

"The Greek Cross: The Cross of Suffering"

1 Peter 2:21-25

Midweek Lent 4

Messiah, Boerne

March 13, 2024

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Text: 1 Peter 2:21-25

Dear Friends in Christ:

The cross that holds our attention this evening has a certain attraction to it—a beauty perhaps unequalled by any other form of the cross. Its arms are of equal length, perfectly symmetrical. That's why it's called "the Greek Cross." You see, perfect symmetry was a mark of beauty to the Greeks, and they loved beauty even in their instruments of torture such as the cross.

It sounds strange, doesn't it, to speak of "beautifying" the cross? How can such a horrible instrument of death be made beautiful in any sense of the term? In fact, why would anyone even try to do such a thing?

Well, the fact is that efforts at "beautifying" the cross are by no means confined to way the Greeks fashioned the cross. Such efforts continue right into our own day. So, the questions are not only asked of the Greeks, but we must also ask them of ourselves.

How do we beautify the cross? It's subtle, but it happens quite readily. You see, it's difficult for us to think of a terrible instrument of punishment as an instrument of God's salvation. So, we feel compelled to make what God does more pleasing to our senses, more acceptable to our reason. Thus, we tone it down and thereby keep God from appearing somehow "imperfect."

One way we do this is by emphasizing that "God so loved the world" that He gave His Son over to the cross. God's love always sounds so nice and neat. Surely sacrificial acts done out of love don't hurt as much as things we experience out of necessity. At least, we think, that *ought* to be true. So, the joy of Christ's sacrifice makes it possible to retain the cross without having to think too much about its pain and anguish, just as the Greeks retained the form of the cross while beautifying it.

This can, in fact, be pressed further by stressing that the cross is a divine act performed by God-made-man, who does indeed feel something of our suffering while His divinity permits Him to rise above all that we go through. This easily transforms the cross into its Greek form by acknowledging His suffering and death while never really relating it to our own life, suffering, and death.

A final step in this process happens when people barely stop at the cross long enough to think about it, hurrying on by to view the resurrection, which is much more pleasant to consider. For example, during Lent in previous congregations, I would sometimes affix a crucifix to the front on my pulpit to highlight the penitential nature of the season, but I'd hear complaints about crucifixes from members because of a preference for the empty cross. But, you see, to rush to the resurrection without any real understanding of the crucifixion is to belittle the cross, beautifying it by ignoring Christ's Passion in favor of the resurrection. This is the ultimate Greek form of the cross.

Perhaps here we come to the heart of why people want to make this instrument of our redemption beautiful. People reveal their view of life and death by the way they view the cross. There are some people who say that life is essentially intended to be happy, reasonably successful, and largely carefree and sublime. It's a particular temptation of our time and culture to speak of and search for a life *without* pain in which perpetual pleasure and ever intensifying happiness, increasing success, and immediate solutions to problems are emphasized. We see monumental problems solved in 60 minutes on TV; drugs deaden our pain; healthy diets and proper exercise programs promise long and happy lives; and lawyers guard our every sensitivity

from someone who offends us or causes us distress. When life is viewed in this way, death is pushed into the background, and it's very difficult to comprehend fully the dimensions of Jesus' real cross.

Although the life just described is often spoken of as a sort of ideal in our time, few people experience it like that. Jesus didn't either. His cross had its beginning long before He hung on it. Even as a newborn under Herod, decades before entering His public ministry, He shared the burdens we commonly carry, the pain and suffering of people around Him. He could have been free of all temptation in the wilderness, of the strife and division among His people. He was conscious of the social, political, psychological, physical, and religious concerns and cares of His day as we are.

Jesus' life, suffering, and death form the backdrop for Peter's admonition to servants in our text this evening. Earlier they had been told that they were ransomed from all that once bound them, made free by God's ransoming activity in Christ. Now these free people are urged to be servants of the highest quality, giving themselves over to suffering as God's people if that becomes necessary. They are free to serve (although at first they may have preferred to be free *from* service). They are also free to suffer (although they may have preferred hearing that they were free *from* suffering).

Without the backdrop of Jesus' life, suffering, and death, these would be strange admonitions. But Peter makes plain that this way is placed before his hearers "because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps." One might think that Peter was some kind of masochist, loving to suffer and be punished, if he were not making Christ his constant point of reference. But he makes plain that this suffering is not to be sought out, nor to be endured for doing silly or wrong things. Rather, he reminds them: "to this you have been called" (v 21).

You see, suffering is tied to godliness because Christ's death is tied to a life that cuts across the flow of the world. The world doesn't like godliness, nor does it tolerate it for long without assaulting it and crucifying it as exemplified in Christ's life. Jesus' crucifixion flowed out of a life that cut across the grain of the world's thinking and living. That is why, in order to offset the beautifying effect of the Greek Cross, it's very commonly found in a sequence of five, one cross for each of Jesus' wounds. Thus, the horror and agony of the cross is set against its beauty, and reality is restored to it.

The cross in this way sets forth the beauty of One who "committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth. When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to

him who judges justly" (vv 22-23). With the five crosses, we are reminded of the awfulness of the cross where "he himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sin and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed" (v 24).

Thus, the Greek cross calls you to two things. On the one hand, it calls you to know how deeply the very heart of God suffered for you. It tells you of the five wounds of Jesus, the agony of dying by exposure with nails piercing hands and feet and thorns crushing down on His fevered brow while a gradual suffocation took its toll on His body weakened by the cruel blows of soldiers and the whipping administered according to Pilate's order. But it tells more, for through the cross we have a window into the very heart of God. The Father's love sends His Son for you while the Son willingly sacrifices Himself for you. One who did not need to die gave Himself freely, willingly, even joyfully into death because through it "you [who] were like sheep going astray . . . have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls" (v 25).

The second message of the Greek cross tells you that you yourself were beautified through this cross. Your sins are taken away through this cross. The door is opened to a new life. This new life, of course, is not all that easy, for it's

a call to follow the Man of the cross—and therefore, like Simon of Cyrene, to carry the cross yourself.

Part of that suffering is an inner awareness of how far short you fall in that new walk, in that calling to which "you were called" to follow Jesus. You suffer within yourself by knowing you are not even what you would like to be, much less what God calls you to be. And you suffer with Christ when you realize that this very shortfall in your life burdens Him on the cross. His suffering becomes yours in these moments.

Another part of the suffering comes from outside of you as your life carries the name of Christ written large over it. The world loves to see you stumble and fall—to be like it. If or when that happens, you suffer with Christ as the world scoffs at you. Christ's suffering is your suffering. On the other hand, when you are indeed Christ-like, the world pulls and tugs at you to get you off your "pedestal," as the world puts it, so that you are just like it. And the wounds of Christ become your wounds as the world demands that you be like it is or it will crucify you.

Dear Friends in Christ, many people wear beautiful crosses as jewelry, some as a witness to their faith. When you wear the cross as a mark of following Christ, you show the awful price of redemption and your willingness to be wounded in His name. But you also show the beauty of God's love and the glory of the new

life that He makes possible through it. So, wear it proudly,
for it reminds us of the gateway to eternity. Amen.