

"The Sign of Forgiveness"

Luke 23:34

Pastor Espinosa

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our crucified Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen. The Lenten series we're journeying through this year is entitled, "the sign of the cross." But I have to admit right off that by using the word "cross" instead of the better word "crucifix," that we've already lost something in what we're trying to convey. Crosses are quite popular, but what actually occurred at Calvary when our Savior was crucified is not nearly as popular. Crosses are everywhere. When you see them along the freeway, they mark the memory of loved ones who lost their lives at those locations thus marked. We don't see many people marking locations with crucifixes. Crosses are stylish. How common is it to see entertainers donning them left and right? They are common hanging on necklaces, serving as earrings, and tattoos. Crucifixes aren't quite so "in." Crosses have seemingly become this "cool" thing. They are a powerful general sign of a type of spirituality. But again what is definitely not as common are crucifixes. The crucifix presents a narrow and precise message that is not at all embraced by popular culture. The crucifix is not just the cross, but the corpus (the body) nailed to the cross. These are much less common. They are esp. less common in churches that claim the name of Jesus. Why would this be? One mega-church pastor said on national television that it is "dangerous" to reduce the Christian faith to just one symbol. On one occasion a neighboring minister of a four-square Pentecostal church noticed my crucifix and felt compelled to remind me, "You know, Jesus isn't on the cross anymore!" I felt for the poor chap. I knew he meant well, but there was something missing in his theology. But his comment betrays a widespread preoccupation that what actually happened on Calvary's cross is somehow something quite negative. We know what happened (at least we think we do), but does that mean that we have to keep talking about it, esp. when we know what happened three days later?! Death, after all, is a downer; it's a negative thing when everyone thinks that the best messages about God should be "uplifting" and focus on life, not death! That Pentecostal pastor had a point: Jesus isn't dead anymore! Some have even explained that the general Protestant emphasis of crosses is precisely to convey an inherent reminder that Jesus is indeed no longer on the cross...so that the "empty" cross is actually a sign that Jesus is also risen. The cross is also – if one is esp. worried that one might be confused with Roman Catholicism – that which will protect you from being associated with Catholic and (for that matter) Orthodox Christians. But dear Christians, all of these issues are extraordinarily silly and I'd like to say categorically that our series is better named "the sign of the crucifix" and that we are among those Christians (like our Catholic and Orthodox brothers and sisters in Christ) who should not avoid this sign, but whole-heartedly embrace it and this by the way, is a very good *Lutheran* thing to do! Let me say it better, it is the sign of the Christian. It is a great *Christian* sign to convey. The early church cherished the sign of our Savior on the cross and the churches of the Reformation did not hesitate to adorn their sanctuaries not with a cross, but with a crucifix.

It must be so if I'm going to offer a sermon on that which is the true sign of forgiveness (the title of this first installment in the series). We can't know forgiveness apart from our Savior nailed to the cross. Apart from the crucifixion, forget about it: there would be no forgiveness. Period.

On this Ash Wednesday we receive the imposition of ashes, the ashes take us back to one fundamental truth: we are in desperate need of forgiveness. Dusty people who in themselves can do nothing but die, need the LORD to forgive their sins. Our ashes are a confession of sin; and that our

sin has cast the curse of death upon us. But I need to lead you to take this one step further: death is a reminder of helplessness in which we cease to function. In effect – and to speak in very mechanical terms – you cease “working.” Your heart stops, the electrical impulses in your brain stop, and things like your vision stop. You can’t think. You don’t see right and wrong. You break down. Again, you don’t “work.” You can’t “see” anymore. And this is the language employed to convey the state of ashes...we are blind...we can’t see...we don’t even realize what we are doing...we don’t see the horrendous nature of our sin. And this means that ash people – people of sin and death – don’t know what they’re doing. And when you get this (by the seeing and knowledge-giving ministry of the Holy Spirit working through the Word of Christ) then our Savior on the cross (and those crucifixes which symbolize our Savior when He was on the cross) take on a whole new meaning...our Savior on the cross, His body nailed to the cross becomes THE sign of forgiveness. And when we see Him on the cross, though we were once blind, by His blood and by His grace-giving prayer, we are enabled to see...but only through His being nailed to the cross. This is the sign of our restoration; this is the sign of our forgiveness!

Our sin is unspeakable. It has done more harm to ourselves than we can even begin to describe; it has done more harm to other people than we can ever begin to imagine; and it has ferociously fought against God and resisted the LORD in ways that would turn our stomach and make us sick if we could truly see the gravity of our resistance against the Lord of Life. Again, our sin means that we don’t even know what we are doing...that’s how bad our sin is; and this is why we receive this stunning reminder of our condition: we are but ashes.

But the sign of our Savior’s cross (and the crucifix which reminds us of this singularity of salvation) is what conveys the LORD’S response to our terrible ignorance and blindness: listen to Him as He prays while nailed to the cross (making the cross a crucifix): “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

These words of Jesus from His crucifixion are recorded in the Gospel of Luke, the gospel among the four gospels that probably conveys God’s universal forgiveness better than any of the others...Christ nailed to His cross forgives ALL: men, women, children, the sick, the weak, Jews, Gentiles...*you*. “Therefore, it is entirely in keeping with Luke’s portrait of Jesus that Jesus should ask the Father to forgive those responsible for his crucifixion: not just the soldiers, but also Pilate, Herod, the Sanhedrin, the chief priests, the rulers, and indeed all people...The hearer of the gospel knows that this absolution [“Father, forgive them”] flows from the full and complete atonement Jesus is accomplishing for the sins of the whole world *as he speaks these very words*. Forgiveness flows from the cross, so how fitting it is that Jesus’ first word from the cross is a word of universal forgiveness.” (Just, Concordia Commentary, 933).

Crucified, Jesus was speaking your forgiveness even as His shed blood was accomplishing it. Ash people say, “He must have been speaking about ME...about ME...because I’m but ashes and that means that my sin is so bad that I don’t even know what I’m doing!” But that means you were included in His prayer. Hear it again, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” That’s a reference to me; that’s a reference to you. Therefore, in speaking of us; in praying for us, He was forgiving us. He was forgiving you. Before your violations of the Law of God; before you scarred yourself with your sin for life; before you hurt those whom you have hurt; before you ever sinned in thought, word, and deed by what you’ve done and left undone, the LORD knew in what state you

would commit these sins: as one who did not know what they were doing...for these He prayed, for these He was crucified, for these He shed His blood...for these He repaid good for evil; your evil covered by His good; your cursing against God repaid by God's prayer on the cross..."Father, forgive them." "When he was praying as he hung on the cross, he could see and foresee...[sinners] were raging, but he was praying...He was asking for pardon for those from whom he was receiving [and would receive] hideous treatment." (Augustine, Ancient Christian Commentary, vol III, p. 361) "It was for enemies that he shed his blood, but by his blood that he converted his enemies...[and He knew] 'it is blindness that is crucifying me.' Blindness was crucifying him, and the crucified was making an eye-salve for them from his blood." (ibid, p. 361) By His prayer and by His blood our eyes and our minds have been healed. We see now, we understand now...we now carry Christ's crucifix upon our foreheads...His baptism upon us marks us: those once who were only ashes not knowing what they do; are now forgiven...these ash people shall now be raised; their blindness shall receive sight; their lack of knowledge will be given the knowledge of the Savior whose cross is not this negative thing whatsoever, but a glorious thing; their source of life...we know this with certainty, because He prayed...He prayed for us; He prayed for me; He prayed for you: listen to His prayer...this is your guarantee of forgiveness: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." Your ashes testify: "I know that He was praying *for me!*"