

The Beauty of the Cross One Cross + 3 Nails = 4 Givenness

Texts: Jeremiah 31:31-34

Hebrews 5:5-10 (Series B, 5th Sunday in Lent) Ps. 51:1-12 or Ps. 119:9-16

John 12:20-33

Prayer:

Luther Burbank was an agricultural scientist who took an interest in the common *field daisy* that was an outcast weed despised by the farmers in the East. He crossed it with the *Japanese daisy* and an *English daisy* and produced the *Shasta daisy*, a flower whose beautiful bloom has grown as much as two feet in diameter, and which will last up to six weeks when cut.

Burbank went on to transform other despised and worthless plants into plants of beauty and usefulness. He said, "It is my theory that there are no outcasts in nature; everything has a use, and everything in nature is beautiful if we are eager to dignify it. Every weed is a possible beautiful flower." *Sheryl Beller -Kenner.... Once told me that there are no bad weeds, they are plants with a purpose, we just don't know it.*

This is also the paradox of the cross. We could as easily consider the ugliness of the cross as the beauty of it. One is as real as the other. At one time in history the cross was the most gruesome object of horror that could be imagined.

Cicero the Roman said, "*The cross speaks of that which is so shameful, so horrible, that it should not be mentioned in polite society.*" It was so horrible to die on the cross.

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No one ever dreamed that the cross would someday become a universal decoration and design for jewellery. You can buy a cross made of precious metal and with diamonds or any other precious stones.

This would have sounded as incredible to the ancients as the idea would sound to us today of wearing a *hangman's noose* as a silver pin, or hanging a picture of instrument of execution (*as such an electric chair*) in your living room.

Weeds being transformed into flowers is amazing, but nothing can compare with the wonder of the cross being transformed from a symbol of *horror* and *death* to a symbol of *beauty* and *life*. Jesus converted everything He touched, and one of the most radical conversions of all was the conversion of the cross.

The central hour of all history has come, and God's purpose is to be fulfilled. The beauty of the cross is the beauty of a finished project, plan, and purpose. "*The First Night Outside Paradise.*"

When Adam, and Eve were driven out of Eden, and they looked back. An angel with a flaming sword guards the gate. Looking at the angel, however, for above him illuminating the sky is the bright outline of a cross. Their eyes are lifted, and they are staring at the cross.

The cross was in God's plan from the beginning. There was only one bridge that could span the gulf between *paradise lost* and *paradise regained*, and that was the cross. No one could get past the angel's flaming sword until God solved the sin problem through an atonement for all people. Adam and Eve couldn't go back, you and I couldn't go back paradise until the sin problem was solved.

Jesus knew the hour had come to fulfill the purpose of God for all people, both Jews and Gentiles. No longer would He be limited to Israel. He says in verse 32, "*when I am lifted up I will draw all people to myself.*"

From the perspective of the divine plan and purpose the cross was the beautiful fulfillment. Jesus saying to the thief beside him, "*This day thou shalt be with me in paradise.*"

The hour had come to open the *gate of paradise* where people could once again enter the presence of God. On the cross Jesus reconciled God and humanity and made it possible for people to be forgiven and cleansed of all sin. What could be more beautiful than the gate to paradise? The *cross* was that gate.

Jesus says that a grain of wheat must fall into the earth and die or it remains alone, but if it dies it bears much fruit. Death is a means to productiveness in nature. Jesus uses an illustration from nature, for the Greeks would understand this. For without the shedding of blood, and death there is no remission of sin. St. Augustine said, *"The death of Christ was the death of the most fertile grain of wheat."*

The cross was not the termination of His life, but the germination of His life. The cross became the most productive tree ever. This is the very tree of life, and all of the fruits of the Spirit, and all of the fruits of Christianity in history are offshoots from the cross. The beauty of the cross is the beauty of its productiveness.

In verse 25 Jesus says, *"He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life."* The world says that self-preservation is the law of life, but Jesus says we must go beyond this law into the higher law where self-sacrifice is the way to life. People who seek only to preserve their life and refuse to risk it, or invest it in the lives of others, abide alone like a seed in a box.

They *reason*: If you fall in love, your chances of being hurt are greater. The more you get involved with people, the more you open yourself up to wounds and heartache. The way to escape all of this is to live for self alone.

Love your life only, and no other, and then your problems will be few, and your burdens light. This is the logic that leads to loss of life is what Jesus is saying. The way to abundant life is in following the principle of the cross, which is self-sacrifice.

Many people feel it is such a waste for missionaries to bury themselves in pagan lands and give up so many of the good things of life, but from the perspective of Christ it is beautiful.

In the year 826 a young Monk only 25 yrs old, he felt God was leading him to bring the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the Vikings. His name is Ansgar from France. St. Ansgar was the first missionary to Scandinavia, he worked tirelessly until February 3, 865 at the age of 64 he fell ill and died. Through his mission work Christianity was introduced to Denmark and beyond.

Just look at me I am a product of missionary work on the west coast of Africa. Just to name few from their inscription on tomb stones in the church cemetery in Ada Foah my home in Ghana: *Fritz Delius (Valdorf, Germany), Alfred Furrer (Baby), Paul Kitcher, Ernest Twynam, Henry Davies (Scotland), Daniel Holomah*. These men and women followed the principle of the cross. They worked for decades without any obvious results.

But today they have been rewarded for their labour of sacrifice. As many congregations have been established around the country from this fishing village. The world says *survival* at any cost, but Jesus says *sacrifice* at any cost. He said, "*Take up the cross and follow Me.*" It is the way to life.

This principle is one that Jesus repeats more than any other: Twice in Matthew, twice in Luke, and once in Mark, and here. The beauty of this cross is that it will lead our lives to being purposeful and productive, as was that of Christ.

On a lesser scale each of us, like Christ, can fulfill God's purpose in history. To become a part of the beauty of the cross we must abandon the principle of *self* and *safety* first and follow Christ in sacrificing ourselves for others.

A little girl once spoke to her mother and asked, "*Why are you so ugly mother?*" The mother said, "Come here my darling and I will tell you." It was time for the secret to be told, and so she explained why her face is disfigured.

She told her that a fire had broken out in the home when the girl was only a baby. The mother was at a neighbour's house, and when she rushed home she plunged into the flames to get to the child. She saved the child, but not without great cost to her own body. The scars she bore were the result.

After the child heard this story she was overwhelmed with love, and in tears she cried out, "*Mother, you are the most beautiful person in the world.*" Ugliness can become beautiful when you can see it from the right perspective.

For me, in this 5th Sunday in Lent, it is time again that I consciously think more about what it *all* means for me now and especially for *my eternal life*. How do I break out of my self-protecting shell and be rooted again in Christ, growing, blossoming in Holy Ground?

Jesus tells his disciples about the grain of wheat that must die in order to bear fruit. It is a cue for me to remember that my life in this world is brief and shortening with every day that passes.

It is time for me to crack open the seed of wisdom and truth in the ground of my being, to grow its fruit in my soul, and perhaps, along the Way, it may plant a few seeds in others.

When we see the sacrifice of the cross and what it did for us, then we see the beauty of the cross. We are in the Lenten season in the lead up to Good Friday and the Easter celebrations. As we follow Jesus on his way to the cross, we are reminded of all that he has done for us.

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Whatever your cross. Whatever your pain.
There will always be sunshine. After the rain.
Perhaps we may stumble.
Perhaps even fall, but God's always there.
To help us through it all.

Amen.

March 17, 2024