
Reclaiming the Cross

Lenten Study Guide



2017

INTRODUCTION: READ THIS FIRST!

Hanging from the center of the ceiling in McCleary Chapel at the University of Indianapolis is a Jerusalem cross—a cross with four equal sides and four smaller crosses filling in the four quadrants above and beneath the arms of the cross. Normally, a communion table is placed directly below it, but when the table is removed the cross hangs low enough to nearly hit your head. Nearly everything else is movable but the cross. No matter where you sit you can see it and no matter what the arrangement or decorations may be, the cross is in the middle of it all.

THE UNAVOIDABLE CROSS

So it is in our Christian faith. Adore it or abhor it, the cross hangs in the middle of the Christian religion. You simply cannot have a Christianity without the cross lest you abandon the core narrative of the New Testament. Indeed, Paul summarized his message by saying, “I preach Christ crucified.”

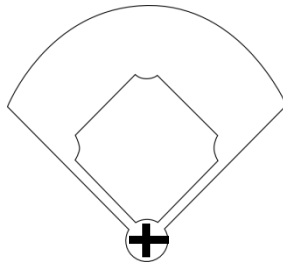
And yet, there is no other symbol in Christianity that has had as contentious a history as the cross. It has been used by Crusaders as a sign of conquest and as an example of servitude by slave masters and abusive husbands. To the other extreme, the cross was an inspiration for nonviolent protest in the Civil Rights movement. The cross is a potent symbol precisely because it is a multivalent symbol capable of great good and great evil depending on how it is understood.

CROSSES AND BASEBALL DIAMONDS

All the more reason to meditate on the cross in order to discover its true meaning. Rather, I should say “meanings” because there is more than one way to think about the cross. In spite of its centrality, Christian tradition never said that only one interpretation was right. For example, the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds affirm that Jesus “suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried” but they do not explain *how* the cross works as part of our salvation. And so, over the years there

have been a variety of “atonement theories” and each one has been accepted as part of mainstream Christian beliefs.

As with other doctrines, there is a wideness within orthodoxy that allows for diverse opinions about the cross while at the same time recognizing that there are limits to what is an acceptable interpretation or application of the cross. Think of doctrine like a baseball diamond. In baseball, there are foul lines that fan out from home plate. Balls hit outside those lines are foul, but a variety of balls can be hit within those lines that are fair.



When it comes to the cross, we believe that the cross is an essential part of the story of salvation, but when it comes to the details about its role—how the cross works—there are a variety of valid perspectives.

The diversity of perspectives comes, in part, from different assumptions we make about other things that shape how we see the cross. One of those assumptions is how we see the problem of sin and evil. If the cross is the “solution” (or part of the solution) then you have to ask, “What is the problem it is supposed to solve?” How you define the nature of sin shapes how you describe the cross. Another assumption that shapes how we see the cross is the role of other beliefs, especially the Incarnation and the Resurrection. The relationship between the Crucifixion and these beliefs puts the spin on our view of the cross. The introductions to each session explains these underlying assumptions.

THIS STUDY

This study is designed for individual reflection or small group discussion. Each session includes questions to get you started and to take you deeper into the weekly topic that is highlighted by one or two key scripture passages. Because the cross is a contested

symbol, you are encouraged to explore your options and articulate your criticisms of the various ways in which that symbol has been misused.

Concluding each session is a section called “What We Believe” and “What We Reject” that clarifies the boundaries and diversity of orthodox belief. This is the baseball diamond of belief. It is included to help you clarify where you stand in relationship to church doctrine, regardless of whether you decide to stand within or outside of it.

Ultimately, the cross is more than an object of speculation. It is a symbol of faith. And so, each session ends with a meditation exercise that will help you discover the reality of the cross for today. The meditation exercises were created to appeal to different types of spirituality. Some are more rational and others are more imaginative; some involve action and others quiet reflection. If some of them do not speak to you, that is okay because there are a variety of ways to pray the cross.

You will notice that the key scripture passages are not the Passion story from the

four Gospels. Instead, they are passages that interpret the meaning of the cross. This is a study of the cross as a symbol of faith, not a study of the death of Jesus. Nevertheless, the story of Jesus' death is an inseparable part of understanding the meanings of the cross as a symbol. And so, this study begins and ends by reading two versions of Jesus' crucifixion.

You will begin on Ash Wednesday by reading Mark's version and end in Holy Week by reading John's version. They can be read individually or they can be read as a group in a round or with participants playing the characters.

It is my prayer that you will rediscover the meanings of the cross in ways that deepen your faith in Jesus Christ. Spiritual growth is often a painful process, especially when the cross is the focus of your exploration. Just as Jesus' crucifixion resulted in his resurrection, we claim the promise that "if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his" (Romans 6:5). Resurrection is what we celebrate on Easter, and so there can be no

better Lenten preparation for Easter than to
meditate on the cross!

Pastor Darren
Ash Wednesday 2017

ASH WEDNESDAY

Today, read Mark's Passion story in Mark 14:43-15:47. Read it in one sitting.

Imagine yourself in the story. What do you see? What do you hear? What do you feel?

Read it like a good novel. On this first day of Lent, do not "read into it" theological assumptions or meanings. Also, because it is so familiar to us, read it closely and notice the details that are often glossed over. Enter into the story and experience it afresh.

**SESSION ONE:
“A VICTORIOUS DEFEAT”
THE CROSS AS VICTORY**

Getting Started

If you could design a sanctuary where would you put a cross?

- a. Up front and center lifted above everything else
- b. To the side and up close to the pews so people can see it
- c. Several crosses as part of the artwork and fixtures
- d. On a banner along with other banners that would change with the season
- e. At the entrance
- f. Carried in during the opening processional and taken out at the end
- g. No cross

Introduction

The early church turned the cross upside down. It was an instrument of Imperial power.

But because it is an essential part of the Jesus story, the early church could not ignore it. So

“Crucifixion in the Roman Empire”

According to John Dominic Crossan in *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, “Roman crucifixion was state terrorism.” It was a public form of torture that was often used with other forms, such as flogging (In contrast, torture today is performed in secret. However, the purpose of torture, then and now, is not to get information from the victim. It is to inscribe on the individual the power of the State in order to maintain a climate of fear that enables the State to perpetuate its authority).

It was a form of public humiliation and a deterrent to rebellion. Usually the victim was naked and hanging in a prominent place for all to see. Usually, the body was not buried but left for food for wild beasts and birds of prey. The death was supposed to be slow and painful.

Mass crucifixions were used to put down revolts. For example, after the death of Herod the Great in 4 b.c.e., Romans crucified 3,000 after a massacre in the Temple during Passover. In the summer of 70 a.d., Titus’ siege of Jerusalem included the crucifixion of 500 rebels in different positions, for the amusement of the Roman troops.

instead, they reinterpreted it. Drawing upon the Passover story and the image of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah, they saw the cross as a sign of God’s power to save us. The cross is the destruction of the very forces that killed

Jesus, an ironic implosion of the evil that nailed him to the cross. Jesus' death is "the death of death." This view of the cross has been called "Christus Victor" — the victorious Christ.

If the cross is the solution, what then is the implied problem? The problem is domination. Sin and evil are in control; we are being destroyed by these forces (whether they are spiritual, cultural, political, etc.). On the cross, God in Christ gives us victory over these forces.

Speaking for the African American experience, Shawn Copeland wrote,

"The cross was treasured because it enthroned the One who went all the way with them and for them. The enslaved African sang because they saw the results of the cross—triumph over the principalities and powers of death, triumph over evil in this world" (in James Cone's *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*).

The crucifixion is only one-half of the solution. The resurrection is the other half that completes the victory.

The cross as victory entails a different way of looking at reality in the face of absurd and seemingly insurmountable suffering. God's power, as revealed in the cross and resurrection, operates very differently from the power dynamics in the world. The cross is part of a different logic, a different kind of wisdom. Thus, Paul describes Christ as "the power of God and the wisdom of God" (I Cor. 1:24).

In this session, explore that ironic logic. The primary meaning of the cross is that it represents God's victory over sin, evil and death. As you read and reflect, consider the alternative form of power the cross offers us and how easily the cross can be misused and misunderstood.

1 Corinthians 1:18-25

¹⁸ For 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 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.

Reflection Questions

What kinds of power do we see in the world today? How do they compare/contrast with the cross?

How does the cross give meaning and hope to those who are suffering?

How has the power of the symbol of the cross been misused?

What does it mean to you that Paul describes the cross as “the power and wisdom of God?”

If the cross is the power and wisdom of God, then how should it shape our perspective on power dynamics (political, economic, cultural, familial, etc.) in the world today?

How does the Church celebrate the victory of Christ? Is the cross a part of that celebration?

What we believe:

- The crucifixion and the resurrection are two inseparable parts of the story of salvation.
- The cross is the destruction of the forces of evil, sin and death.
- The cross gives us a different way of understanding power dynamics in our world today.

What we reject:

- Death is a part of the way God intended the world to work.
- The cross is a symbol that endorses and perpetuates violence and oppression.

Meditation Exercise: “Imagining Victory”

Step 1: Select an image of the cross (such as a painting, a wall hanging or a yard display).

Step 2: Enter into a time of silence while focusing on the cross. Then, read or sing the first stanza of “Lift High the Cross”:

*[refrain] Lift high the cross, the love of Christ
proclaim
till all the world adore his sacred name.*

*Come, Christians, follow this triumphant sign.
The hosts of God in unity combine.*

Step 3: Envision modern-day examples of evil, hatred and injustice (the examples may be on a large scale, such as international relations, or they may be on an intimate level, such as family dynamics).

Step 4: Envision each one of those examples coming to an end and a new world of love and justice emerging. What does this new world look and sound like?

Step 5: Quiet your mind and focus on the cross again.

Step 6: Read or sing these stanzas of “Lift High the Cross”:

*[refrain] Lift high the cross, the love of Christ
proclaim*

till all the world adore his sacred name.

*Each newborn servant of the Crucified bears on the
brow the seal of him who died.*

[refrain]

*So shall our song of triumph ever be:
Praise to the Crucified for victory!*

[refrain]

**SESSION TWO:
“A GRACEFUL SOLIDARITY”
THE CROSS AS SOLIDARITY**

Getting Started

When you see a crucifix, what is your gut reaction?

- a. Not much
- b. Yuck
- c. How sad
- d. Looks Catholic
- e. I’m inspired

Introduction

In *Trauma and Grace*, Serene Jones describes her experiences with a self-defense class for the survivors of domestic violence. The last session of the class coincided with her UCC church’s Maundy Thursday passion play. Four of the women attended the service with her.

Afterwards, one of the women, Mari, spoke up: “This cross story, it’s the only part of this Christian thing I like, I get it. And, it’s like he

“Moral Influence Theory of Atonement”

The Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds affirm that Jesus died on the cross, but they do not spell out how his death works to give us salvation. Throughout the centuries, theologians have tried to explain “how” Jesus’ death saves us.

One such “theory of atonement” is called “the Moral Influence Theory,” which was first articulated by Peter Abelard in the early 12th century. The cross, according to this perspective, is the supreme expression of God’s love. When we understand the cross, we are moved by this love to trust in God. This awakening to God’s love is how the cross saves us.

The strength of this theory is that it emphasizes love, instead of anger or punishment, as God’s motivation. The weakness of the theory is the assumption that the image of the cross will elicit our loving response to God. It relies too much on human subjectivity to explain how the cross saves humanity.

gets me. He knows.” Jones writes that Mari’s words “capture well a long and complex thread of Christian interpretations of the cross that highlight the believer’s experience of solidarity between themselves and Christ as the source of redemption.”

In this session, we will explore how the crucifixion is

an expression of God's affinity with and sharing in the struggles of humanity. Jesus' experiences on the cross are the culmination of an entire life of solidarity with humanity. This solidarity is known as the Incarnation, which is the belief that Jesus is both fully human and fully God. The cross represents more than the death of a religious leader; it is a sign of God's participation in the human experience, or as Jürgen Moltmann calls it, "the Crucified God."

For much of Christian history there was a tendency to deemphasize the human side of Christ and this distorted the meaning of the cross. Various "atonement theories" about how the cross saves us portrayed the cross as an abstract theory. One result was that Christianity tended to ignore injustice.

If God's solidarity is the solution, what is our problem? We are alienated from God. Sin is separation or disconnection between humanity and God. In order to bridge that gap, God comes in human form as Jesus of Nazareth, to retrace the whole human experience, including his death.

This session explores why it is necessary to see the cross as God's act of suffering *with* humanity.

Philippians 2:5-8

⁵Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,

⁷ but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form,

⁸ he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.

Isaiah 53:1-9

¹Who has believed what we have heard?

And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?

² For he grew up before him like a young plant,

and like a root out of dry ground;
he had no form or majesty that we should look
at him,

nothing in his appearance that we should
desire him.

³ He was despised and rejected by others;
a man of suffering and acquainted with
infirmity;
and as one from whom others hide their faces
he was despised, and we held him of no
account.

⁴ Surely he has borne our infirmities
and carried our diseases;
yet we accounted him stricken,
struck down by God, and afflicted.

⁵ But he was wounded for our transgressions,
crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the punishment that made us
whole,
and by his bruises we are healed.

⁶ All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have all turned to our own way,
and the Lord has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.

⁷ He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,

yet he did not open his mouth;
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
and like a sheep that before its shearers is
silent,
so he did not open his mouth.

⁸ By a perversion of justice he was taken away.
Who could have imagined his future?

For he was cut off from the land of the living,
stricken for the transgression of my people.

⁹ They made his grave with the wicked
and his tomb with the rich,
although he had done no violence,
and there was no deceit in his mouth.

Reflection Questions

Was there ever a time when you were hurting
and the presence of a special person gave you
comfort and hope?

When you have gone through hard times, has
God felt close to you or absent from you?

How is the meaning of the cross distorted if we do not see it as part of the entire life and ministry of Jesus?

If Jesus is fully human and fully divine, what does his suffering reveal about the nature of God? About God's relationship with humanity?

How is the cross an expression of God's love?

Isaiah Fifty-three helped the first believers understand why Jesus died. Does Isaiah help or confuse us in understanding the cross today?

What We Believe:

- The crucifixion is the culmination of the Incarnation.
- Jesus' death is an expression of God's love for humanity.

What We Reject:

- The symbol of the cross promotes and legitimates abuse.
- The symbol of the cross reinforces the shame of victims.

Meditation Exercise: "The Wounds of Christ"

Meditations on the wounds of Christ is a tradition that dates back to the Middle Ages and has taken various forms. In this week's meditation exercise, we adapt this ancient practice as a way to see the presence of Jesus among those who are suffering today.

Step 1: Center yourself in silence, opening your heart and mind to the leading of the Holy Spirit. With each wound, imagine Jesus in and among the people associated with the wound:

- Forehead of Christ—those who suffer from mental illness and addictions.
- Right Hand of Christ—those who work with their hands in exploitative conditions.
- Left Hand of Christ—those who are victims of abuse.
- Right Foot of Christ—those who have been uprooted by wars and disasters.
- Left Foot of Christ—those who are dominated by oppressive regimes, systems and cultures.
- Side of Christ—the churches that are persecuted around the world.

Step 2: Once again, center yourself in silence. Recall a moment in your life when you were in pain, physically or emotionally. Visualize where you were at that time. Imagine Jesus being there with you, sharing your burden and comforting you.

Step 3: Read or sing “What Wondrous Love is This”:

What wondrous love is this,

*O my soul, O my soul,
what wondrous love is this, O my soul!
What wondrous love is this
that caused the Lord of life
to lay aside his crown for my soul, for my soul,
to lay aside his crown for my soul.*

SESSION THREE:
“AN UNEXPECTED PEACE”
THE CROSS AS RECONCILIATION

Getting Started

Remember a time when you got in trouble as a child. What happened? How did you feel?

Introduction

Sometimes it takes a variety of metaphors to make your point. That is what Paul does in Romans five when he describes how the death of Jesus reconciles us with God. There is war and peace imagery (“we have peace with God” and “we were enemies”). In contrast to the Empire’s geopolitical *pax*, the church declared that our true peace comes from “Lord [Greek: *kyrios*] Jesus Christ” and not the Caesar. He also uses Temple imagery. Just as the holy of holies is where the priest meets God, the cross gives us “access to his grace.” Then there is a bit of legal imagery when he declares that we are “justified [acquitted; declared innocent] by

his blood.” Whether it is a battlefield, the holy of holies or a courtroom, the message is the same: the cross reconciles us with God.

If the solution is reconciliation, what is the problem? We are in a state of conflict with God. Sin is rebellion against God. We are at odds with God’s will and fighting against God’s ways.

Sometimes we confuse what is a normal part of how God made us with sinful rebellion. We are created in the image of God and salvation is the recovery of this image. But if we confuse this divine image with sin then our understanding of the cross is skewed. Quotes like “justified by his blood” perpetuate rather than eliminate shame about how God made us.

In addition to this view of the problem, the cross as God’s act of reconciliation is based on additional assumptions. It assumes that Jesus’ identity represents more than a lone individual. In some sense, he represents humanity to God and God to humanity, which Paul describes in Romans Five.

The conflict with God spills over into our relationships with one another. The letter to

the Ephesians describes how the cross also reconciles us with one another. This was a big problem in the early church between members who were Jewish and those who had been pagan worshippers.

Paul Tillich described Paul's reconciliation with God and others this way:

“In the picture of Jesus as the Christ, which appeared to him at the moment of his greatest separation from other men, from himself and God, he found himself accepted in spite of his being rejected. And when he found that he was accepted, he was able to accept himself and to be reconciled to others” (“You Are Accepted” in *The Shaking of the Foundations*).

Needless to say, the history of Christianity is full of examples of our divisions as it is our unity. It raises the question, How can the cross be a symbol of reconciliation? In this session, we explore the peace that Jesus' death creates with God, with others and within us.

Romans 5:1-2, 6-11

¹Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ²through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God.

⁶For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. ⁸But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. ⁹Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. ¹⁰For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. ¹¹But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

“Substitutionary Theory of Atonement”

The most familiar interpretation of “how” the cross saves us is “the Substitutionary Theory of Atonement.” According to this perspective, Christ was a substitute for us when he died on the cross, so that we would not have to face eternal punishment. It was first purposed by Anselm in the 11th century, who said that God’s honor had been disgraced by human sin and only the death of the God-Man Jesus could restore God’s honor. In the same vein, later theologians described the cross as Christ being a substitute for the punishment that humanity should have had to suffer.

The insight behind this theory is that Jesus Christ did something for us on the cross that we could not do on our own, something that is necessary for our salvation (“Christ died for us”). But the obvious flaw in this theory is that it portrays God’s motivation as something other than love. Also, it strongly implies that there are almost two gods at work: a mean Father and a loving Son. And so, when pushed to its logical conclusions it violates the basic tenet of unity in the Trinity. The Moral Influence Theory was a corrective to Substitutionary Atonement Theory.

Ephesians 2:11-17

¹¹ So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called ‘the uncircumcision’ by those who are called ‘the circumcision’ — a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands — ¹²remember that you were at

that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. ¹³But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ¹⁴For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. ¹⁵He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, so that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, ¹⁶and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. ¹⁷So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near.

Reflection Questions

In what ways can a person be “at war” with God, an enemy of God?

What do you think “the wrath” is in Romans 5:9 (In the original language, verse Nine does not contain “of God” which was added by translators):

- a. The wrath is God’s eternal torment and punishment of sinners at the end of time.
- b. The wrath is the negative consequences of our bad decisions that God does not prevent from happening to us.
- c. The wrath is our eternal non-existence that will happen as a result of our lack of faith in God while we were alive.
- d. The wrath is the guilt we experience.

When is it impossible for us to handle the responsibilities and consequences for our mistakes?

When in our lives are we not able to be independent and we need someone to be our substitute? How might these experiences help

us understand the role Jesus plays in Romans 5:6-8?

In Romans 5:6, who takes the initiative to reconcile God and humanity?

What does it mean to be “reconciled to God”?

How do you deal with guilt?

How does the cross free us from guilt? How might it be misunderstood in such a way that increases our shame?

When you have a conflict with someone do you

- avoid them
- attack them
- question yourself
- line up allies
- look for their faults

What divides Christians?

How is the cross the “great equalizer” among people?

What We Believe:

- On the cross, Christ did something that saves us from sin that we could not do for ourselves.
- The cross is a once and for all sacrifice that does not need to be repeated.
- The death of Christ alleviates human guilt.

- All persons are equal in light of the cross.
- Sin does not eliminate the image of God in humans. Salvation is a restoration of the image of God.

What We Reject:

- The cross is a symbol of divine approval of child abuse.
- The cross is a sacrifice that we must imitate.

Meditation Exercise: “Prayer of Confession”

Step 1: Read or sing the first stanza from “And Can It Be”:

*And can it be that I should gain
 an interest in the Savior’s blood!
 Died he for me? Who caused his pain!
 For me? Who him to death pursued?
 Amazing love! How can it be
 that thou, my God, shouldst die for me?
 Amazing love! How can it be
 that thou, my God, shouldst die for me?*

Step 2: Pray: “God, forgive me for my sins and free me from my guilt.” Name all those things that have separated you from God.

Step 3: Visualize Jesus, with his wounds, taking you in his arms and hugging you. When you look in his face, see his tears and his smile as he holds you. Hear him say to you, “All is well.”

Step 4: Read or sing the following refrain from “And Can It Be”:

*'Tis mercy all, immense and free,
for O my God, it found out me!
'Tis mercy all, immense and free,
for O my God, it found out me!*

SESSION FOUR:
“A DYING LIFE”
THE CROSS AS PARTICIPATION

Getting Started

Which museum have you visited that does the best job of bringing history to life?

Introduction

Over the centuries, spiritual writers and mystics have seen the cross as something more than an historical event that happened to Jesus. For them, the crucifixion is a step in *our* spiritual process that culminates in transformation, blessing and union with God. Thomas a’Kempis wrote in *The Imitation of Christ*:

“Everything is founded on the cross and everything depends on our dying on the cross. There is no other way to life and interior peace except the holy way of the cross and our daily dying to self. ”

This participatory view of the cross is one of the meanings of baptism. Just as the believer is immersed in the baptismal waters, so our faith undergoes a death and resurrection in the Spirit.

“Beyond Theories: Participation”

Before there were “theories” about the “moral influence” or the “substitution” of Jesus’ death, there was the experience of early believers and mystics. For them, the crucifixion was the spiritual process through which we enter into the unity with God—“become participants of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:7). This unity with God entails victory over the forces of sin and death in one’s self.

What makes it possible for the crucifixion to be personal for us is the nature of Jesus Christ. For these early believers, Jesus is God who retraces and recovers the human experience through his earthly life. This is called “recapitulation.” In Christ, God runs the gamut of the human experience, including death, in order to lead us through it and into the life of God.

From this perspective, the cross was often portrayed as the Tree of Life. Throughout history, there are images of the cross sprouting leaves and bearing fruit. It plays on the irony of the cross as the life-nurturing atonement. This is in contrast to a legal perspective of the cross that one finds in Substitutionary Theory.

If the solution that the cross offers is a participation in the death of Christ, what then is the problem? Sin is domination. It is

something that controls us—possesses us—making us think and do those things that destroy us. The cross as the process of liberation in this session is the same theme in session one but on a personal level.

This session explores how the cross is a transforming encounter with the Spirit that frees and heals us.

Romans 6:1-14

⁶What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? ²By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it? ³Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.

⁵For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. ⁶We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the

body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. ⁷For whoever has died is freed from sin. ⁸But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. ⁹We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. ¹⁰The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. ¹¹So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

¹²Therefore, do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. ¹³No longer present your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and present your members to God as instruments of righteousness. ¹⁴For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.

Reflection Questions

Think of a persistent bad habit you have. When have you tried to break it and what did you do?

What sorts of things can have “dominion” over a person?

What is the relationship between the crucifixion and resurrection in this passage?

What would our faith experience be if there was only the challenge to die with Christ without the hope of being raised with Christ? Or, what would our faith experience be if there was only the goal of being raised with Christ without first dying with Christ?

How does the idea of “dying with Christ” run counter to our culture of pleasure and fulfillment?

Is there a difference between dying to “self” and dying to “sin” (v.2)?

What’s the difference between the weightlifter’s slogan, “No Pain, No Gain” and Paul’s statement, “If we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his”?

How might Romans Six be misread and misused to deepen shame and self-injury?

What We Believe:

- The crucifixion is an historical event that has meaning for us today.
- The Holy Spirit as the third “Person” of the Trinity makes the cross meaningful for us.

What We Reject:

- The symbol of the cross promotes self-flagellation.

Meditation Exercise: “Sign of the Cross”

At the Beginning of the Day:

Step 1: At the beginning of your day, use water to remember that you have been baptized. For example, splash water in your face; run water over your hands; or stand beside a creek bed and listen to the water flowing.

Step 2: Recite Romans 6:3, “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?”

Step 3: Think of one habit, thought or attitude that you need to surrender to God in order to be free from its control (i.e. that you need to “die” to).

Throughout the Day:

Option 1: Carry a small cross with you and periodically feel it as a reminder of what you need to surrender to God that day. Repeat to yourself this one sentence prayer: “Surrender.”

Option 2: Make the sign of the cross throughout the day as a reminder of what you need to surrender to God that day. Repeat to yourself this one sentence prayer: “Surrender.” [Making the sign of the cross: Using your right hand, you should touch your forehead at the mention of the Father; the lower middle of your chest at the mention of the Son; and the left shoulder on the word “Holy” and the right shoulder on the word “Spirit.”]

At the End of the Day:

Step 1: Like this morning, use water as a symbolic reminder of your baptism.

Step 2: Recite Romans 6:5, “For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.”

Step 3: Hold your palms upward and imagine receiving the new life and blessing that replace what you have been surrendering throughout the day.

Step 4: Read or sing the following stanzas from “I Surrender All”:

*All to Jesus I surrender;
Lord, I give myself to thee;
fill me with thy love and power;
let thy blessing fall on me.
I surrender all, I surrender all,
all to thee, my blessed Savior,
I surrender all.*

*All to Jesus I surrender;
now I feel the sacred flame.
O the joy of full salvation!
Glory, glory, to his name!
I surrender all, I surrender all,
all to thee, my blessed Savior,
I surrender all.*

SESSION FIVE:
“A NECESSARY OBEDIENCE”
THE CROSS AS OBEDIENCE

Getting Started

Have you ever been misunderstood or criticized for doing the right thing?

Introduction

The cross has been an inspiration for prophets of the 20th century. Martin Luther King, Jr. often talked about his commitment to nonviolent dissent as the cross. Archbishop Oscar Romero saw the cross in his work for peace in El Salvador. During World War Two, Dietrich Bonhoeffer found meaning for his resistance to the Third Reich by meditating on the cross. In *The Cost of Discipleship* he wrote:

“To endure the cross is not a tragedy; it is the suffering which is the fruit of an exclusive allegiance to Jesus Christ. When it comes, it is not an accident, but a necessity....If our Christianity has

ceased to be serious about discipleship, if we have watered down the gospel into emotional uplift which makes no costly demands and which fails to distinguish between natural and Christian existence, then we cannot help regarding the cross as an ordinary, everyday calamity, as one of the trials and tribulations of life....The cross means sharing the suffering of Christ to the last and the fullest....When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.”

If the cross is the supreme symbol of obedience, what then is the problem? The cross saves us from the sin of selfishness. It challenges apathy and inspires commitment.

The cross as a symbol of obedience is the culmination of the four dimensions, which we previously discussed. The obedience it inspires is not a doomed endeavor because of the victory over evil that it has achieved. It is a symbol we can relate to because it demonstrates Christ’s affinity with us. Our obedience is possible because of the

reconciliation and empowerment we have received through it.

This session is a meditation on the cross as our example and inspiration for discipleship.

Mark 8:31-38

³¹ Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. ³²He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ³³But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, ‘Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.’

³⁴ He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, ‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ³⁵For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. ³⁶For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit

their life? ³⁷Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? ³⁸Those who are ashamed

“Liberal Protestants & the Cross”

In the 19th century, liberal theology developed (first, in Germany and then in America). Liberalism rejected orthodox views of the cross. The early liberals criticized Substitutionary Theory as too abstract and too callous in its portrayal of God. Yet, at the same time, they were opposed to secularization and a total rejection of belief in God. Liberal theology developed as a middle way between orthodoxy and secularism. They did this by reinterpreting Christianity with contemporary beliefs, such as pragmatism and evolution. For liberal theology, the way to make the Gospel relevant is to emphasize Christianity as an ethical way of life.

Echoing the Moral Influence Theory, liberals criticized Substitutionary Theory as an affront to the moral character of God. At the same time, they also favored naturalistic views of the nature of Christ. Jesus is a moral leader and the incarnation is a metaphor of his spiritual advancement rather than a description of his nature.

Thus, liberal theologians favored moral concepts of atonement. The cross inspires obedience and imitation. It's role in salvation is reduced to a tragic event that is one part of the story of Jesus' obedience to God.

of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.'

Reflection Questions

What was so tempting about Peter's advice for Jesus? How did it remind Jesus of his earlier temptations?

Which would be the hardest for you: the psychological suffering, the physical suffering, or the rejection by others?

Verse Thirty-four describes a process of obedience: deny self, take up your cross, follow Christ. What do each one of these steps mean to you?

What kind of faith experience would you have if you

- Don't deny yourself but try to pick up your cross?
- Don't pick up your cross but deny yourself?

How does Mark 8:35-6 compare with our culture of self-fulfillment?

What excuses do we make for not following Thirty-four?

Read the Bonhoeffer quote in the introduction. What insights do you learn from his statement?

What We Believe:

- Discipleship requires sacrificial commitment.
- Carrying one's cross is a voluntary and intentional act.

What We Reject:

- We earn our salvation through our imitation of Christ's obedience.
- The cross legitimates relationships of subservience.

Meditation Exercise: "Dirty Work, Holy Work"

Step 1: Select a task that you *hate* doing. Do that task for someone else.

Step 2: Before you do the task, recite these words (that are adapted from the Great Thanksgiving prayer for communion):

"In remembrance of
God's mighty acts in Jesus Christ,
I offer myself in praise and thanksgiving
as a holy and living sacrifice,

in union with Christ's offering for us."

Step 3: If it is a task that allows you to think about other things while you do it (e.g. washing the dishes), meditate on Jesus' words in Mark 8:34-35:

"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ³⁵For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it."

Step 4: After you have completed the task, offer God a prayer of thanksgiving for the privilege of doing the task for that person.

HOLY WEEK

Throughout this week, read John's Passion in John 18:1-19:42. Like the reading of Mark's Passion on Ash Wednesday, imagine yourself in the story. Take your time with it, read a little each day. As you read it, consider the different meanings of the cross that you have explored throughout Lent. Let the ones that you liked comfort you and let the ones you disagreed with challenge you. Give God thanks for what Christ did for us on the cross.

FRONT COVER ART:

“The Missionary Cross Banner” by Doris Douglas

The Missionary Cross was one of the first banners created by Doris Douglas. The various shades of green were chosen for Ordinary Time, the portion of the church calendar between specific seasons such as Lent. The cross is also known as a “Jerusalem Cross”, a center cross with four smaller crosses in each panel. At the top of the banner is a grouping of wheat and at the bottom are stalks of wheat to symbolize communion.

The Missionary Cross Banner is well-suited for this year’s Lenten focus. This study features five different dimensions of the cross and the first Sunday of Lent begins with communion. Just as green symbolizes spiritual growth, we grow in our faith during Lent through our meditation on the cross.

All scripture quotes are taken from the New Revised Version Bible.