



CHURCH of
the SAVIOUR

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“Break the Cycle”

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1 Corinthians 1:18-25

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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. ¹⁹ For it is written,

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

²⁰ Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scholar? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ²¹ For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of the proclamation, to save those who believe. ²² For Jews ask for signs and Greeks desire wisdom, ²³ but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to gentiles, ²⁴ but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵ For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.

We live in a violent world. And it appears that we like it that way. The top five movies at the box office last weekend were John Wick: Chapter IV, Shazam: Fury of the Gods, *Scream VI*, *Creed III*, and *65* – all of which are built around graphically violent depictions of inherently violent storylines. The most popular spectator sport in the United States by a wide margin is football, despite reports linking tackle football to chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE) and a growing number of schools dropping the sport because of safety concerns and lack of parents willing to risk their children’s future for a game. Political rhetoric has grown increasingly violent and evidentiary studies show a link to real-world violence.¹ And after yet another senseless shooting at a school in Nashville this week, one Tennessee lawmaker lamented that there was simply nothing the government could do to stop gun violence.² *Really.*

Our duplicity is staggering. We condemn violence while also glorifying it. We respond to violence with violence, which only leads to more violence. There must be another way.

We believe that *Jesus came* to offer us another way. In his healing, he showed us the way to wholeness. In his teaching, he led us to a deeper righteousness. In his example, he demonstrated an emptying of self so we might belong to something greater – to God and to one another. And he didn’t resort to violence to do it.

But then there is the cross, what Paul called “a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.” The cross is the central symbol of our faith, yet also our greatest mystery. How are we to understand what happened on the cross? What is the meaning of such a violent and humiliating death of God’s Son? What does it mean to say, “Jesus died for our sins?”

Since the very beginning of our sacred story, humans have had to wrestle with the problem of sin. Sin is what moves us away from God and God’s hope for us, selfish actions (or inactions) that harm ourselves or one another, physically and spiritually. We cannot, on our own, resolve the problem of sin. And so was introduced the practice of sacrifice, an offering made to God, often in the form of an animal. The sacrificial system created a means of atoning for our sin and being made right with God. But sacrifice was always more about us than God:

¹ <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/04/09/how-hateful-rhetoric-connects-to-real-world-violence/>

² <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/video-of-nashville-school-shooting-renews-debate-over-how-to-prevent-attacks>

*What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?
says the Lord;
I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams
and the fat of fed beasts;
I do not delight in the blood of bulls
or of lambs or of goats. (Isaiah 1:11)*

*Sacrifice and offering you do not desire,
but you have given me an open ear.
Burnt offering and sin offering you have not required. (Psalm 40:6)*

*The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise. (Psalm 51:17)*

Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'" (Matthew 9:13)

The sacrificial system provided a means of atoning for sin, but it created the image of a God who works through violence and it made forgiveness into a transaction instead of a gift.

For much of Christian history, we have understood the Crucifixion as a sacrifice, the necessary payment to make us right with God. Death was the price to be paid for our sin, but Christ took our place, paying the penalty for us. That way of thinking about atonement made God into the Chief Sacrificer and turned the very idea of divine redemption into a kind of necessary violence. Is that really God's solution to the problem of sin? Or is it merely our preferred understanding? After all, if God solves problems through violence, then maybe that means we can, too.

The Letter to the Hebrews describes Christ's death on the cross as a sacrifice, but a very different kind of sacrifice than regular temple practice. His was a "once and for all" offering. Jesus's death wasn't to *fulfill* the sacrificial system but to *end* it. In the words of Will Willimon:

Atonement is not simply a transaction whereby Jesus paid our debt. Jesus is more than a divine afterthought, God's Plan B after our sin messed up God's Plan A. As Paul says, Christ, in his death and resurrection is the "kindness and love" of God, what God was doing all along.³

Jesus didn't come to change God's mind about us; Jesus came to change our minds about God. The cross shows us the depth of God's love for us, God who came to us in Christ. By taking upon himself the pain and suffering of the world, the anger and violence of the world, the sin and death of the world, Christ transformed it. His death was not an act of redemptive *violence*, but an act of transformation through redemptive *suffering*.

That distinction is critical, because it determines how we understand God's role in the cross. Again, if God solves problems through violence, then maybe that means we can, too. So if *violence* is redemptive, we end up with distortions like Christian nationalism, images of a triumphant Jesus carrying a flag in one hand and an assault rifle in the other, a twisted version of faith that is about dominance and moral superiority instead of humility and servant leadership. But if we understand the cross as an act of redemptive *suffering*, then we begin to understand that to follow Christ means to stand in solidarity with the poor and oppressed; with the left out and the left behind; with the least, the last, the lost, and the lonely. Jesus didn't summon an army of cultural warriors to impose their views on society. He called disciples to *deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow him* (Matthew 16:24) – to follow the way of self-denial, self-emptying, and yes, even suffering.

³ William H. Willimon. *God Turned Toward Us: The ABCs of Christian Faith*. Nashville: Abingdon Press (2021), 9.

But we must be careful here. Not all suffering is redemptive. God does not want you to stay in an abusive relationship, to silently endure emotional anguish, or to inflict harm upon yourself. Saving the world from sin is *Christ's* work, not ours. We are, however, called to lives of compassion – literally, “to suffer with” others – by walking alongside those who suffer, seeking deeper understanding, by not denying the darkness while seeking the light of hope.

The Good News of the Gospel is that God didn't come into the world to enact vengeance or to demand a blood sacrifice for our wickedness. God came to us in Christ to become one of us, to show us the lasting joy that comes from a life of service and right orientation to God. Christ broke down divisions, fed the hungry, healed the sick, lifted up the lowly. He knew what it was like to love *and* to lose, to feel joy *and* pain, to be in the company of others *and* to be lonely, to be praised *and* criticized. In other words, he knew what it is like to be us. He lived a fully human life, but he was also the incarnation of God. In that divine mystery, the one we call Emmanuel, God-with-us, loved us all the way to the cross. And because he was willing to suffer *with* us, he suffered *for* us, breaking forever the power of sin and death.

On this Passion Sunday, as we celebrate with palms and hosannas, let's turn our attention to the cross, because the cross changes everything. In Christ, God reconciled the world to Godself. Jesus took upon himself the worst the world could throw at him and transformed an instrument of death into a sign of life, humiliation into hope, foolishness into divine wisdom. The cross can change us from self-interested, self-centered, self-preserving individuals just trying to make our own way through life into a community of those who have been redeemed from sin to live for others, called and sent to be the hands and feet of Christ in the world.

There is too much violence in the world already. Let's not perpetuate it by turning God into a bloodthirsty tyrant, not even for a week. God didn't make Jesus die in our place. God *came* to us in Christ to set us free, to break the cycle of sin and hate and violence. I pray that we can learn to see the cross not as an act of redemptive violence, but as the ultimate act of healing – for you, for me, for us, for all. Thanks be to God. Amen.