage managers, who have since made a great mess of it.”

Still, God sent prophets proclaiming that we were meant to love God and to love each other, but mostly we killed the prophets and did as we pleased. Sin and selfishness leads to alone. Alone in the dark without the purpose of love, we try substitutes of all sorts. We try self-medication. We try power and violence and acquisitiveness and lust and hate and hobbies, and still we feel alone without God in our lives. God in Jesus Christ entered the emptiness of our sin, and He took it upon Himself. Jesus on the Cross felt the rejection with which we reject God and each other, the fear, the powerlessness, the humiliation, the alone. That is why He cried out, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me!” On the Cross, He knew what each of us knows a part of, that we tire of blaming, and we feel our guilt, and we fear our death, and we sometimes cry out, “God, why have you forsaken me?” Alone.

I have felt parts of that, and many of you have felt it, and Jesus on the Cross felt all of it, all of it! The ultimate alone is death. Sin leads from one empty thing to another empty thing until we feel the full emptiness of all things – death. The Bible says that sin does lead to death. It’s the ultimate emptiness, and when you’ve lost a loved one, you know that. You know that feeling of finality, that disorienting gulf between what was and what will never be again, of grief. God sent those prophets to warn us of the emptiness of life apart from God, and we didn’t listen. They spoke to remind us that we were made for God in each other, and we killed them, and finally God came in His son, Jesus Christ, and we killed him, too. The Cross.

At first in Jerusalem, He was hailed and greeted and lauded and loved, and then the minute it became obvious that He was not going to take out the Romans and establish an earthly Kingdom; the same crowd turned on Him and said crucify Him!

Willimon once wrote, “It is a stunning moment of terrible realization that the voices that screamed for the Crucifixion and death of Jesus, they are our voices.” They are ours.

Who embodied sin in the Bible? Was it Judas? Was it David before he repented? No. Listen to 2 Corinthians, speaking of Jesus, “For our sake, He made Him to be sin, who knew no sin so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.” Jesus who was life itself became sin itself for us. We attribute to Jesus Isaiah 53:5, and it says, “But He was wounded for our transgressions. He was bruised for our iniquities. Upon Him was the chastisement that made us whole, and with His stripes, we are healed.”

There are two profound clues to the Cross in ancient Israel. John the Baptist spoke inspired words when he saw Jesus, and he said, “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.” Now, John the Baptist was equating Jesus with the Passover lamb, and you remember Passover. That was when the Lord delivered Israel from slavery in Egypt, and there were warnings and there were plagues, but the Pharaoh would not listen, and finally the plague of death came. The Hebrews, who were faithful, smeared the blood of the lamb on their doorposts, and it was a sign to God that His death angel was to pass over their house. It was the blood of the lamb that was applied that saved them from death. It showed that they believed in God and His power to save. Now, fast forward to the New Testament. It was a Passover meal when Jesus told His disciples this is my body, broken for you. This is my blood, poured out for you, for the forgiveness of sins.

Another High Holy Day, the Day of Atonement in Israel. They took a goat once a year, and they put a cloth on its horns, and then the priest symbolically placed in that cloth the sins of the people of Israel, and then they led that goat out into the wilderness, and they set it free, ostensibly carrying with it all the sins and all the evil of Israel. That is where we get the word scapegoat. That’s where it comes from. Really. It didn’t work because they had to keep doing it year after year after year. The sins came back just like the woman who had a demon cast out, and then seven more moved in. We could not stay clean. We cannot stay clean unless God cleans us. What would it take to cleanse us once and for all? How about, instead of a lamb or a goat, God’s son? Instead of banishing into the wilderness, a Cross. That is the magnitude of our sin and separation from God, and that is the magnitude in depth of God’s love for us.

In Philippians second chapter, it says, “Christ Jesus, who though He was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men and being found in human form, He humbled Himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.” Now, all these thoughts together give new weight to the Psalm 139, “Whither shall I go from thy spirit, whither shall I flee from thy presence, if I ascend to Heaven, thou art there, if I descend to shio, thou art there.” God will go anywhere to offer us relationship, and that’s where we came in. God in the beginning intended an intimate, compassionate relationship with us and each other, and we continually choose self and sin instead. God

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entered our sin and our emptiness to save us and to show us what great love God has for each of us. Here's another clue about relationship and the Cross from 1 John, fourth chapter, “In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His son to be the expiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love each other.” Do we accept it and do we grow in it and reflect it, or do we reject it and die alone in the dark? How many times have you heard the story of someone trying to save a drowning person, but the drowning person keeps fighting him off? We do that with God all the time. We need saving. We need the power only God can give to fight the spiritual forces of isolation and wickedness and evil in the world, to live our lives with God and with compassion for others. It doesn't matter who you are, and Scripture says so. Whether you are slave or free or male or female, neither Jew nor Gentile means nothing. What counts, Galatians 6, what counts is a new creation.

The clearest way for me to understand what all these clues add up to is God's love and God's justice. God's judgment of sin and the despair that it causes us are there on the Cross, and God's love of us in spite of the pain we cause Him and each other is there on the Cross. Yes, God so loved the world that He gave His only son that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life. God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through Him.

You know, in the beginning of the Gospel of John, it says, “In the beginning was the word, and the word became flesh and dwelt among us.” Then when Jesus was on the Cross, His last words were, “It is finished.” In Greek, “tetelestai.” It is finished, some people have pointed out, means that the debt is paid, but more than that, more than that. In the beginning of creation, and then in the beginning of Jesus' ministry, there was Jesus Christ, and on the Cross, “It is finished,” means that now new life is possible. A new creation is possible because of what Jesus accomplished on the Cross. That is what “It is finished” means. Not just His life, yes, but more. Not just our debt is paid, but more. A new creation now is possible because His work was finished. Because of Christ, new life is possible. Let us seek the power of God's Holy Spirit to become a new creation, to become able to love as God loves, to live out the new possibilities that are ours because Christ finished what He came to do on the Cross. Amen.