

THE CROSS AND THE RECTIFICATION OF ALL THINGS

Romans 6:3-4

Romans 8:22

I Corinthians 15:51-52

Isaiah 54:8

A sermon by Larry R. Hayward on the Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost, November 14, 2021, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia. This is part of an ongoing sermon series “The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ.”¹

Romans 6:3-4

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.

Romans 8:22

We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now...

I Corinthians 15:51-52

Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.

Isaiah 54:8

In overflowing wrath for a moment

*I hid my face from you,
but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you,
says the Lord, your Redeemer.*

**

Returning to this intermittent series on “The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ,” we have on three separate Sundays this Fall had sermons entitled

- The Primacy of the Cross
- The Godlessness of the Cross
- The Cross and the Gravity of Sin.

If you have not heard these sermons, you can tell by their titles that they are about matters *heavy*; if you have heard them, then you have experienced some of that heaviness. Today I am excited to conclude this first part of the series by moving from the heaviness of the crucifixion to the fullness of its meaning in grace and joy. Today’s title is “The Cross and the *Rectification* of All Things.” The sermon will focus on the meaning of the word “rectification” in context of the death of Jesus Christ, who, in the fullness of the Trinity, is “God with us.”

¹ This sermon series is inspired and draws largely from the book by Fleming Rutledge, *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ*, published in 2015 by William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Let us pray: “*Come Holy Spirit, Heavenly Dove; Come kindle the flame of sacred love; in these cold hearts of ours. Amen.*”

I want to begin on a personal/autobiographical note. As many of you know, I was highly active in the Presbyterian Church as a young person without having descended either from clergy or even from college grads. I finished college in three years and went straight to Union Seminary in New York. I was ordained at age 25. I have been a pastor all my adult life, and I absolutely love it. I have spent nearly all of my continuing education time in *Biblical and theological studies* aimed at strengthening my preaching and teaching. With the exception of following my favorite sports teams – the Nats and the Yankees, Arkansas and Iowa in basketball and football and the University of Memphis basketball, I spend nearly all my leisure time reading history, politics, literature, Biblical and theological studies.

Despite the fact that Easter is my favorite Sunday to preach and the season of Lent and Holy Week leading up to it are meaningful yet challenging to me because of my deep-seated sense of the power of sin and evil in the world, I know I have never *fully* understood as well as I would like the *death* of Christ, the *brutality* of his crucifixion on the cross. Like many of you, a simple Sunday School question has nagged me for many years: “Why did Jesus have to die? Couldn’t God have chosen some other way to save and redeem us? Why the suffering and death of the cross?”

While I do not expect to be able to answer this question fully this side of the River Jordan, it has been fruitful for me to tackle this question in this series and share it with you in what are hopefully to near-final months of the human tragedy of COVID.

One of the outcomes of COVID has been that people my age have been forced to learn technology that is not our natural habitat. Because of this, I have been able to re-connect through Zoom calls with my theology professor Dr. Christopher Morse, who has steered me toward three Union professors whom I did not have – all of them now deceased – Dr. Lou Martyn, Dr. James Cone, and Dr. Paul Lehmann. Most of all Christopher remains a good friend with Reverend Fleming Rutledge, an Episcopal priest who graduated from Union right as I started, who had the same teachers I had, and who has written the book on which this series is based. In preaching to you on this challenging subject, I am standing in a long line of a “great cloud of witnesses,”² a line that includes you as well, as together we try to answer the question: “Why did Jesus Christ have to die on the cross?”

I.

The answer lies partially in what we have seen so far in this series.

- Sin and evil are *two sides* of the same coin
- They are a *power* which *invades* the world and *if uncontested corrupts* and *controls* all that we say or do, think or feel, as individuals, as well as every institution, nation, and civilization in which we “live and move and have our being” after the Fall
- Part of their power is that they *create a fracture* between humanity and nature, humanity and God, humanity and self, to a point that a phrase we use in one of our Prayers of Confession rings tragically true: “There is no health in us.”

² Hebrews 12:1.

The gravity of sin and evil are so great in the world that there is no human way for us to overcome them with our own power or intelligence. As one of our texts for today says: “*We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now...*”

II.

But the good news comes with the last two words: “*until now.*” The word Fleming Rutledge uses to describe what Christ accomplishes on the cross is “*rectification.*”³ *Rectifying* means making right the situation in which sin and evil dominate. It means

- Fixing things
- Making things right
- Making the situation right
- Correcting things
- Restoring things.

Because the power of sin and evil impact the entire created order, “fixing things” involves more than “forgiving an individual’s particular sins” or “saving an individual’s soul.” It involves more than helping us as individuals come to spiritual and psychological peace – in light of what *we* have done or what has been done *to us*.

It is *rectification*.

III.

Because the situation is so grave, the rectifying solution can only come from the *outside*. If we could have taken care of it ourselves, we would have done centuries ago. It takes something beyond us to rectify “the vast primordial catastrophe” – a phrase I used a few weeks ago to describe our human situation, and a phrase for which a father, leaving church, thanked me for “giving him a way of describing his daughter’s bathroom.” (Thank God that even in heavy sermons someone can see humor!)

When something comes from *outside us*, at least in theology, it is called “*apocalyptic*” Apocalyptic is an unfolding and a revealing.

- In the *popular* mind, to say something is apocalyptic is to say it involves catastrophe, destruction, punishment. The Protestant religious version of this phrase is “fire and brimstone.”
- But when the *New Testament* speaks of apocalyptic, it speaks of grace, beauty, hope. It speaks of that all-important word love, the self-giving love of God, *agape*.

Listen to Paul in Romans:

... we have been buried with [Christ] by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.

³ See “Anselm Reconsidered for Our Time,” pages 146-166 in Rutledge *Crucifixion*. Rectification is particularly discussed on page 146.

And in First Corinthians:

Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.

Then hearken back to Isaiah the prophet:

*In overflowing wrath for a moment
I hid my face from you,
but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you,
says the Lord, your Redeemer.*

**

I am not yet of an age where I think about the prospects of my own death very often, but when I do, I'm probably like many in this room: I want to die quietly, peacefully, painlessly, in my sleep. And then I want to *see* what's coming.

But I can almost assure you that what's coming will *not* be a catastrophe. It will be *love*. When the New Testament speaks of God's intervention from the outside, it speaks of love, not catastrophe.⁴ "Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes in the morning."⁵

IV.

From our experience, however, we know that even if we fervently believe that God through Jesus Christ has *rectified* things on the cross, things aren't fully rectified *yet*.

- Genocide is still happening in the world
- People are still starving, malnourished, impoverished.
- The good still die young.

We know that just as she was entering the prime of her life a member of our clergy staff was struck with a debilitating illness.

We know that a longstanding member of our church, his family and staff have received death threats because of a vote he cast as a Member of Congress.

We know that things aren't fully rectified *yet*.

**

But this is where a phrase that Christopher Morse coined over thirty years ago comes in, a phrase I have shared with you before:

⁴ This a direct quote from a conversation with Christopher Morse, 11/11/21.

⁵ Psalm 30:5.

“We are *on hand* for the kingdom of God which is *at hand* but *not in hand*.”⁶

In the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ – indeed of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – the reign and rule of God has come in our midst. It is “*at hand*.”

And we are privileged to be “*on hand*” for it:

- We see it.
- We sense it.
- We experience it.
- We sing its hymns, recite its prayers, open ourselves to its moments of silence.
- We answer its call, “in the tumult of our life’s wild, restless sea.”⁷

We are “on hand” for the kingdom of God.

But we don’t yet have God’s reign and rule “in hand.”

- We don’t direct it.
- We don’t choreograph it.
- We don’t control it.
- It comes to us; we don’t go to it.
- We don’t fully understand it; yet it fully understands us.

In my conversation with Christopher Morse Thursday,⁸ he said his colleague Dr. Paul Lehmann and his wife had only one child Peter, who tragically died after a lengthy illness. When Lehmann was once asked how to seek God’s guidance after such a loss, he said: “It is found in the tension between two prayers of Jesus: ‘My God, my God, why has Thou forsaken me?’⁹ and ‘Into Thy hands I commit my spirit.’¹⁰”

The kingdom of God is at hand and we are on hand for it, but we don’t yet have it in hand.

V.

A final thought.

The rectification of all things does not mean the *absence of justice*. Rutledge writes: “A society of impunity is intolerable.”¹¹

But in Biblical faith and therefore in the Reign of God that is at hand, *justice* and *mercy* are *both* aspects of God’s *love*. Rutledge reiterates: “God’s *justice* and God’s *mercy* both issue forth from [God’s] *single* will of *eternal love*.”¹²

⁶ Christopher Morse, *The Difference Heaven Makes: Rehearing the Gospel as Good News* (New York: T & T Clark International, 2010), 21-25.

⁷ Cecil F. Alexander, “Jesus Calls Us,” 1852.

⁸ This story is recounted by Rutledge on page 104, note 81.

⁹ Matthew 27:46 and Mark 15:33.

¹⁰ Luke 23:46.

¹¹ Rutledge 152.

¹² Rutledge 163.

She quotes theologian David Bentley Hart:

In the God-man,
Within human history,
God justice and mercy are shown to be
One thing,
One action, life, and being...
The righteousness that condemns
*Is also the love that restores.*¹³

Our task on earth is *not* to take justice into our own hands, but to *respect* the means God has ordained for the provisional administration of justice on earth: governments, laws, courts, militaries, and that unspeakable word “politics.” Our task is to make those as strong and fair as possible, and when they are not, to seek to change or reform them. Our task is also to rest assured that in the rectification of all things, both *justice* and *mercy* will be *complete* and will *upend* those places on earth where either has been incomplete.¹⁴ The rectification of *all things*.

VI.

After a lengthy conversation with Christopher on Thursday morning, I emailed one final question:

Why did Jesus have to die? Couldn’t God have figured out some other way to save and redeem us?

His brief answer – born of eighty something years of Methodist faith and almost as many of studying and teaching theology – came a few hours later:

I have no answer
As to how God might have been
Other than how God is
According to the Gospel.
The One who is becoming flesh and dwelling among us
In a love from which nothing can separate us
Proves to be exactly that –
By overcoming all that would separate us [from God’s love],
Including death itself.¹⁵

Because we know God, even in the limited way we do, we can only trust that Christ’s manner of dying on the cross is the way *God* has chosen to defeat every power that seeks to separate us from God.

I find this reassuring. I can go with this. And I can sing:

What wondrous love is this,
O my soul, O my soul!
What wondrous love is this

¹³ David B. Hart, “A Gift Exceeding Every Debt: An Eastern Orthodox Appreciation of Anselm’s *Cur Deus Home*.” *Pro Ecclesia* 7, no. 3 (Summer 1998), 330-349, quoted in Rutledge 164.

¹⁴ I have always interpreted Romans 13:1-7 as Paul’s call for us to obey earthly authorities, recognizing their penultimate and provisional nature.

¹⁵ Email exchange 11/11/21. I have slightly edited the comments for clarification.

That caused the Lord of bliss
To bear the dreadful curse
For my soul, for my soul,
What wondrous love is this...¹⁶

Amen.

© Larry R. Hayward, Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria VA

¹⁶ Stith Mead, "What Wondrous Love Is This," (1811), available at <http://www.hymntime.com/tch/htm/w/h/a/t/w/whatwond.htm>.