

## “A Cross for a Throne”

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The heart of Jesus' teaching was “the kingdom of God.” He spoke about that topic more frequently than any other, and it typifies his actions as well.

In the rich New Testament metaphors, the world was, and still is, part of the domain over which Satan is king. Jesus said his kingdom is “not from this world;” yet, *in him*, the reign of God is introduced into the world. In his Inaugural Address, Jesus proclaimed, “The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand!” and the central goal of his life was to plant the seed of this new kingdom so that, like a mustard seed, it would gradually expand, eventually overcoming the rule of Satan and reestablishing God, the Creator of the world, as its rightful ruler (Matt. 13:31-32).

Now, this is “way out there” stuff! Paul writes, “...*our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.*” (EPHESIANS 6:12 NRSV)

Everybody get that? Steven Spielberg stuff! We have no point of reference—nothing to prepare us—for things like that. We need metaphor, or myth. Now, remember, metaphor and myth are not related directly with truth or fantasy. Each can be truth; each can be fantasy. They are nothing more, or less, than tools of language, whose purpose is to describe realities (or fantasies) that go beyond human capacity to comprehend.

So far, so good. Metaphor paints beautiful word pictures. The New Testament speaks of “streets of gold;” “river of life;” “Light of the World”... We believe each points to a truth that defies human explanation or understanding.

But if it remains metaphor, there's no connection with life as we know it. It remains a kingdom “not of this world.” That's where Jesus comes in. Jesus is where the rubber meets the road—where heaven touches earth! When Jesus was present, so was that kingdom (MATT. 12:28; 3:2; 4:17).

I closed last week's sermon with this statement: “This is what the kingdom of God looks like. It looks like humility. It looks like grace. It looks like service. It looks like Jesus.” And then I said, “Aside from the cross, it most graphically is symbolized by a child and a towel.” Today, I want to talk about that “aside:” the cross. The Kingdom of God has a cross for a throne.

I CORINTHIANS 1:18-25 (NRSV) *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.* <sup>19</sup>*For it is written,*

*“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.”*

<sup>20</sup>*Where 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? <sup>21</sup>For 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. <sup>22</sup>For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, <sup>23</sup>but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, <sup>24</sup>but*

*to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. <sup>25</sup>For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.*

"Jesus taught what he lived and lived what he taught, and, since we've read the last chapter, we shouldn't be surprised to find a cross-shaped love at the center of his teaching."<sup>1</sup>

When asked the most important commandment, he said "all the law and the prophets" hang on loving God with all our heart, soul, and mind, and loving our neighbor as ourselves (MATT. 22:36-40). And in the parable of the Good Samaritan (LUKE 10:27-37), Jesus defined "neighbor" as anyone we find in need of our service—and he says everything hangs on loving that person—sacrificially, if necessary.

We can try to obey every detail of the law—dot every "i"; cross every "t"—as the Pharisees did, but if love doesn't motivate our behavior and our relationships, we haven't even begun to obey the law and the prophets.

And in the kingdom Jesus announced, love always has a cross-shaped quality. People in the kingdom of the world find it easy to love those they think deserve it. That's part of the tit-for-tat nature of the world's kingdom. Kingdom-of-God participants, on the other hand, are called to love all people unconditionally, even their enemies (LUKE 6:27, 35)!

People in the kingdom of the world easily do good to those who do good to them; but, followers of Jesus are called to do good even to those who harm them (LUKE 6:34-35). When struck on the cheek, we are to offer the other (LUKE 6:29). When commanded by an oppressive Roman soldier to carry his pack one mile, we are to carry it two (MATT. 5:41).

Understood: Jesus isn't telling us to allow people to abuse us. Injustices will happen. The world isn't fair! This isn't about prevention; it's about our response. We have choices, and Jesus gives us a way to rise above injustice and unfairness—to refuse to be defined by those who act unjustly toward us.

The kingdom of the world has always lived under the dictum, "an eye for an eye." When we respond to violence with violence, be it physical, verbal, or attitudinal, we validate the violence of our enemy and sink to his level. But when we respond unexpectedly—offering our other cheek; going a second mile—we expose his injustice and establish that he has no power to define us by those actions. By responding violently, we surrender any opportunity, any possibility that he will repent and be transformed.<sup>2</sup>

Jesus is not primarily about getting people to pray a magical "sinner's prayer"

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Gregory Boyd, *The Myth of a Christian Nation: How the Pursuit of Political Power is Destroying the Church* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Press, 2005) Kindle Edition, location 533.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

or to confess some approved doctrine or jump through the right liturgical hoops to escape hell. That's "fire insurance," not the kingdom of heaven; although, life in the kingdom of heaven is lived free of the threat of hell.

Jesus is about gathering together a group of people who, in child-like faith actually believe him when he says, *Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you* (LUKE 6:27-28). A group of people who actually believe that!

I hope you remember my story about Nelson Mandela, who brought the kingdom of heaven a little closer. Released after twenty-seven years in prison, he was elected president of South Africa. He asked his jailer to join him on the inauguration platform. He appointed Archbishop Desmond Tutu to head an official panel with a challenging name, the "Truth and Reconciliation Commission."

Mandela sought to defuse the pattern of revenge he'd seen so often when an oppressed people took control over their oppressors. For the next two-and-a-half years the Commission heard reports of atrocities. The rules were simple: if a white official voluntarily faced his accusers, confessed his crime, and fully acknowledged his guilt, he could not be tried and punished for that crime. Hard-liners grumbled over the obvious injustice of letting criminals go free; but Mandela insisted that the country needed healing more than it needed retribution.

A policeman named van de Broek confessed to shooting an eighteen-year-old boy and burning his body, turning it on a spit like barbecue meat to destroy the evidence. Eight years later he returned to the same house and seized the boy's father. The wife was forced to watch as they bound her husband on a woodpile, poured gasoline over his body, and burned him alive.

There was a hush as the elderly widow took the stand to respond. "What do you want from Mr. van de Broek?" the judge asked. She said she wanted him to go to the place where they burned her husband's body and gather up the dust so she could give him a decent burial.

Then she said, "Mr. van de Broek took my family away from me, and I still have a lot of love to give. Twice a month I would like him to come to my house and spend a day with me so I can be a mother to him. And I would like Mr. van de Broek to know that God forgives him, and that I forgive him too. I would like to embrace him so he can know my forgiveness is real."

Someone began to sing "Amazing Grace" as she made her way from the witness stand, but van de Broek didn't hear the hymn. He'd fainted.

Justice was not done in South Africa that day. Something beyond justice took place. "*Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good,*" wrote Paul.

Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu understood that when evil is done, only

one response can overcome it. Revenge perpetuates it. Retributive Justice punishes it. But evil is overcome only by good; only when the injured party absorbs it, and refuses to allow it to go any further. That's the pattern of otherworldly grace that Jesus demonstrated on the cross. That's what a cross for a throne looks like!

Note: this is NOT A GUARANTEE! Love is always risky. It can be rejected; and, it probably will demand sacrifice—maybe even great sacrifice. That's why we call it “cross-shaped.” But, it is the only response that offers the possibility of transformation.

It's not a quick fix. It's a long range plan. It may take generations; but, as I quoted G. K. Chesterton last week: “Christianity has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult, and not tried.”

The Kingdom of the World is strong, and it won't capitulate easily. But first, it takes one generation to begin.