

## Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

\*On the 26<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the church.

### **A Community of the Cross**

(selected passages from Galatians)

#### **Introduction: How do you say “Happy birthday, church!”?...**

In his book, The Cross of Christ, (one of the very best books on the cross I have ever read) John Stott describes a painting by the British artist, William Holman Hunt, called “The Shadow of Death.”

The painting depicts the inside of the carpenter’s shop in Nazareth. Stripped to the waist for work, Jesus is portrayed as a young adult. He is standing by a wooden trestle on which he has put down His saw. He lifts His eyes. We can’t tell if the look on His face is pain or ecstasy.

He stretches, raising both arms above His head. The sunlight streaming through the open doors casts a shadow in the form of a cross on the wall behind Him, where His tool-rack looks like a horizontal bar on which His hands have been crucified.<sup>1</sup>

While the idea of the painting is historically fictitious, it is theologically brilliant because it is true that from Jesus’ birth forward the cross cast a long shadow over His life. His DEATH was central to His life and mission - and this is something that the church has always recognized.

So, on this, the 26<sup>th</sup> birthday of our church, we’re going to go back to the basics. We’ll start at square one. And for us, square one is the cross of Christ.

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<sup>1</sup> In the left foreground of the painting a woman kneels among the wood chippings. Her hands are resting on the chest in which the rich gifts of the Magi are kept. We can’t see her face because she is looking at Jesus. But we know that she is Mary. She looks startled at her son’s cross-like shadow on the wall.

The cross drives our praise and worship. The cross drives us to honor God with our lives. The cross drives our witness to the world. The cross is our boast!

There is no question that the cross is the centerpiece of our faith. For two thousand years, the church has been a community united at the foot of the cross.

It is an empty cross. We understand that Jesus is no longer on the cross. Nor is He in the grave. “He is not here!” were the angel’s words to the women on Easter Sunday morning.

Today, we affirm, He is not in the grave. He was raised from the dead. And He is not on the cross. But we, Jesus’ disciples, are continually drawn to the cross. It is the place where love and justice met. It is the place where our Savior died.

And if our hearts did not draw us to the cross (and they do) we would be drawn to it by our reading of the New Testament. That is because the message of the cross is everywhere in the New Testament.

In the writings of John, Peter and Paul, the focus is NOT on the physical suffering Jesus endured<sup>2</sup> but on the **accomplishments** of the cross. Those accomplishments are astounding.

We find about the best example of this tendency to center everything on the cross in the letter to the Galatians. Throughout Galatians the apostle Paul demonstrates the pervasive influence of the cross for us who believe. And on this anniversary Sunday morning, I’d like to highlight just three of those pervasive influences.

The first has to do with the forgiveness that we receive by virtue of Jesus’ death on the cross.

Paul began Galatians with a crucifixion focus, by including a reference to the cross in the opening salutation of the first chapter.

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<sup>2</sup> Although that is not ignored.

## The Cross - The Ground of Our Forgiveness (1:1-4)

*[1] Paul, an apostle (not sent from men nor through the agency of man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised Him from the dead), [2] and all the brethren who are with me, To the churches of Galatia: [3] Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, [4] who gave Himself for our sins so that He might rescue us from this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, [5] to whom be the glory forevermore. Amen.*

### Jesus Died VOLUNTARILY

The first thing to note from these words is that Jesus' death was voluntary. He **"gave Himself."** That is the consistent theme of the New Testament.<sup>3</sup>

He willingly went to the cross. He died the gruesome death He did as a volunteer, not because He was drafted.<sup>4</sup>

I don't know what emotions stir in you as you reflect on the idea that Jesus left Heaven to come to earth to die voluntarily? That He did what He did on purpose. But we need to realize that while it is true that **"the Father sent the Son"**<sup>5</sup> the Son came to earth willingly to die.

And, Paul goes on to tell us WHY Jesus volunteered to die: **"He gave Himself for our sins."**

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<sup>3</sup> In Luke's Gospel, we read that Jesus "set His face resolutely" to go up to Jerusalem to die. In John, Jesus repeatedly made reference to the fact that He was "giving up" His life (as opposed to the idea that someone was going to take His life from Him). Matthew and Mark both record King Jesus marching forward to meet those who were arresting Him in the Garden of Gentlemen, knowing full well that to do so was to invite the cross. In the same way, Mark tells us that Jesus answered the High Priest's question about His identity in such a way that there would be no avoiding crucifixion. Caiaphas asked Jesus if He was the Son of God, and He replied, **[Mark 14:62] And Jesus said, "I am; and you shall see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven."**

<sup>4</sup> We're not denying that it is also true that the Father sent the Son. But we should never think that the Father sent the Son to do something that the Son did not want to do.

<sup>5</sup> John 5:36; 20:21; 1 John 4:14

## Jesus Died FOR OUR SINS

*The wages of sin is death...*

From Genesis forward, the Bible tells us that the penalty for sin is death. It was true in the Garden of Eden. Paul reaffirmed in Romans 6:23 that **"the wages of sin is death."**

Everyone who sins, dies. We die physically AND we die spiritually, too. That living, vital relationship with God for which we were created is dead because of sin.

The only exception to the rule (everyone dies because of their sin) was Jesus! So He did not **need** to die for His own sin. And in fact, it was not for His own sins that He died.

*...but it was our sin (not His own) for which Jesus died.*

Galatians 1:4 tells us that He gave Himself to die for **OUR SINS**. On the cross, Jesus took the role of "substitute."

In school, the substitute takes the place of the regular teacher. In sports, the sub takes the place of the starter.

As our Substitute, Jesus replaced the condemned sinner (ME! YOU!) and took his/her place.

And this act of substitution rescued us.

### Jesus' Death Was To Rescue Us.

*Rescuer or rescuee?*

Most of us don't like to think of ourselves as needing to be rescued. I like to think of myself coming alongside the ones who need to be rescued. I have grandiose dreams of being the rescuER, not the rescuEE, the hero (even the SUPER hero!), not the damsel in distress.

Do you ever have dreams of being a rescuer? Dashing in to save someone from a raging fire?; jumping overboard to rescue a drowning person?

Those are wonderful images. But the Bible clearly teaches that every one of us have sinned - we were in desperate straits.

Spiritually speaking, we were drowning, going down for the third time. We didn't have a chance to survive because we were being dragged down by the weight of our sin. We needed Someone strong enough to pull us out of the water!

And here comes Jesus! He plucked us out of mortal danger and delivered us safely back to shore. Praise the Lord!

But, we can't miss that He rescued us at the greatest possible personal expense.

*How the cross provided the rescue*

***[3:13] Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree”***

Jesus became the curse of God for you and me. He died the death we deserved to die. He took the punishment that was due us. He suffered the wrath of God that should have come our way.

Justice demanded that sin be punished - and in love Jesus took that punishment.<sup>6</sup>

We often hear the phrase, “Whatever it take” to describe someone's commitment to accomplish something. Well, God the Father and God the Son showed a willingness to do **WHATEVER IT TOOK** to bring salvation to us - even if it meant the death of Jesus!

We affirm this morning, that we are a people who have been forgiven - saved from our sin - by the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross.

But we don't exhaust the accomplishments of the cross by considering only eternal life, deliverance from the bondage of sin, redemption and reconciliation with God.

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<sup>6</sup> As many have observed, at the cross there was the perfect marriage of justice and love.

No, the cross is also part of the essential equipment we need if we would lead a God-honoring life.

Paul makes a couple of comments at the end of a long narrative in Galatians that have captured my imagination (maybe yours?) for a long time.

### **The Cross - The Basis Of Community**

#### **Introduction:** Our Participation in the Cross

He writes, *[20] I have been crucified with Christ...*

According to Paul, not only has Christ been crucified (an historical fact), but having placed my faith in Him, I, too, have been crucified.

Certainly, we have not been crucified physically. But, because of our union with Him through faith, Paul says that we share in His death. We'll see what THAT means as we come to understand WHEN Paul made that point.

To do that, we have to go back to the beginning of Galatians, chapter two.

#### **Visit #1: Antioch - Jerusalem (Galatians 2:1-10)**

***[1] Then after an interval of fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along also. [2] And it was because of a revelation that I went up; and I submitted to them the gospel which I preach among the Gentiles, but I did so in private to those who were of reputation, for fear that I might be running, or had run, in vain.***

The second chapter begins as Paul tells us about a journey he and Barnabas and Titus made from Antioch<sup>7</sup> to Jerusalem.

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<sup>7</sup> If our chronology is correct, Paul was absent from Jerusalem for around ten years. During the years of his absence, he probably had been serving the Lord in Syria and Cilicia, with his “home base” being that great church at Antioch (**Syrian** Antioch, not **Pisidian** Antioch).

They had taken money with them to support Christians in Jerusalem who were suffering from persecution and from a famine.<sup>8</sup>

While there, they enjoyed great fellowship with the leaders of the Jerusalem church - James (Jesus' half-brother) and Peter and John are mentioned.

It was a friendly, edifying, encouraging, helpful, bridge-building visit between the Mother Church (Jerusalem) and the leader of the other great church of that day - the church at Antioch.<sup>9</sup>

This visit was followed by another visit. We trace the route of the second visit from Jerusalem to Antioch.

### **Visit #2: Jerusalem - Antioch (Galatians 2:11-21)**

After some period of time (several months at least, maybe a couple of years), Simon Peter decided that he would go and visit his Christian friends in Antioch.

Once there, he had the time of his life!

The church at Antioch was comprised mainly of Gentiles. And Peter (who had received a vision from God assuring him that he should no longer consider anything unclear - kosher was declared passé) initially fit right in to that church!

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<sup>8</sup> We know it was the famine relief visit because of what we learn in Acts 11:27-30. *[27] Now at this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. [28] And one of them named Agabus stood up and began to indicate by the Spirit that there would certainly be a great famine all over the world. And this took place in the reign of Claudius. [29] And in the proportion that any of the disciples had means, each of them determined to send a contribution for the relief of the brethren living in Judea. [30] And this they did, sending it in charge of Barnabas and Saul to the elders.*

<sup>9</sup> There was one controversy during this visit that concerned Titus. The strict Jewish Christians wanted Titus, a Gentile, to be circumcised according to the Law of Moses. Paul's argument, though, that Titus should not be compelled to live like a Jew since he was not a Jew, won the day. (see Galatians 2:3-5)

He enjoyed the fellowship there. He hung with the Gentiles, ate with the Gentiles, and ate what the Gentiles ate (hot dogs, pork chops, sausage and bacon - all violations of Jewish kosher laws!).

Things were going great... - until a few of the heavyweights from Jerusalem came to visit Antioch. And when they showed up on the scene, looking down their noses in contempt at the Gentiles what did Peter do?

Did he stand up to these super-scrupulous brothers? Did he patiently explain to them that having fellowship with Gentiles was exactly right?

NO! He capitulated!

He withdrew from table fellowship and started treated the Gentile Christians in Antioch like second-class citizens in the Kingdom of God! He refused to hang with them anymore, wouldn't eat with them anymore, wouldn't eat what they ate anymore.

And when Paul saw what Peter was doing, he called Peter on the carpet for his hypocrisy.

*[11] But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face<sup>10</sup>, because he stood condemned [12] For prior to the coming of certain men from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he began to withdraw<sup>11</sup> and hold himself aloof, fearing the party of the circumcision.*

Now, let's review what it was that Peter had done. He had withdrawn from eating his meals with the Gentiles in Antioch. That was all.

And because of that, Paul accused Peter of hypocrisy AND of not being straightforward about the truth of the Gospel!<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Paul gives the Galatians further evidence of his apostolic authority by resisting Peter.

<sup>11</sup> Word used to describe the pulling back of troops in battle.

<sup>12</sup> This is the third time Peter and Paul had been together. They first met when Paul went to Jerusalem, recorded in Gal. 1:18 and Acts 9:26-30. They saw each other again when Paul, Barnabas, and Titus brought the famine relief money from Antioch to Jerusalem. Now, at their third meeting, Paul rebukes Peter for hypocrisy.

And at the end of the passage, he explains why Peter's behavior was so reprehensible:

***[20] I (Implied - and so has Peter!) have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and delivered Himself up for me. [21] I<sup>13</sup> do not nullify the grace of God; for if righteousness comes through the Law, then Christ died needlessly.***

The logic runs:

- Christ was crucified. He died. Now, this life and its pressures no longer have a hold on Him.
- I, who have placed my trust in this crucified (and resurrected!) Christ have also died to this life and its pressures/temptations.
- The old "ME" - the ME that was alive to sin and to temptation - is now dead.

Since we are not now who we used to be it THEREFORE makes no sense to live as we used to live!

The cross - and our participation in it - has changed everything! It means that you and I now can live lovingly, unhypocritically, freely, joyfully!

Paul kept the message and the implications of the cross at the forefront of his mind, and was equipped to love powerfully. Peter forgot (or put aside) the simple truths of the message of the cross, stumbled, and in his stumbling, hurt others and the work of God.

The key to any future effectiveness for our church is tied to our all **OWNING** what Paul says here: ***"I have been crucified with Christ."***

When someone comes to Jesus by faith, they die to the godless pulls and the pressures of this world. They are made alive to God and His ways. They are able to lead powerful, loving, serving lives that honor the Lord.

So today, we affirm that we can love sacrificially, because we have been loved perfectly by Jesus. We are a people who can pursue personal holiness because of what Christ has done for us on the cross.

The cross is the driving force behind our salvation and it is the engine that drives our ability to live the Christian life. The cross is also the content of the message we bring to those who have not yet come to faith in Christ.

As Paul shows us in Galatians, the cross was certainly the content of his own evangelistic presentation.

### **The Cross - The Subject of Our Witness**

#### **Our Method - To Present Christ Crucified**

***[3:1] You foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified?***

When Paul came to the Galatian region, he made it his aim to so vividly present Christ crucified, that it would be as if his audience was actually watching the crucifixion take place before their very eyes.

In fact, one of the greatest goals in telling any story is to turn people's ears into eyes, so that they can see what we are talking about.

That's what witnesses do who are describing a three car pile-up to a police officer. It's what sports fans do when describing a heart-breaking, season-ending Spurs loss to a friend. That's what parents do when making up a bedtime story for their kids. And that's what Christians do who tell a friend the best story of all - the story of Jesus.

We want to turn ears into eyes. Paul made it his personal aim to tell the Galatians about the cross in such a way that they would see it for what it was - the wedding of God's love and justice.

At the same time, it was the message of the cross that got Paul in trouble.

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<sup>13</sup> We need to hear Paul emphasizing the word "**I**" in verse 21. He is claiming that he did not nullify grace - but is accusing Peter of doing so!

Persecution followed him from town to town as he kept on preaching that the God-Man was nailed to a Roman cross on the Jewish charge of blasphemy and the Roman charge of treason.

Had Paul simply shifted the emphasis of his message away from the cross, he would have avoided much of the persecution, beatings, and rejections he encountered.

But listen to what he says in Galatians 5:11.

### **Our Passion - To Keep the Message Clear**

*[11] But I, brethren, if I still preach circumcision, why am I still persecuted? Then the stumbling block of the cross has been abolished.*

Paul would have received WAY better treatment in the cities he visited if he had ignored, stayed quiet about or otherwise downplayed the message of the cross.

After all, the cross was regarded by the average Roman citizen as an object of shame and loathing.

But, the one thing he resolutely refused to do was lessen the emphasis on Jesus crucified. The message of the Gospel was, for Paul, inextricably tied to the message of the CROSS.

It doesn't help to soften the message of the Gospel by lessening the emphasis on the cross. Subtracting the cross reduces the Gospel to be-good-ism.

Nor does it help to fiddle with or add anything to the message of the cross. It doesn't help to add good works or good intentions. When it comes to the message of the cross, additions only subtract.

For Paul to have NOT emphasized the cross would have made it easier on him. But, to take the focus away from the cross would have stripped away the very thing that gives the message its power.

It is my prayer that in the years to come, our church will become more and more a maternity ward in which the cries of joy from new-born-again believers are constantly heard.

And I personally believe that this will happen as we increasingly seek to turn our friends' ears into eyes, portray Jesus, crucified, and embrace the centrality of the cross to the message of the Gospel.

It is at the moment of our greatest disappointments and struggles that we see the cross at its most powerful. It is at that time that remembering these words: "*Jesus loved me so much that He died on the cross for me*" will bring genuinely encouragement.

And that is why Paul says what he does in the final chapter of Galatians.

### **Conclusion: The Cross - The Object of Our Boast**

*[14] But may it never be that I would boast,<sup>14</sup> except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.*

Whatever we "boast about" engrosses our attention, and absorbs our time and energy.

These days, people boast about a variety of things. Politicians boast about their ability to effect change. Moms and dads boast about their kids' exploits.

Kids boast about their athletic prowess or academic skill. Those competing in the marketplace boast about sales, commissions, acquisitions, and promotions.

Christians?

We boast about the cross of Jesus. The cross drives our praise. Nothing moves us like the cross does.

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<sup>14</sup> The Greek word for "boast" here is difficult to translate into English. It carries a broad field of meaning, including "to brag about something" "to revel in something" "to trust in something" and "to live for something."

In the Old Testament, the Exodus was the main event. Whenever people in the Old Testament era wanted to praise God for His great acts, the first thing mentioned was the deliverance of Israel from Egypt by the parted Red Sea.

Now, the cross of Jesus has superseded the Exodus. There is nothing like the cross and the conclusion of the cross event: the resurrection.

When we think about the greatest things that God has ever done, nothing comes before the cross.

It is essentially the basis for everything we do as Christians. In short, we are a people who are motivated to live for God by the cross more than by anything else in the world.

Happy Birthday, indeed!

We are today what we began to be in 1982 - a community of the cross. By God's grace, the future will find us every bit as committed to the message of the cross as we are this day!