

Changing the World

We live in times with new political leadership in Washington that promises to change the world.

And so we have massive proposed increases in military spending, talk of walls on the southern border, and warm embraces of folks like Egypt's dictator.

These efforts are certainly one way to change in the world, in fact, it's the way humanity has sought for thousands of years to change the world: through power, hatred of enemies, making right through might.

We often cloak these efforts in our faith; enlisting Jesus in the cause of nationalism and patriotism.

Shortly after 9/11, red, white and blue crosses and crucifixes began to appear for sale at boutiques.

While the distributors of these items probably had good intentions, such a cross is, shall we say, very regrettable indeed....

One wonders if the makers and purchasers of these star spangled banner crosses understand that the love of Christ can never be reduced to a single nation....that Jesus is the savior of the world...not only of those who died on 9/11, but of those who did the killing too.

Somehow these good folks missed the fact that the cross of Jesus isn't jewelry, it's a scandal — it's not a sweet feeling — it's a rebuke to how we view the world.

That's why we're here today.

We come together each year, this Sunday of the Passion of our Lord, because the scandal of the cross is something so outlandish, so upsetting, so outside of our normal experience, that we need to confront it over and over again, so that like water running down rock, eventually we might be cracked open, and begin to see the stunning truth that is God's call to us.

It's a truth revealed in the events of October 2, 2006, when a man named Charlie Roberts took his gun into a one room school house in Pennsylvania's Amish country.

Charlie's daughter had died not long before, and he was crazy with grief and rage.

His grief and rage take him into a classroom with over a dozen young Amish girls... and one by one he shoots them...killing most of these young innocents.

It's a truth revealed in the events of June 17, 2015, when 22 year old Dylan Roof joins the Emanuel AME Church Bible Study in Charleston, South Carolina, and as the people close their eyes in prayer, young Mr. Roof shoots dead 9 of the members, wounding 3 more, and then calmly walks out of the church as if nothing at all has happened.

The usual reaction to these atrocities is complete and utter revenge, hang 'em high!, show them the same mercy they showed the poor innocents!; the same reaction most Americans had in the aftermath of 9-11.

And yet in the case of both the Amish and the Charleston church members, that's not what happens at all.

Instead, the scandal that is the cross invades the lives of these people...

"We must not think evil of this man,' the Amish grandfather says to his community; while another reminds the people gathered that Charlie Roberts 'had a mother and a wife and a soul....'" Charis, P. Sprinkle, 162.

Hours after the shooting, the "Amish women visit Charlie's widow, offering forgiveness, while another Amish man holds Charlie's father in his arms for over an hour." Id.

In Charleston, the reaction is much the same.

"I forgive you,' Nadine Collier, the daughter of 70 year old Ethel Lance, says at Dylan Roof's bond hearing." TWP, 6/19/15.

Myra Thompson, the sister of the slain DePayne Middleton-Doctor, says 'I am very angry.

But one thing that DePayne always enjoined in our family ... is that we are the family that love built.

We have no room for hating, and so I forgive you." Id.

Such is the horrifying scandal of the cross.

While so many turn the cross into mere jewelry or another symbol of power and patriotism, the horrifying scandal of the cross is this:

"It isn't often that someone will die for a righteous person, though maybe someone might dare to die for a good person.

But God shows his love for us, because while we were still sinners — Christ died for us." Rom. 5:7-8.

And this:

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'

But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father who is in heaven.

For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust." Mt. 5:43-45.

The wife of the fellow who killed those little Amish girls writes an open letter thanking the neighbors who poured out their forgiveness...

"Your love has given my family the healing we so desperately need.

Your gifts have touched our hearts in a way no words can describe.

Your compassion reaches beyond our family, beyond our community, and is changing our world.'

She's on to something, you know.

Random acts of kindness don't change the world.

Being nice does not change the world.

Jesus wants to change the world.

Not with power and arms, but with unconditional, stubborn, love — aimed straight at the heart of your enemy -- for only this produces ripple effects strong enough to change the world." Charis, 162-3. paraphrased.

And we only get to that place of unconditional, stubborn, love for our enemy when we can finally gather the courage to look deeply and honestly within, and see that we too are the enemy, we too are capable of inflicting great harm on others, both as

individuals and as citizens of the American Empire, and so, we too are in desperate need of God's forgiveness, compassion, love...

When Jesus is crying out 'My God my God why have you abandoned me?!,' he joins in solidarity not only with the innocent victims of the world, but also with the torturers.

"Jesus hangs from the cross not only to redeem the victims of hate-fueled murder, but also those who commit such murder." F. Rutledge, *The Undoing of Death*, 32.

Not long ago the news ran a story of a young mother, who, for reasons beyond comprehension, beat her 4 year old boy to death because she believed he was "gay."

Jesus hangs from the cross to redeem her too, to love her too, to return her to the person she was meant to be in God's eyes.

This is the scandal of the cross, that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

It is the scandal of the cross..... and it is the power of the cross.

Through the cross, God rejects our ego driven obsession with earning and deserving our salvation, as God confronts us squarely with who we truly are: sometimes good, sometimes evil, and always in need of God's mercy, of God's forgiveness.

To all of us Jesus says, "Father, forgive, they don't know what they are doing," making himself one, not only with my pain, but also with my sin -- because we are all of us sometimes victims and sometimes torturers and sometimes both." Id., 33. paraphrased.

It's not a pretty picture and many spend a lifetime running from this truth.

But then, perhaps, something happens.

A crisis, a death, a divorce, a diagnosis of cancer, a child who is a crushing mess, and we are somehow shaken enough to look deeply into that mirror of our reality, to see ourselves, if only for an instant, as God sees us, and in that miracle of insight, Jesus whispers, "forgive, as you have been forgiven."

The scandal of the cross is like water running over the hard rock of our often jaded lives, as it slowly but surely works to crack us open, letting loose the power of forgiveness, the only power that can truly change the world.

+amen

