The Cross

By the Rev. Andrew K. Barnett
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In the name of God. Amen.

I wish to speak to you this morning about **the cross;**

That stark symbol, at once powerful and terrifying

Beautiful and absurd, liberating and death-dealing.

There is no image more closely linked with Christianity,

No symbol that more powerfully evokes the full story.

Here I am talking of Jesus' story

but also of our imperfect efforts to engage it.

Many Christians wear a cross near our hearts-

A gracious emblem of faith, publicly understood.

Indeed, oppressed people throughout time have pointed to Jesus'

On the cross as a reminder that God knows their story and takes their side.

So, in these ways, the cross is a symbol of liberation.

Yet the pages of history are also filled images of the cross that disturb.

In Jesus' day, it was a terrifying machine of torture.

Dead bodies were left on crosses for days to scare you into submission.

Later, it was emblazoned red on the crusader's' shield.

The cross was held before forced converts in the inquisition

Burned in front yards as an act of racial terror

And broadcast even today by those who would distort the Gospel of Jesus

to proclaim a message of exclusion and hate.

But let us refuse to cede the evangelical message-

The Good news of God's dream for the world–

to those who would ***distort*** it in such ways.

We cannot understand Jesus as *anything less* than

God's love incarnate, sent for the sake of the world

But the world can be a harsh place.

Indeed, Gospel writers often use the word "kosmos" to describe this world

Not the glory of God's good creation but **rather the fallen realm**

That is *estranged from God and opposes God's will.*

And Bible scholar Walter Wink translates this kosmos to mean "System."

It was indeed a *system of violent domination.*

Rome could do whatever it wanted,

whenever it wanted, to whomever it wanted.

Rome could tax your land,

make you carry a soldier's heavy gear for a mile,

Rome could humiliate you in front of everyone.

And they did. All the time.

Into this darkness erupts the light of Jesus.

He exposes and rejects the system of violent domination

As he proclaims a very different kingdom:

The kingdom of God,

And if Jesus Christ is Lord, as we proclaim today,

Then Ceasar is not.

Jesus teaches people assertive ways to resist the empire

And **to insist** that we have value as children of God,

Even as Rome shrieks

That you are nothing but cogs in a grinding machine,

Jesus teaches us to turn cheeks, and walk extra miles, and give shirts.

But the empire was displeased with him

In time, concluding he must die.

Which brings us to the cross.

How are we to understand it?

Is it a blood sacrifice to an angry God?

Indeed this substitutionary atonement theory of the cross

Has been peddled for centuries, causing great damage.

Humanity's sin causes a vengeful God such rage that someone has to suffer.

Jesus take the pain for all of us, and our salvation is found in his suffering;

A blood offering to an angry God.

Let me be clear: this is NOT the God revealed in Scripture.

What of God's love and mercy, justice, and compassion?

Starting with YHWH's forgiveness after the Golden Calf fiasco in Exodus,

Moving through Jeremiah's promise of iniquities forgiven

And exemplified in Jesus life and teaching.

We cannot understand YHWH-

the God of the old and new testaments,

and the one Jesus calls Abba- **as anything other than love**.

And what's more, we must reject a theology

that would separate the Father from the Son.

There are not co-equal persons of the Trinity in that equation.

Pause.

So how then are we to make sense of this cross?

As Paul writes,

"The message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing,

but to those who are being saved it is the **power of God**." (1 Cor 1:18)

How does the cross save? And from where does its power come?

We cannot hide the brutality of it.

Oppressed people have pointed to the cross as the clearest symbol possible

That God feels their pain and knows their story.

As African American priest and scholar Robert Phillips writes,

"Do not take the blood out of the cross.

Because my people shed a lot of it."

Pause.

Also, sin is our biggest problem.

We miss the mark,

We give in to greed over sharing, self over other, fear over love.

And try as we might, we are stuck in sin.

We need God's forgiveness.

We cannot earn our way to God without this mercy.

And the cross is the crux of God's forgiveness.

Why?

Theologians Karl Barth and Karl Rahner offer a new perspective.[1]

God kept saying yes to the world,

but the world kept saying no to God.

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[1] See, for example: Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/1, ed. G.W. Bromily and T.F. Torrance (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1956), 128, 144-45, 213-41, 272; IV/2, ed. G.W. Bromily and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&t Clark, 1958, Publishing Co., 1994, 157-61, 280-81; Karl Rahner, *The Great Church Year* (New York: Crossroad BPublishing Co, 1994), *Theological Investigations VII* (Baltimore; Helicon Press, 1967), 136-42.

God said yes to the world in the primal blur of creation,

But the world kept saying no to God by turning away from God's will.

God kept saying yes to the world by sending prophets and sages

to reveal a righteous law.

As Walter Brueggeman writes of the prophet Jeremiah,

"God doesn't do these things merely out of

some kind of stubborn faithfulness

but out of deep, wounded love and profound grief

that have moved God beyond anger to tender caring

and, most importantly, to forgiveness."

We realize, with Dr. King that

"There can be no deep disappointment where there is not deep love."

Did your parents ever say, "I'm not angry, I'm just disappointed."

And somehow, that was worse,

Because you know they love you, and you **<u>messed up big time.</u>**

So it is out of **love** that YHWH makes

that incredible promise in Jeremiah:

"I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts,

and I will be their God, and they shall be my people…

I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more." (Jer 31:33).

God never breaks that covenant, but we, the people, do.

Then, in the fullness of time, God so loves the world that God says yes again and sends his only son for the sake of the world.

But the world kept saying **no** to Jesus.

We scorned and challenged him, and

Ultimately, said no in the strongest possible terms,

By putting him to death, even death on a cross.

Yet in the midst of all of this, God is waiting for a yes from the world.

THIS is where and how the cross saves.

Jesus- God incarnate- intercedes on our behalf.

That conversation between the Father and the Son

Continues. And Jesus says,

"Father forgive them." All of them. Everybody.

All the time. For everything.

Even the ones who pound the nails into his hands and feet.

"For they know not what they do."

And because Jesus is fully human, incarnate, in this world

Finally the world can say yes back to God.

And so all is forgiven,

and the cross becomes the ultimate symbol of amazing grace.

But there's more to the cross's power.

Arms outstretched, from atop a cold lonely stone,

Jesus looks out at the stone walls of Jerusalem.

And past there he can see the valley of the shadow of death,

and all the roads that lead to Rome.

He sees the worst of the domination system.

Indeed he feels its pain.

He stares it down, he exposes it, and ultimately **he rejects it.**

There could have been an armed revolt back in the Garden of Gethsemane,

But he tells his followers to lay down their weapons.

From the cross, he might have sought vengeance

for those who wounded him.

But instead he prays God to forgive them.

And he promises, after his resurrection, to bring all people to himself.

He dies on Good Friday.

But he rises on Easter Day

And centuries after the Roman Empire had fallen

under the weight of its own cruelty

People across the globe are sharing Jesus' message, not Rome's.

It is a **cosmic victory over sin, evil and death.**

The cross represents Christ's victory over evil, sin, and death.

Sometimes called Christ Victorious, or Cristus Victor,

It is a theory of the cross that lifts it high in the Gospel story,

And gives us a hopeful and powerful claim.

The cross says to the world

That love is the way.

Even and especially when love feels weak, or timid, or insufficient.

Love is the ultimate source of victory.

Alleluia, Alleluia.

Amen.