

Betsey Moe  
Sermon 8.2.09  
"The Scandal of the Cross"

Mark 15:25-41

25It was nine o'clock in the morning when they crucified him. 26The inscription of the charge against him read, "The King of the Jews." 27And with him they crucified two bandits, one on his right and one on his left. 29Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying, "Aha! You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, 30save yourself, and come down from the cross!" 31In the same way the chief priests, along with the scribes, were also mocking him among themselves and saying, "He saved others; he cannot save himself. 32Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down from the cross now, so that we may see and believe." Those who were crucified with him also taunted him.

33When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. 34At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" 35When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, "Listen, he is calling for Elijah." 36And someone ran, filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink, saying, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down." 37Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. 38And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. 39Now when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, "Truly this man was God's Son!"

40There were also women looking on from a distance; among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome. 41These used to follow him and provided for him when he was in Galilee; and there were many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem.

Today's Question of Faith gets at the heart of the Christian faith:

*"If God loves unconditionally, why did God's Son have to die on the cross for us to be saved?"*

1 Corinthians 1:18-26

18For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. 19For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart." 20Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? 21For since, in the

wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. 22For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, 23but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block (literally, "a scandal") to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, 24but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. 25For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

There are moments in life that seem to shift the ground you're standing on. A couple flies to Guatemala and adopts a baby from an orphanage. On the plane, the husband looks at the wife holding their infant. One glance between them means, "Life will never be the same. What just happened?" An eighteen-year-old woman is in a car accident, and her friend in the car with her does not survive. As she gazes out the window as she lies in the hospital bed, she knows the ground has shifted. Her mind cannot settle down. "*What just happened?*" When these moments occur, you may know what just happened on the surface of things, but there's also a part of you that knows it will take a lifetime to make sense of "what just happened." In the midst of these pivotal times, it is tempting to just want to move on; reflecting on the event requires so much emotional energy.

Christians living in the time just after Christ's death and resurrection were a part of what we understand to be the pivotal time of history. Jesus' disciples had walked with Jesus and had witnessed miracles and profound teaching – then Jesus was executed on a cross, only to rise again three days later. I imagine the disciples rubbing their foreheads, saying, "What just happened?"

The New Testament, in many ways, is a compilation of letters and stories, all seeking to answer this question. The gospel writers, the writer of Hebrews, the Apostle Paul, all wrote as a way of making sense of what just happened on the cross. All great theologians since have addressed this question. And so today's question of faith is in good company. "*If God loves unconditionally, why did God's Son have to die on the cross for us to be saved?*" Of course, it would be easier to just move on – to go through the motions of being good Christians without thinking too much about the deep meaning behind our central symbol. But thinking through the pivotal moment of the cross event should be done in every time and place – so a big thank you to the person who asked this question! If we cannot articulate why the cross is important, the very heart of our Christian faith will be missed, and we will only throw fuel on the fire of those who see the cross as scandalous and foolish. "The message about the cross," Paul says, "is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God." When Paul thinks about the cross and asks, "What just happened," his answer is that the power of God was unleashed.

I want to say that when I say “the cross event,” I, like Paul, am including in “the cross event” the radical life of Christ that led up to his being crucified, the actual death on the cross, and the resurrection – without which the cross would simply be death, the end of a great man.

There are three main ways that Christians over the years have come to understand “what just happened,” and each angle adds something to our life.

The first way to look at what happened when Christ was crucified, and perhaps the perspective that is most widely used to explain the cross, is that Jesus on the cross bought forgiveness by paying for our sins with his life. Humans since the beginning of time have followed our own desires instead of God's; we dishonor God by giving our worship to things inferior to God, and because of this offense, we owe God a debt. Because the wrong was done by humans, a human has to pay it, but the debt is so high that only God has the *resources* to pay it. The only solution is to have a God-human pay it. God coming in human form and giving his life was the only way to make things right. Paul writes in Galatians, “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us.” (Galatians 3:13). God paid the debt we owe. There's a story about a teenage boy who had just gotten his license, when he got a speeding ticket – and it was a doozy. He didn't have enough money to pay it, so when he went to traffic court, he was an anxious, sweaty mess. He could do nothing but plead guilty. “And I do not have the money to pay the fine, your Honor,” he said. Then, the judge did something unexpected: he got down off the bench, walked around to where the boy was standing, took off his robe, and reached into his back pocket. He took some large bills out of his wallet, laid them down, and said, “It's paid.” And do you know why he was able to do this? The judge was the boy's father. This story illustrates this first view of what happened on the cross: Christ on the cross bought our forgiveness with his life.

The second way to look at what happened when Jesus died is to say that Jesus on the cross brought challenge and showed us the way to live. By living in obedience to God, then dying on a cross, Jesus demonstrated the greatest love the world has ever known. And because that selfless love is so compelling, we respond with grateful obedience. In the original Question of Faith that was submitted, the person asked, “If God loves unconditionally, why did God's Son have to die on the cross for us to be saved?” This second view of the cross would say that the human race did not know unconditional love until Jesus lived, died, and rose. In the cross, the fullness of God's love was revealed. And we are *changed* by this kind of love; we are challenged to live abundantly by dying to ourselves, suffering *with* others, letting go of our need to control. The love shown on the cross compels us to make choices that counter the violent, self-serving, fear-driven ways of the world. Understanding the love of Jesus on the cross changes us.

Tony Campolo told a story of a new recruit in the marines. "He was one of those young men who seemed to be a bit out of step with the norm, and he easily became the subject of ridicule for those who enjoy picking on off-beat people. The other young men in his barracks did everything they could to make a joke of the new recruit and to humiliate him. One day, someone came up with the bright idea that they could scare the daylights out of this young marine by dropping a disarmed hand grenade onto the floor and pretending it was about to go off. Everyone else knew about this and they were all ready to get a big laugh. The hand grenade was thrown into the middle of the floor, and the warning was yelled, 'It's a live grenade, it's a live grenade! It's about to explode!' They fully expected that the young man would get hysterical and perhaps jump out a window. Instead, the young marine fell on the grenade, hugged it to his stomach, and yelled to the other men in the barracks, 'Run for your lives! Run for your lives! You'll be killed if you don't!' The other marines froze in stillness and shame. They realized that the one they had scorned was the one ready to lay down his life for them."<sup>1</sup> You can bet that these marines were changed. The love Jesus showed by going to the cross challenges us and changes us.

The third way to look at Christ's work on the cross is to say that Jesus on the cross brought hope to the cosmos by proclaiming victory over all the evil powers in the world. From this perspective, we imagine a grand battle that was taking place between the forces of God and the forces of sin, death, and evil. Instead of fighting this battle from a distance, God entered into the battle, dying, descending to the dead, and proclaiming victory by defeating death and rising from the grave. Paul writes from this perspective in Colossians when he says that Christ on the cross "disarmed the rulers and authorities" (Col. 2:15). Because of this cosmic battle Christ fought on our behalf, we can now say, "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" (1 Corinthians 15:55). It may seem like evil is still winning in this world; abuse, selfishness, despair, neglect of the earth, political corruption still seem to have the most power nowadays – but we who are being saved know different because of what Christ has done on the cross. Victory over these powers has been won, once and for all. Every knee in heaven and earth and under the earth bows to the name of Jesus.

The end of Psalm 22 has so much meaning when read in light of God's victory over evil on the cross:

From the four corners of the earth  
people are coming to their senses,  
are running back to GOD.  
Long-lost families  
are falling on their faces before him.

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<sup>1</sup> Tony Campolo, *Let Me Tell You a Story*. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000).

God has taken charge;  
from now on he has the last word.

<sup>29</sup> All the power-mongers are before him  
—worshiping!  
All the poor and powerless, too  
—worshiping!  
Along with those who never got it together  
—worshiping!

<sup>30-31</sup> Our children and their children  
will get in on this  
As the word is passed along  
from parent to child.  
Babies not yet conceived  
will hear the good news—  
that God does what [God] says.

What just happened? The ground indeed shifted when Christ died on a cross and rose from the dead. *“If God loves unconditionally, why did God’s Son have to die on the cross for us to be saved?”* Because by dying on a cross, God in Christ bought our forgiveness. Because dying on a cross, God in Christ brought challenge. Because by dying on a cross, God in Christ brought victorious hope. We are invited to participate now in God’s work on earth, informed by this hopeful perspective of the gracious, forgiving God who is firmly in charge.