

Why The Cross?

We've entered the season of Lent. Lent is the forty day period that comes before Easter. (The western church excludes Sundays from the 40 days because they are celebrated as the day of Christ's resurrection. The eastern church includes them, i.e. Orthodox and Catholic churches).

Traditionally the period of Lent was a time of preparation for Easter and specifically for those who were to be baptized on Easter. It is a time of spiritual reflection, a time to acknowledge one's sinfulness and the need for repentance and a renewed commitment to Christ as we prepare for the remembrance of Christ's sacrifice for us, his death, burial and resurrection.

A few years ago during Lent I read Richard John Neuhaus' book, *Death On A Friday Afternoon - Meditations on the Last Words of Jesus From the Cross*. Something he said in the book made such an impression on me I have since shared it several times. I wanted to focus on Jesus and the Cross during Lent and as I prayed I kept thinking about the question, Why the Cross? Why did Jesus have to die on the cross? Neuhaus shared four important truths that I believe help provide at least a partial answer to our question.

Neuhaus takes us back to our parents, to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and what he called their fateful sin of "over-reaching." They were told they could eat from every tree in the garden but they mustn't eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil for when you eat of it you will surely die. Neuhaus pointed out that if good could have come from eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, then God wouldn't have forbidden it. God is not withholding good from us when he prohibits something, rather he is protecting us. "No good thing will he withhold from them that walk uprightly." Psalm 84:11. The devil however tries to deceive and convince you that God is trying to keep you from having a good time or from being your authentic self. "God is withholding good from you." Believing the devil's lie, Adam and Eve overreached, reaching for a different kind of knowledge. Remember in Genesis 3 the devil, in the guise of a serpent, told Eve if she ate of the forbidden fruit she and Adam would become like God knowing good and evil (Genesis 3:5). King James reads, "ye shall be as gods."

Neuhaus said they were reaching for a universal knowledge, "unbounded by truth as it is presented to us." That is a dangerous concept - knowledge unbounded by truth. Adam and Eve decided they could find their own truth. If they ate of that fruit, they would be as gods and they would have the power to define for themselves what was good and what was evil.

Sounds familiar doesn't it? Neuhaus wrote, **"Each of us has been there when we, godlike, decided that we would determine what is good and what is evil – at least for our own lives. Perhaps we shied away from the godlike pretension of making a universal rule that applies to all. Modestly, or so we said, we limited ourselves to deciding 'what is good for me' and 'what is wrong for me'. 'I can speak only for myself', we say. We would not think of imposing our judgement upon others."** ... Richard John Neuhaus

He's right isn't he? Everyday, godlike, we decide what is right for us. In our culture we pride ourselves on creating our own truth. No absolutes and we won't force our truth on anyone else we say. "I can't say what is right for you or what is truth for you, I just know what is true for me, this is right for me." We think we have eaten the forbidden fruit and gotten away with it! We have become as gods, knowing our own truth. We decide what truth is for us and we foolishly think that lets us off the hook. "Well, it was true for me!" Neuhaus wrote, **"The truth is that we do not judge the truth, the truth judges us."** ...Richard John Neuhaus

"We will be as gods!" Yeah, how's that working out for us? Here's what happened. We reached for the knowledge of good and evil and began to define and decide for ourselves what was good and evil, what was true and false and in the process, we fell further from God's truth, from the judgment of truth that would have kept us on the right path. Not only did we fall farther from God's truth, we fell farther from God himself and the life-giving relationship we once had. Instead of grasping truth, we found confusion and fear.

Look at our parents again. "We will be as gods. We will find our own truth. This is going to be great." Read **Genesis 3:5-13**. They were naked and they were ashamed and they hid. Here is the first great truth we learn from Adam and Eve: **Something very bad has happened.**

Amazing isn't it? Adam and Eve couldn't even say for sure what had happened, but in the very first moments after eating that fruit, they knew something was very wrong, they were afraid, and they wanted to hide. Neuhaus writes, "Something has gone very wrong with us and with the world of which we are part. The world is not and we are not what we know was meant to be. That is the most indubitable of truths; it is beyond dispute, it weighs with self-evident force upon every mind and heart that have not lost the sensibility that makes us human."

Something has gone very wrong. Look back through history - from the cheering crowds in Rome watching Christians being torn apart, to Hitler's concentration camps, the killing fields

of Cambodia, the genocide of Rwanda. Read the accounts of child abuse and human trafficking, of late-term abortions with babies born alive dying in the garbage and then tell me nothing is wrong. Something is terribly wrong with this world and it's not getting any better.

The next truth is hard to accept but its' truth is absolutely necessary: **We are complicit in what has gone so very wrong.** Complicit means we are an accomplice. We are part of the problem. We hate to admit it and we are quick to gather up our self-righteousness and point out that we are not mass murderers or sex traffickers. No, but we are all sinners and have come short of God's righteousness. Paul called himself "the chief of sinners." Neuhaus wrote, "I may think it modesty when I draw back from declaring myself chief of sinners, but it is more likely a failure of imagination. For what sinner should I speak if not for myself? Of all the billions of people who have lived and of all the thousands whom I have known, whom should I say is the chief of sinners? Surely I am authorized, surely I am competent to speak only for myself. When in the presence of God the subject of sin is raised, how can I help but say that chiefly it is I?"

We are all sinners. We are all complicit in the sins of this world. We all participated in the sins that required the death of Christ on the cross (that means we are getting close to an answer as to why the cross.) We must confess. The story is told that in response to a question posed by The Times editors, "What is wrong with this world?" the author G.K. Chesterton wrote back, "I am." Yours, G.K. Chesterton. Rabbi Abraham Heschel said, "Some are guilty, all are responsible." We are responsible. Because of our sin, we are part of what's wrong

We couldn't bear this truth if it were not for our hope in the grace and mercy of God, but we mustn't get ahead of ourselves. We must first recognize our guilt, our complicity. We are responsible. Neuhaus writes, "We do not know the measure of our trespass, whereas we know God's mercy is beyond measure. Be grateful that forgiveness is not limited to the sins that we know. [Jesus prayed from the cross] 'Father forgive them, for they know not what they do.'"...Neuhaus. However deep and terrible our sins, our trespasses, God's grace and mercy are deeper still!

He continues, "These then are the truths at the heart of atonement. [These are the truths that point us to why the cross?] First, something has gone terribly wrong...Second, whatever the measure of our guilt, we are responsible. Then third, something must be done about it. Things must be set right. We cannot go on this way."

Something must be done about it. It's fascinating to watch our futile efforts to do

something about it. We've tried to transfer guilt to others - blame parents, upbringing, dna, environment. We've tried to think positively, keep a stiff upper lip, make peace with our past. We've tried to medicate the shame, outrun the guilt, turn up the volume of our entertainment, but we still come face to face with our sin. Something is terribly wrong. At some core level, deep inside, we know we are sinners, we are responsible and something must be done about it. Which brings us to this great truth: **“Whatever it is that needs to be done, we cannot do it.”**

We recognize the need for justice. Something must be done to set things right, to make things right, but what can we do about it? Neuhaus again writes, “But what can we do? We cannot even put our own lives in order, never mind setting right a radically disordered world. The apostle Paul declares, ‘I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do...Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?’” Romans 7

Neuhaus gives us the truth that everyone must recognize. **“If we cannot set things right, if we cannot even set ourselves, never mind the world right – who, then, is to do it? It must be someone who is in no way responsible for what has gone wrong. It must be done by an act that is perfectly gratuitous, that is not driven by necessity, by an act that is perfectly free. The act must be by one who embodies everything, whose life is not one life among many, but is life itself – a life that is our life and the life of all who have ever lived and ever will live. But where is such a one to be found?” ...Richard John Neuhaus**

Where do we find such a one? The opening words of the Gospel of John: **“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men.” John 1:1-4**

We have found the One, the only one who could save us and give us new life. Neuhaus wrote, **“The One who is life itself does this because nobody else could do it.”**

Nobody else could save us. No one else can fix what is so broken and wrong. But Jesus. “He who is light and life plunges headlong into darkness and death” and gives us salvation, hope and eternal life. No one else could do it. But God so loved us that he gave his only son for us. The bible tells us, **“All this is from God who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ not counting men’s sins against them.” 2 Corinthians 5:18-19**

We could not fix what was broken in ourselves and in this world, but God has done what we could not do. Think of it. Here then are four great truths that confront us. Four truths the human race knows inherently:

Something bad has happened.

We are all complicit in what has gone wrong.

Something must be done about it.

Whatever it is that needs to be done, we cannot do it.

Here we are then, at the cross where what needs to be done is done by the only One able to do it. What was it Neuhaus said? “The One who is life itself does this because nobody else could do it.” The sinless One dying for us, the sinners. He died in our place. The prophet Isaiah testified, **“He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities, the chastisement of our peace was upon him and with his stripes we are healed...and the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.”** Isaiah 53:5

The apostle Paul declares, **“God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”** 2 Corinthians 5:21.

The writer of Hebrews declares, **“...we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.”** Hebrews 10:10

Confronted by the truth of our sin, knowing we are complicit in what has gone wrong, knowing we failed and sinned and we are deserving of punishment and death and hell, we come to the cross and find the greatest single truth: Jesus paid the price for us! Why the cross? It was for us. For you and for me. The songwriter declared, “Jesus paid it all, all to Him I owe, sin had left a crimson stain, he washed it white as snow.” Jesus paid it all! Hallelujah! “Oh praise the One who paid my debt and raised this life up from the dead.” What glorious truth that redeems us and sets us free.