
God Defeats Violence At The Cross

**A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam Candler
Good Friday – Year B**

I have a long sermon today, and an important one. It is a long and important day.

Way back in the fourth century, the emperor Constantine heard the words, “In this sign, conquer;” and he placed an image of the cross on military shields and armaments. Later, during the crusades of the Middle Ages, those violent invasions would also use the cross as a symbol of violent imperialism.

Today, I want to be part of a new crusade, a crusade against violent interpretations of the cross. Today, I want to redeem the cross. The world needs to hear an explanation of the cross that does not condone violence, an explanation that does not depend upon a violent atonement theory.

“Atonement” means “at-one-ment.” An atonement theory explains how it is that the cross of Jesus actually saves humanity. But atonement theories that accept violence as one of their principles do not do us any good at all. And they do not do good to the cause of Jesus. The cross means something that is the very opposite of violence, and it means something that is much more profound than mere emotional pietism.

Today, Good Friday, is the day of the cross. I know that Easter is a lovely and delightful day, but I feel closer to God on Good Friday. Let me tell you why: Good Friday is a day of love. Unfortunately, throughout history, many of us have tried to explain the meaning of the cross without love. We have discussed crude blood sacrifice, and we have developed grand “atonement” theories that actually depend upon violence. I want to dispel those ideas today.

Listen to three popular theories of what happened at the cross:

A first theory has been called “the fish hook theory.” Some say that “Satan was owed something because of the sinful nature of humanity. Someone had to pay Satan a sort of ransom, and that someone was Jesus. Jesus died on the cross and paid the price. But then Jesus tricked Satan by being resurrected.” This view was once described with the image that Christ was a worm on a fish hook that finally caught Satan. So, this view has also been called the fish hook theory. But this theory has a real problem: why should God have to owe Satan anything at all?

A second type of atonement theory can be called “the retribution theory,” and has to do with satisfying God’s legalism. Some say that “it wasn’t Satan who had to be satisfied. Rather it was God’s legalism, God’s so-called justice, that had to be satisfied.” The perfect retributive justice of God demanded that someone suffer for sins which had been committed. Therefore (according to this theory), Jesus’s death on the cross satisfies the so-called justice, the so-called righteousness, of God.” But this theory has a similar problem: Would God kill Jesus in order to satisfy a harsh and impersonal legalistic system? That can’t be.

A third atonement theory is “the blood theory.” This theory maintains that “sin –somehow—can be transferred to another’s blood. The Old Testament sacrificial offerings of lambs and such were designed to be a sort of transference. In those ceremonies, the sins of humanity were transferred to the animal and so offered to God and removed from people. Thus, sins can be transferred to Jesus’s blood because he was a perfect and sinless offering; he was able to take away the sins of the world.”

Alas, as the sensitive philosopher Rene Girard has shown us, this theory runs the risk of perpetuating the

violence of scapegoat systems. When we believe that Jesus's death is just another example of the scapegoat sacrificial system, we perpetuate scapegoating and violence done to other innocent people. We end up making the cross a sign of violence towards others again. Thus, we end up with the cross emblazoned upon banners at lynching scenes.

Perhaps you recognize the language of these three sorts of theories. Pieces of each theory appear in our theology, our prayers, our hymns. Some of us may believe parts of all of them.

Let me suggest, however, that none of them captures the essence of what is going on today. The cross is not about a legal contract, or a heavenly transaction, or the satisfaction of divine retribution. It is not "blood for sin." We betray the cross if we analyze it in quantifiable and crude transactional terms. Good Friday is not an intellectual day, and the cross cannot be fully explained with an intellectual theory.

The cross goes deeper than our brains.

The cross, indeed, is a starkly violent image; there is no getting around that. But the point is that Jesus transforms that image! In our prayers, we remember that Jesus "made an instrument of shameful death to be for us a means of life and peace." That transformation declares that even the most painful suffering and most gruesome death are not stronger than God. God is greater. God defeats violence at the cross! And God defeats death at the cross.

Well, how then does that transformation happen? Why the cross? Today, I have three words with which to answer that question. The cross, the holy cross, means three things: pain, paradox, and passion. And by "passion," I mean "love." Pain, paradox, and love.

Let's start with the human experience of pain, and death. Why do we suffer pain? Where does evil come from? What is death? These are eternal questions of humanity, whether that humanity lived two thousand years ago or today.

There are some people of the world who do not believe that pain is real. There are some religions of the world which do not believe in pain. Some do not believe in sickness or disease. Some religions believe that evil is an illusion, that evil does not actually exist. Some religions do not acknowledge death.

Let them be, those religions. Christianity is not among them. Christianity's answer to the eternal questions of pain, death, and evil is not simply to claim that they do not exist.

Rather, Christianity's answer is the cross.

The pain and suffering of the cross is Christianity's acknowledgement that suffering, and evil, and death, really do exist. This might seem obvious to you. "Of course evil, suffering, and death exist," you say. But I am not speaking so simplistically. We have all known hundreds of situations in which good-willed people have been unable to acknowledge their pain. Our tendency is to hide those embarrassing parts of ourselves, those places which have not matched our ideals of perfection and happiness. Suffering is painful, yes, but it is also embarrassing. Pain is also humiliating.

Our tendency is to hide. We would rather not admit those times when we have been betrayed, when we have lost, when we have been defeated. Husbands and wives live hidden from one another. Families live hidden from one another. We show up to work in misery. We collapse in the evening from fatigue and bewilderment, unable to keep up with our dreams. But somehow, we dare not admit those problems. We are scared.

Then, worse, we tend to explain away evil. Such an act was due to a lost childhood, we say. Such an atrocity was a sign of sickness. Such horrific behavior is a symptom of a sick society, we say. No; pain and suffering are inherent parts of being human.

So, first of all, the cross means that we Christians acknowledge the real existence of pain and suffering. In fact, we share an important tenet with Buddhism in this regard. Life is suffering. Of course, we believe that life is also much more than that; but life does involve suffering. None of us gets around pain and suffering. The way to the other side of pain and suffering is not around it, but through it.

It is Jesus who shows us how to go through pain and suffering, not around pain and suffering. The holy cross, then, reminds us that Jesus himself encountered pain, and betrayal and false witness and innocent suffering,

too – more so than most of us ever will. We follow Jesus and the cross because they show us the way through. Remember: the cross never gives us permission to inflict pain; it gives us the strength to live through it.

Secondly the cross means paradox. This is more complex. It starts with the very paradox between suffering and joy, and between death and life. The cross means both death and life. Christians are supposed to know how to deal with both. The cross, two simple intersecting lines, represents the truth that life always has two lines going through it, at least two lines, usually many more.

The very shape of the cross, an intersection of two lines, can be seen as paradox, as the meeting of two different worlds. Many people have understood the horizontal axis of the cross to mean reconciliation with each other, and the vertical axis of the cross to mean reconciliation of humanity with God, with the transcendent. Perhaps the cross means the paradox of reconciliation.

Christianity is a deeply spiritual way, not a rational way. People who wear the cross care about the reconciliation of “both/and”, not “either/or.” Paradox means the ability to live with opposites. In Jesus, for instance, we live with both humanity and divinity. Humanity and divinity are concepts that are often seen as opposites; but, to us, paradoxically, they are not.

Finally, passionate love. The cross means love. It was love that brought Jesus into the world, and it was love that led him to the cross. The reason we follow Jesus to the cross is because we want to love like he loved.

In short, wearing the cross around our necks means that we choose to love. Processing with a cross before us means we choose to love. In the midst of pain, we choose to love. In the midst of paradox, we choose to love. In the midst of things we cannot hold together, things we cannot understand, we choose to love. In the midst of life, we choose to love, to give ourselves for each other. Love was the choice Jesus made, and he made that choice most powerfully at the cross, the holy cross.

The holy cross means pain, but it means paradox even more; and even more still, the cross means love. “Jesus loves us, this we know, for the cross tells us so.” The cross is where Jesus sacrifices not just himself, but he sacrifices all of humanity.

But here’s the catch. The word “sacrifice” does not mean to kill something. Sacrifice does not mean violence. The real meaning of sacrifice, the deep meaning that lies behind all the ways the word is used in Scripture, the deep meaning of the word, “sacrifice,” is “to make something holy,” “to bring something close to God,” “to take something near God.”

The sacrifice of Jesus, then, is not simply that he died, or that he shed blood, or that he experienced evil. The sacrifice of Jesus is that he took the human experiences of pain, violence, and death, to God. This is Christianity’s answer to the eternal questions of death, pain, and suffering. Jesus is the evidence that pain and evil really do exist, and even God knows about them. In fact, God is one of us; God has lived our pain and evil, and is transforming them.

Again, Christianity is an honest and realistic and incarnate religion. There are places in our lives where we bleed. There are places where we hurt, where we are in pain, where we suffer. Those horrifying, and even gruesome places, are the very places where God –in the person of Jesus Christ—pours out his love for us. God does not love us in theory. God loves us personally, in the person and life of Jesus Christ, in the very blood of Jesus Christ.

Today, we see suffering, but we also see love. It is love that looms so much larger over the landscape of intellectual theories of atonement. It is love that generates the power of Good Friday. It is love that compels Jesus Christ to take the despair and pain and suffering and blood of humanity near to God.

Sacrifice means to make holy. Jesus has made holy the human experiences of torturous pain, or bloody death, by drawing them into himself, into the very heart of God.

It is at the cross, then, that we discover, the true nature of God. The true nature of God is passionate love. When touched by sin, God forgives – he does not condemn. When touched by despair, God perseveres. When touched by evil, God instigates the Good. When touched by violence, God turns it into peace. When touched by death, God turns it into life. The true nature of God is passionate love.

This is why we can say with deep conviction that we are saved by this cross of Jesus. This is why we can say

with passion that Jesus is the perfect offering for our sins. His offering makes holy even the awful aspects of humanity, His offering takes all of human experience to the very heart of God, and in that heart of God we meet ... perfect love.

Jesus on the cross is an offering of love. And there is nothing more perfect than that love, nothing more powerful than that love, nothing more passionate than that love. To be loved by a suffering Jesus, on the cross, is to be loved. To be loved where we suffer is to be loved. That kind of love is deep, and broad, and high; that kind of love is the perfect offering for our sins. That kind of love lifts us close, so very close, to God. That kind of love is why we call this Friday Good.

AMEN.