

The Cross Is About God's Love

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[0 : 0 0] Hey everybody, my name is Anthony Parrott and I get to serve as the lead pastor here at the Table Church. Thank you so much for joining us. This is Palm Sunday.

This kicks off something in the church calendar called Holy Week or maybe called Passion Week, depending on your tradition. And basically we are remembering and in some ways reliving the last week of Jesus' ministry on earth from when he entered in Jerusalem, from when he was crucified, and then what Christians believe is that Jesus was raised from the dead.

And this is the week when we celebrate and remember all of that. So thanks for joining us and thanks for taking part. Before we get started in today's message, I want to say just a couple things. That since the last time I've preached, I haven't really had a chance to talk about some of the mass shootings and murders that have gone in our country.

And, you know, I have so many conflicted feelings about even talking about it. Not because my feelings are conflicted, but because like why do I need to talk about this? Like it should be obvious that, you know, racist and sexist murdering of people is wrong.

And yet it does not get condemned as often as you think it might. And Christians in particular, Christianity, Christian churches, Christian leaders and preachers, oftentimes have trouble just saying things like racism is wrong, that murder is wrong, that a culture that thrives on and depends on violence and gun ownership is wrong.

[1 : 4 0] And it is. And so you would think that I wouldn't have to go around saying that. Like you think that would just kind of be obvious. And yet we live in this culture where you can't necessarily expect a preacher or a pastor or a church would go out and say, condemn these things as utterly wrong.

And not just like, you know, you know, okay, great, fine. Maybe none of us watching are going to go pick up a gun and go on a shooting spree. But it's deeper than that, isn't it?

It's not just that we get to pat ourselves on the back for not being mass murderers or going around explicitly saying racist things. We are also part of a deeper culture that says, you know, Asian Americans are the model minority because they behave just like white people.

No, that's a problem too. Or we're part of a culture that says that, you know, men, if you find yourself lusting after somebody, well, then you need to take care of the enemy, which are women.

And yes, there are really curriculums for men who struggle with sexual temptation that call women the enemy, that we have to fight a battle against. This is wrong.

[2 : 5 2] So we've got a lot to talk about when it comes to this. And we can't do it all today, though I think we might be glancing upon this subject and you'll see how. But I want to say I'm sorry for the ways that the church global, the church Americana, has perpetrated this kind of violence and a kind of culture that sees this kind of language as okay.

And language creates culture. And language can oftentimes create permission in our imaginations, in our minds, in our guts, in our souls, in our hearts for what we think is acceptable behavior.

And it is no accident that in a country that considers itself Bible-based and historically Christian that we struggle with violence like none other. So, okay, with that, we're talking about the death of Jesus today.

We don't have like a traditional Good Friday service. And so I thought it would be important for us to spend Palm Sunday talking about why Jesus had to die and why the symbol of Christianity is the cross.

And, you know, we oftentimes have been told some lies about this or just some mistaken ideas, like a really bad game of historical telephone, where the reasons why Jesus had to die get passed on, get passed on, get passed on, until we end up with an idea that God is committing cosmic child abuse against his own son in order for God to be able to forgive us.

[4 : 30] Otherwise, he couldn't. So that's a problem. Let's talk about it. There's this wonderful episode of This American Life, which is all about misconceptions, specifically misconceptions that you had as a child that you brought into adulthood and didn't get corrected until it was very embarrassingly corrected as a grown-up.

For instance, they tell a story about a guy who, you know, the Nielsen system, like the Nielsen rating system. It's the company that determines like how many people watch the Super Bowl or, you know, How I Met Your Mother or some like, you know, streaming show or whatever.

And the guy, like, knew about Nielsen and was under the conception, under the understanding that everybody who was giving the Nielsen system their ratings had the last name of Nielsen, that they just based, like, all TV popularity based off of families with the last name of Nielsen.

And he says this to a friend. He says, isn't it weird that all the families who rate TV shows have the last name Nielsen? To which his friend just has, like, a moment of silence. I'm like, dude, you know that's not right.

There's another example where a guy sitting with his friend, he's in his 20s, they're at a bench in a park and some deer pass by. And the guy says, you know, they really should put up a deer zing sign here.

[5 : 44] And the other friend just sits in silence for a long time and finally says, you know, zing isn't a word, right? There was somebody who thought that misled was pronounced misled, like some form of Yiddish.

And it was the past tense of miseling someone to misel. There was somebody else who thought that quesadilla was Spanish for what's the deal? So, you know, imagine, like, a Seinfeld-esque, like, guy hanging out his window, yelling at, like, a driver, like, quesadilla, what's the deal?

There was somebody else who thought that unicorns were real. Because, like, why are unicorns that much more far-fetched than, like, a zebra or dinosaurs?

And so they were like, you know, you know, I've never actually seen a unicorn before. And, like, this group of friends is like, sweetheart, oh dear. By the way, misled quesadilla unicorns would be a great band name.

Now, if you have a misconception that you have carried into adulthood, wouldn't you want it to be corrected at some point before you end up, like, with a group of friends or maybe in front of a camera preaching to a couple hundred people?

[6 : 59] Wouldn't you want it to be corrected at some point? It's like if you got that piece of broccoli stuck in your teeth. Wouldn't you rather have someone point it out to you than be walking around looking like a hygienic maniac for the rest of the day?

Now, each of us, we all have grown up with conceptions and misconceptions about what God is like, who God is. Perhaps we imagined him, and Meg mentioned this in Megan Lexi's wonderful sermon last week.

Like, we get these conceptions of God passed on to us, quite often by people who might look like us. We have these perceptions of maybe of God as like an old man with a long beard sitting in a throne room.

Or, you know, maybe we thought that the God of the Old Testament was like really angry and then got some therapy and came out the other side and wrote the New Testament. Here's the thing. But whenever we ascribe a characteristic to God that's not true, we're actually engaging—this is biblical language—we're actually engaging in idolatry.

We're shaping God in our own image. The book of 1 John, chapter 5, puts it in even more blunt terms. If we don't believe what God has said about himself, we're actually calling God a liar.

[8 : 21] Pretty blunt. So, it behooves us. It is worthy of our time to study God's Word, to study Scripture, which I believe is God's testimony about God's self, and to believe what it actually says.

You know, with study and interpretation and paying attention to those who know what they're talking about, but to, like, pay attention to it, to study it, and to believe it, to not just believe our misconceptions about God, not just believe the lies that someone has told us, we have to be willing to unlearn what we've learned about God, engage with God's Word and God's community of people, and with God relationally in prayer and worship and community and mission.

Alvin Toffler put it like this. He said, The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn.

Unlearning is a crucial aspect of learning, and we have lots to unlearn about God. So, let's not be illiterate Christians.

Let's unlearn and relearn together. So, this is the question for the day. Why did Jesus die? Why did Jesus die? It is a massive and important question for Christians.

[9 : 44] Why did this, what we believe, massively, historically significant event take place? And there are a thousand facets to the diamond of this question.

And there are some good answers that we could talk about, and some really, really bad answers out there as well. Let's see if this one sounds familiar to you. There's a story out there that says that God created humans that were innocent.

Humans, however, rebelled against God. So far, so good. But here's where the story, I think, gets weird. God, because of his infinite holiness and perfection and righteousness and justice, could not stand to be with sinful humanity.

He could not bear to even look at them or to get close to them. In fact, because of God's justice, God had to, needed to, kill humanity.

And that was the only thing that could be done if God were to be just. God perhaps would have even liked to be in relationship with humans. But because of the legal concept of justice, God's hands are proverbially tied.

[10 : 51] But then along comes Jesus. And Jesus says to the Father, Whatever wrath or punishment or anger or discipline you had in mind for humans, I will take it instead, Jesus says.

So the Father, God the Father, out of a need to be just and to punish sin, aims his wrath at humanity and hits Jesus instead. One writer even says, It pleased God to bruise Jesus.

So the Father abandons Jesus on the cross. Jesus dies. And now Jesus stands in the way of the Father's righteous anger, standing forever as our mediator, preventing us from being rightfully, justly destroyed by God.

Imagine a parable like this. There was a father who had two sons. This might sound familiar. The younger son demanded his inheritance. And he went and indulged in wild living.

However, the younger son came to his senses and went back to the father, asking for forgiveness. And the father says, I'm sorry, I can't forgive you. It would be against the moral order of the universe.

[11 : 58] Such is the severity of my justice, that reconciliation will not be made unless the penalty is utterly paid. My wrath, my avenging justice must be placated.

So the older son offers to do some extra work in the fields to pay for the younger son's penalty. And finally, when the older brother dies of exhaustion, the father's wrath is placated against his younger son.

And they live happily ever after the remainder of their days. In other words, many of us have been led to believe or have been explicitly taught that Jesus died to save us from God.

That's a version of the gospel. I even struggle to say that because it's not good news, but a version of the gospel, the good news, that Jesus died to save us from God's righteous anger and wrath.

But to say that Jesus died to save us from God makes as much sense biblically as my old quesadilla unicorns.

[13 : 09] Because of a far too simplistic understanding or explanation of the gospel, we have carried this nonsense right up to this day. We end up saying things that are biblically nonsense, such as Jesus died so that God could forgive, or God could not forgive us until.

Which is, I mean, read the gospels, read the stories of Jesus. Jesus has people brought to him, and Jesus will say things like, like, son, your sins are forgiven.

Jesus hasn't died on the cross yet. Jesus has not, you know, suffered the wrath of the father. And yet Jesus is going around forgiving sins. We dare not say things like, God could not forgive us until, because it makes nonsense of the story of scripture.

So, how then do we understand what's happening on the cross? Let's take a look at Romans chapter 5, verses 6 through 8.

Romans chapter 5, verses 6 through 8. This is what it says. So, as you see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly.

[14 : 25] Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person, someone might possibly dare to die. But, verse 8, but God demonstrates his own love for us in this, that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. So, we need to talk about three things in order for this to make some sense. Number one, the nature of the Trinity.

Grab your coffee, folks. You're going to need it. Two, the very character of God. And then three, our response to all this. So, the nature of the Trinity, you know, just some ancient mysteries to unravel this morning.

The character of God, and then our response. So, let's talk about the Trinity. Clearly, no small topic. We will not master it in the next 15 minutes. But there are some things that we can say about it.

Things that historically, Christians have declared or said to be true about the Trinity. The Trinity is the concept that God is one God in three persons.

[15 : 29] It is a mystery, and yet there are true things that we can say about it using language that are accurate and make sense of how God describes God's self in Scripture.

So, Christians have historically believed that they are three distinct persons, and yet they are the same essence and being. And you can see this little diagram on the screen that explains that the Father is God, the Holy Spirit is God, the Son is God.

But the Father is not the Son. The Son is not the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is not the Father. When Jesus died on the cross, it would not be accurate to say that God the Father died on the cross, but it is accurate to say that God died on the cross.

We're going to take some quotes from some of the orthodox historic creeds and statements about the Trinity to give you a sense of what Christians have historically said about this relationship of the triune God.

So, listen. What the Father is, the Son and the Spirit are also. The Son and the Spirit share the divine nature with God, being of one essence with Him.

[16 : 45] So, this means that every attribute of divinity, whatever makes God a God, which belongs to God the Father, life, love, wisdom, truth, blessedness, holiness, power, purity, joy, all of that belongs equally as well to the Son and to the Holy Spirit.

Quick break here. I love Dallas Willard's definition of God. God is the most joyful being in the universe. Love that definition. Anyway, this quote continues, that the being, nature, essence, existence, and life of God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are absolutely and identically one and the same.

And I did not write this. This is like from a document like 1,600 years old. Okay? More. Since the being of the Holy Trinity is one, whatever the Father wills, the Son and the Holy Spirit will also.

Will being this idea of volition, what you desire, what you want, what you want, and then put into action. What the Father does, the Son and the Holy Spirit do also.

There is no will and no action of God the Father, which is not at the same time the will and the action of the Son and the Holy Spirit. So again, three persons, one God, one essence, one being, one divine will.

[18 : 02] They are not in conflict with one another, but they will, they desire the same things. More. In himself, in eternity, as well as towards the world in creation, in revelation, in incarnation, in redemption, in sanctification, in glorification.

The will and action of the Trinity are one. From the Divine Father, through the Divine Son, in the Divine Holy Spirit, every action of God is the action of three.

And this is where we get into the mystery, right? Where it gets hard to believe and you gotta pour more like espresso for yourself, but they will the same thing and they act in the same ways, but through their distinct persons.

Now, do you perfectly comprehend that? No, neither do I, and I spent a lot of money studying this stuff in grad school. But we get the idea here that the Christian, historic, or orthodox declarations about the nature of God, that there are three persons who each have distinct actions according to one divine, godly will.

Now, what is true of the Father is true of the Son, is true of the Spirit, and yet they are not each other. They are distinct. Christian tradition has talked about this in terms of a divine community, that the very nature of the creator of the universe is to be in community with themselves.

[19 : 23] And that there is what the Greek orthodox tradition calls perichoresis, this divine dance of mutual submission to each other.

That then God, out of his abundance of joy, thus creates a universe to invite into that divine dance. Now, let's see how Scripture talks about these things.

Did, you know, a bunch of old guys just make this up? Well, I mean, maybe, but I think they got it from Scripture. They didn't pull it out of their heads. They got it from what they saw as the tradition of Christian believers from the first century and even before.

Words of Jesus in the book of John, chapter 5, the Son, Jesus says, can do nothing by himself. He can only do what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does, the Son also does.

Now, this passage is going to be important when we start talking about God's character, because this has massive implications. The Son only does what he sees the Father doing, which means when we see God the Son hanging on a cross, it tells us about the kind of God that Christians worship.

[20 : 36] It tells us that God the Father and God the Son are united in purpose, united in character, united in their love for humanity, and what they will do to show that love.

We see this concept again in Hebrews chapter 1, verse 3, the Son is the radiance of God's glory, the exact representation of God's being. A different translation of that same verse puts it like this, the Son radiates God's own glory and expresses the very character of God.

So, what is true of God the Father is true of Jesus. What is true of Jesus is true of God. God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit are united in being and essence and purpose and character.

So, if you tell a story that makes it sound like God the Father wants one thing, destroy all the bad humans, and God the Son wants another, oh no daddy, please love them, then we are rejecting an orthodox, biblical view of the Trinity.

Which you can do if you want. I mean, who's going to stop you? But you can't say that this is historical or biblical. You can say that you made it up. When you tell a story that God wants one thing and Jesus wants another, you are forging your own path out of what is historic and orthodox faith.

[21 : 59] In other words, Jesus doesn't need to save us from God. Jesus is God. God. The Son, united with the Father and the Spirit together, reveal God's character.

They break the power of sin and invite us into relationship with the divine. That means we can't use phrases like the cross enabled God to forgive us or without the cross, God couldn't forgive us.

That makes no sense of the Trinity. It makes no sense of the life of Jesus either. The cross isn't the means by which God is enabled to forgive us.

The cross demonstrates the forgiveness that God has been offering all along. God has always been this kind of God and the cross shows us that in the flesh.

So, back to Romans 5. We'll read it again. God demonstrates whose love? His own love. If you prefer her own love for us in this.

[23 : 08] While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. And this tells us something about God's character. God is the self-giving, self-sacrificing God.

Jesus' death on the cross wasn't a last-ditch effort by God to show us his love. It wasn't a stretch of God's character like, oh, I really wish I didn't have to do this but I guess I have to for him to love us.

God didn't have to grit his teeth and try really, really hard to like us. God has always been, is today, and will always be a God willing to die and hang on a cross for you and for me.

Whatever debt of sin we carried, God is willing to pay it. Whatever power that death held over us, God is willing to break it. Whatever pain the world may inflict, God is willing to bear it because that is just who God is.

1 John 3 puts it like this, the reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work. Jesus didn't come to keep God from killing us.

[24 : 21] Jesus came with the love of God and the power of the Holy Spirit to destroy the evil that Satan was up to. And I think this is true if you believe in a personified person called the devil or Satan or if you believe in evil as more of like a meme that gets carried through in culture and civilization and humanity.

Regardless, Jesus came to destroy it. Jesus came to absorb the powers of evil and darkness, the powers and principalities and absorb them all and they could not keep Jesus down.

We'll get to that next Sunday. There's this hymn, a song that Christians would sing in the book of Philippians chapter 2. It goes like this. It says, Jesus, who being in the very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage.

Rather, he made himself nothing. Now, do we get the implications of this? Jesus' very nature is God. God's nature's instinct?

It's to empty God's self, to make God's self nothing. God, in the divine image, God's instinct of power and authority and glory, the way that the most almighty, most powerful, most glorious being conceivable decides to communicate that power and almightiness is by making God's self nothing.

[25 : 59] One translator, professor of mine, Dr. Mulholland, put it like this. Jesus emptied himself because he already had the nature of a slave, because he already had identified with humanity, because we find him to appear to us like we are.

He humbled himself because he already was an obedient to death kind of God. The cross is not like an aberration, a historical accident of like, well, I suppose I have to do this for those stupid humans.

No, God has always been from eternity past on through eternity hereafter, the kind of God that gives himself willingly, self-sacrificially out of love.

One theologian responds to this in this way, he writes, what happens on Calvary reaches into the very depths of the Trinity and therefore makes its impact on the Trinitarian life of God in eternity.

In Christian faith, the cross is always at the center of the Trinity. The cross reveals the heart of the triune God, which beats for his whole creation.

[27 : 12] In other words, there was never a time in eternity which God was not like he is. The cross, Jesus, shows us what God has always been like, which, by the way, tells us something about how to read Scripture, that when we read something that does not sound like a self-sacrificing God, well then, maybe we need to read it through the lens of Jesus.

The theologian continues, the definition God is love acquires its full weight only if we continually make ourselves aware of the path that leads to that definition.

Jesus' forsakenness on the cross, the surrender of the Son, the love of the Father, which does everything, gives everything, and suffers everything for lost people.

God is love, and that means God is self-giving. It means that God's God exists for us on the cross. In other words, the cross is not an exception, it's not a weird quirk of history, it's not a last-ditch effort for God to finally figure out how to love people.

The cross is the ultimate revelation of who God is, a God who stands in the gap for us, a God who is by God's very nature self-sacrificing, self-giving, self-denying.

[28 : 36] Quite often in pastoral ministry, we'll be asked, I'll be asked, why God allows suffering and pain and heartache, and even scripture itself struggles with this question.

Just look at the book of Job. I've got some very good theories, but in the end, I don't know why God lets things happen the way things happen. But what scripture does definitively reveal, what the cross does show us, is that God is not immune to suffering or pain.

The classic theologians like to talk about the immutability and impassibility of God, that God could not experience change or suffering. And yet, when we look at Jesus, who is the final, the complete, the full revelation of God's character, we see a God who suffers.

We see that we are not alone. We do not worship a God who is oblivious to our pain. We worship a God who suffers alongside.

Hebrews 4 says, We do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are.

[29 : 50] Friends, our God is with us. Our God is for us. Our God loves us and even suffers alongside us. And we should never forget that Jesus' cross was alongside the crosses of two others.

Jesus shows us that we never suffer alone. So the love that the Father has for humanity is shared by the Spirit and the Son, and the suffering that the Son endured on the cross was eternally felt by the Father and the Spirit, and together through their united Trinitarian communal love and sacrifice.

we are made free, we are made whole, and we will be given the keys to God's kingdom and to life everlasting. Now that, friends, is good news.

So how do we respond to this? Well, first of all, we have to worship God as God truly is, not as we imagine God to be.

Remember what we said in the beginning, that whenever I describe a characteristic to God that doesn't actually belong to God, I'm just making an idol. If my God is just as vindictive and angry and vengeful as I am, then I might as well just bow down in front of a mirror.

[31 : 16] When we add to or reduce from God's character to make us seem more righteous, we make God more angry than he actually is, and less loving than God actually is, and more wrathful, and less kind, and less patient, it's what the Bible calls idolatry.

And some of us, out of a probably good intentioned respect of tradition, we're walking around waiting for God to strike. We are couched in fear and shame and terror, and that betrays what we think God is actually like.

But here's the thing about God. God is good. God is love, and that's not some new-agey 21st century bumper sticker. That's how the Bible talks about God.

God is love. God is eager to forgive you, to embrace you, to hold you as God's dear child.

As the book of James says, mercy triumphs over judgment. It's not that there was like this great arm-wrestling match between the God of judgment and the Jesus of mercy.

[32 : 26] mercy. No, God has always been the merciful sort. So when we fail and screw up and mess up, God's mercy wins every time.

Every time. So here's a thought I want you to take home and ponder. I've brought this up before and I'll keep bringing it up until we all die.

the fruit of the spirit describe God. This passage in Galatians 5, it says the kind of people that we should be growing up to be. That if I look at myself a year ago, I look at myself now, could I describe myself as more loving, kind, patient, etc.

as I could than a year ago? But the fruit of the spirit, first and foremost, describe the spirit. Describe God. So, can we accurately say about the God that I worship, that you worship, that we worship, that our God is loving, joyful, peaceful, patient.

God is kind, God is good, God is faithful, God is gentle, God is temperate, and has self-control. If the God that we worship can't be described like that, I'm sorry that's not God, that's you.

[33 : 44] If you can't be kind to yourself, then you probably believe that God can't be kind to you either. If you can't be gentle with your kids, you probably believe that God shouldn't be gentle with you or with anybody else that you disagree with.

If you can't find joy in your life, then you probably find the idea of God being joyful as preposterous and insulting. But God is each of these things to a degree passing comprehension.

He is better than any of us can imagine. And when we remember that God is the most joyful being in the universe, then maybe finding joy won't be quite so hard.

If we remember that God yearns and is gentle, then maybe we can recall that God will be gentle with us and that might inspire us to be gentle with others.

and this loving, joyful, peaceful, patient God that we are worshiping will call us and enable us to offer that same love and joy and patience and kindness to the world.

[34 : 56] As the beloved disciple says, whoever claims to live in God must live as Jesus did. And as the disciple who denied Jesus and then was welcomed back said, Jesus gave us an example to follow.

And here then is the call to what Christians call holiness. Because if what is true of the Father is true of the Son, is true of the Spirit, and that it's also true that God wants this to be true of his people as well, if God reveals himself through Jesus to be self-giving and self-sacrificing and self-denying, then God, through God's Spirit, will sanctify us and call us to be the same.

we look to the cross not only to reveal the character of God, but also to see the call of the church, that through the love of God we might give ourselves up for the sake of the world, even to the point of death, so that the world might know the depths of the love of God.