

One of my friends in ministry is also one of the best preachers I've ever known. He once delivered the following sermon which I now quote in its entirety: "Jesus lived as if the Kingdom of God was all that mattered, and nothing else had any power over him."

OK, you didn't really think I'd leave it at that, did you? But you know, I almost could have, because in and of itself, that single sentence is a powerful sermon which I believe implicitly says it all about who Jesus was and even about why he was killed. Hidden in the depth of that sentence are the seeds for understanding the meaning of the cross, my topic for this morning.

I've been noodling on this topic anew this Lent. Being Lent, we've had a lot of language about the cross. I've been considering this topic in part because I sometimes struggle with the way this symbol has, at times been misused over the centuries, becoming nothing more than a litmus test for who's in and who's out. So I want to talk about the cross, about how the death of Jesus works our salvation (to put it in traditional terms). And I want to say first that there are lots of ways to understand the cross. The one I will advocate this morning is only one. As always, I invite you to cook it on your own stove, then eat what for you is the meat, even as you spit out what you find to be bones.

So here we go. First, it might be clearer to start with what I don't believe about the cross. Like my copastor who also dealt with some of these questions last week, I don't believe that the crucifixion of Christ was any kind of transaction by which God was somehow paid off for human debt. Indeed, that understanding of the cross, known as substitutionary atonement, codified by Anselm in the 12th century, is often talked about as if it were the only way to understand the whole thing. Anselm's belief went something like this: In the beginning, human beings lived in the Garden of Eden, in perfect harmony with God. But Adam and Eve disobeyed, separating themselves from God. Because of their sin, God had

no choice but to demand repayment and the penalty for sin is death. God loves us but God cannot tolerate sin. So to resolve this problem, God sent his only son Jesus into the world to pay our ransom, to bear the punishment that we all deserve.”

Now, this is one way to understand it. Indeed, I suspect many of us grew up thinking this was the only way to understand the cross. But for some of us, this understanding didn't make sense. For me, the question remained, “If God was prepared to let us off, then why didn't God simply do so without exacting what sounds like a pound of flesh? What sense does it make for an innocent to be killed? And isn't the whole point really that God CAN tolerate sin? That God loves us exactly as we are, and that God's unconditional love in the midst of our brokenness is what frees us to change, not so God will love us more, but so we will find greater joy and wholeness? So for some of us, Anselm's understanding doesn't work very well. It made sense in that time, when kidnappings for ransom were common cultural occurrences. But it isn't necessarily a meaningful metaphor for us. But there emerged another understanding at that time, which came to be known as “The Moral Influence Theory” put forth by theologian Peter Abelard who took issue with Anselm's view.

Abelard believed that more important than the nature of his death, was Jesus' life and teaching. Jesus taught a radical, counter cultural ethic of inclusion, love and empowerment for the powerless. Because this was such a threat to the powers that be, Jesus was martyred by the Roman Empire. He knew it was coming, and still held firm to his message of love, in unbroken integrity. So Jesus' death, for Abelard, was the political result of his radical allegiance to the vision of the Kingdom of God. What was far more important than the nature of his death was his life and his resurrection whereby love is shown finally to be stronger than death, and the most ultimate force in the world. We, as his followers are morally transformed by his life, his teachings, his radical faithfulness despite the cost.

To me, that understanding makes more sense. It understands Jesus to have been killed not because God had to be appeased, but as a very predictable result of the fact that Jesus was a rabble rouser who threatened the power structure of the day. He threatened it because he was so committed to his first and most passionate concern: The Kingdom of God, the community of love.

Back to where we started. Jesus lived as if the Kingdom of God was all that mattered, and nothing else had any power over him. What was it about this Kingdom that so consumed him, that so inspired him, that it was the topic he talked about more than any other, and that not even impending death could deter him from his allegiance to it?

Well, its that vision of a restored world represented both by the pre-fall Garden of Eden in Genesis and the New Jerusalem in Revelations at the end of time. It's the vision of this world, but without anything that makes it broken or hurtful. Without Auschwitz or Isis or the Crusades, without addiction or bullying or climate change. Isaiah talks about it as the place where the lion and the lamb lie down together. John talks about it as the time when there will be no more sorrow or sighing, and every tear will be wiped dry. We tend to think of it as before or after history as we know it, but here's the thing: Jesus said "The Kingdom is WITHIN you!" I think he came to preach and teach and embody the fact that we could begin to live out, to flesh out, the Kingdom of God here and now! That's what He was all about- proclaiming the Kingdom and saying "it starts right here and now with transformed, love-based people."

So ultimately, I understand him as having come not to proclaim himself, and not to claim special powers in the method of his death, but to inaugurate the Kingdom by living from constant, intimate connection with the Spirit, and to show what a life is like when lived from love, not fear. And I believe that in the verse where he said "I am the way, the truth and the life" a better translation would be "mine" or "this" is the way, the truth and the life. This way of love and inclusion, of compassion and

wholeness. The way of the single grain of wheat falling to the ground so that it might grow into a large plant to feed everybody. This way of not protecting your own life at all costs out of fear, but of giving it away in love. This is the only sense in which I can say “Jesus is the only way.” The way of radical love that Jesus embodied is the only way. All other ground is sinking sand.

The poet Sheldon Van Auken put it this way:

Did Jesus live? And did he really say The burning words that banish mortal fear? And are they true? Just this is central. Here The Church must stand or fall. It's Christ we weigh.

All else is off the point: the Flood, the Day
Of Eden, or the Virgin Birth – Have done!
The Question is, did God send us the Son
Incarnate crying Love! Love is the Way!

Between the probable and proved there yawns
A gap. Afraid to jump, we stand absurd,
Then see behind us sink the ground and, worse,
Our very standpoint crumbling. Desperate dawns
Our only hope: to leap into the Love
That opens up the shuttered universe.

Jesus was profoundly, spiritually connected to his source, to God. The vertical dimension you might say, like a tree whose roots plunge straight down to the water table. He was equally passionate about reaching out horizontally through the radical love ethic by which he lived... and there you have it, the cross as I understand it: a symbol of vertical rootedness in the underlying source, and the horizontal outreach of loving community. I believe he came in love to show us a better way of radical love, and that living that way got him killed. But that was not the end of the story. And for the rest, we'll have to wait two weeks. But in the meantime, that, right there, is enough for me to make a life's work of following.

Jesus lived as if the Kingdom of God, the way of love, was all that mattered, and nothing else had any power over him. He invites us to do the same, and therein to begin to create glimpses of the Kingdom of God, the community of love, here and now, on earth as it is in heaven.