

Calvary Episcopal Church
Ashland, Kentucky
Sermon for September 23, 2012 ~ Proper 20B
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It's not difficult to empathize with Jesus who found the disciples slow to understand what he was trying to teach them. I've had days like that when through preaching, teaching, and counseling I've tried to help people come to a deeper experience of God and God's will, only to be met with blank stares, or behavior that files in the face of all that Jesus stood for. On several occasions, I've even received anonymous fan mail from someone who misses the whole point.

It's not too difficult to empathize with the disciples, either. They were listening to Jesus with ears that had been filled with other messages for years. Their frame of reference was quite small and could not accommodate the bit picture Jesus was trying to show them. They were the descendants of people who had been hoping for a Messiah for hundreds of years and they had a preconceived notion of what that Messiah would be like. And, believe me, he wouldn't be born in a barn and die by capital punishment. They were expecting a kingly Messiah. They didn't understand and, like us, they didn't want to ask Jesus to explain himself further because they might expose their ignorance. And, besides, sometimes it seems better not to know things for the time being. Like the fear we have felt when the doctor makes a diagnosis and we hesitate to ask for more details. We understand a little and, in that, really understand more than we want!

They did not really listen because they suspected that perhaps some of the accumulating death would spill over and reach out and engulf them. They were afraid to press him further because they could see that his death might be contagious. After all, they had been identified with him in life. Would they be marked like him for death? Had they been too quick to follow him? Could he really be the Son of God? What happened to the idea of his becoming the kingly Messiah on whom they had pegged their hopes for the restoration of Israel? Was their hope of sitting at his right hand in the kingdom to be hammered to death on a cross? Was the "Way" they were walking with him actually the way of the cross?

They were afraid to ask the specific questions because the answers might get them in too deep. Isn't that the way it is with us? Don't you find it hard to deal with the idea that the way of the cross is the way of life? Nothing in the world in which we live seems to support the idea of the triumph of defeat. We really have trouble believing that the meek shall inherit the earth. To accept and live by that kind of wisdom can be a dangerous thing. Of course, living by the kind of wisdom the world gives us can be hazardous too. We don't often think of the consequences of limiting our understanding to human intelligence alone. The brightest people are not necessarily the smartest.

Henry Kissinger once told a make-believe story on himself. He said: "I was traveling across the country in an airplane with President Reagan, a Bishop, and a Boy Scout. As we were flying over the Rocky Mountains, there was some severe air turbulence and the plan appeared to be in trouble. The pilot's voice came over the intercom. He told us that he was going to bail out because the plane was going down. He advised that we do the same. However, he added, 'I should tell the four of you that there are just three parachutes back there.' Well, we could hear the sound as the pilot ejected from the aircraft. President Reagan stood up immediately and said, 'As President of this great nation, it is

imperative that I am saved, so I will take one of the parachutes.’ In a flash he was gone. I was the next to speak. I said, ‘I am the brightest man on earth and it is important that I stay alive.’ So, I grabbed parachute number two and was out the door as soon as I had it on my back. The Bishop looked at the Boy Scout and said, “Son, I’ve led a long and full life; I have a great deal of confidence in the hereafter. I want you to take the last parachute. You have a whole life ahead of you. Go and save yourself. ‘ The boy looked up at the noble Bishop and said, ‘Sir, I think we’re both going to be okay. The brightest man in the world just leaped out of the airplane with my backpack.’”

The brightest people are not necessarily the smartest! The most worldly wise among us may not grasp the significance of the wisdom of God or the message of the cross.

In this church, like most Episcopal churches and many others, a cross leads our processions. We love the sight of the cross going up and down the aisle just as those Christians in the time of Constantine loved to see the cross in procession through the streets where it had been illegal before. There is a reason we carry the cross. It is a forceful reminder of the strange paradox of the gospel of Jesus – the triumph of defeat. It reminds us every week that the way of life, the way to God, the way to wisdom, is the way of the cross. It is important that we carry it because it is so easy to forget in a world where the sign of the cross is so often replaced by the dollar sign.

I’m reminded of the church where the youth choir was going to sing one Sunday. It was a church where they had not used a processional cross before but someone had found one for that service. They thought it would be just great to have it lead them as everyone sang “Onward Christian Soldiers.” Just before the procession, the minister discovered their plan and took the cross from them because he feared an unfavorable reaction from certain members of the congregation who usually got upset whenever something happened they didn’t understand or weren’t accustomed to doing. He put the cross behind the door leading into the nave. But the youngsters were not to be outdone. They quickly regrouped and when they entered the church, they sang, “Onward Christian soldiers, marching as to war, with the cross of Jesus, hid behind the door.”

Behind the door! That’s where the disciples wanted to put it. Out of sight, out of mind. Jesus talked about a cross; they talked about greatness. And this has been the story of people ever since. It is hard to accept the cruciform way of life. Someone always wants there to be an easier, less costly way. When people come to worship, we want them to see the celebration of a victorious faith. But the cross looms above all of this, constantly declaring that *this* ceremony is a Christian one. That means it’s all upside down. The triumph we celebrate had to die to live, had to lose to win, had to step down before it could step up.

These are not the robes of kings. They are the garments of death, clothes of burial, the vesture of servants of all. At this font, people are “buried with Christ” in baptism so that they might rise with him to new and unending life in the kingdom. At this table, we commemorate the last meal of a dying God. That’s what it has to be in order for it to be a resurrection feast, the banquet foretold by the prophets, which would inaugurate the new kingdom.

We who are to be citizens of this new realm come here, most of us afraid to ask the details and the implications of his death for our lives. So, we come weak-kneed and trembling and he meets us. He pours out his life to give us strength to continue in the way of the cross. We marvel at the way he

shows his greatness by stooping to serve us in our need. And when we rise to leave, the trembling goes away because fear has given way to grace and joy and peace. His blood is flowing through our veins and we are strong and confident.

We reaffirm those familiar words of George MacLeod of the Iona Community in Scotland, who said: “Jesus Christ was not crucified in a cathedral between two candles, but on a cross between two thieves: on the town garbage heap; on a crossroads so cosmopolitan that they had to write his title in Hebrew and Latin and Greek: at the kind of place where cynics talk smut and thieves curse and soldiers gamble. Because this is where he died and that is what he died about, that is where [Christians] should be and that is what [Christians] should be about.”

At the cross...there is where salvation begins and healing and wholeness are ours, because, finally we are his! Being handed over into the hands of *our* enemies is participation in salvation. Receiving and showing hospitality to those who are most vulnerable, weakest, and have nothing to offer in return is participation in salvation. First place goes to the one who puts himself or herself last. The servants are the greatest of all. And, when we learn from Jesus how to put our lives on the line with his and learn to receive whoever comes our way without expectation of personal reward, as one would receive a child, we begin to know what true greatness is.

Along the way, as they traveled together, Jesus took apart the frame of reference of the disciples and redesigned it in the shape of a cross, against the backdrop of creation itself. Thus, it permits us to see the canvass that was before too large to fit. He wants to do the same for each of us; to transform our frame of reference into a cross. When we allow him to do that for us, we can begin to see things from his perspective and begin to understand his ways. Even a tithe doesn't seem too much anymore. The cross stands at the center of our faith. It is planted in the wisdom at the center of all creation. And, it is highly contagious!