

The Tenth Sunday after Trinity
Luke 19:41-48

If you ever go into a protestant church, you'll notice the same thing that's sadly in many Lutheran churches including ours in the past: a cross without Jesus. This highlights a problem that is true in many churches including some of ours: we want a cross-less Christianity. And I mean this in two distinct ways.

The first distinct way I mean this is that we don't like Jesus on the cross. Now, to be fair, there's nothing wrong with a cross without a corpus. To many, it symbolizes the triumph of Jesus on the cross, and the salvation won by Jesus on the cross, and the eternal life Jesus gives to us through His work on the cross. And these are wonderful things to think of. But to a lot of people, seeing Jesus on the cross bothers them. Why is this?

For many, I believe, it bothers them to see Jesus on the cross because you get a clear picture of God's judgment against sin. Isaiah 53:10 describes this judgment: "Yet it pleased [God the Father] to bruise, [or smite, Jesus]; [God the Father] has put [Jesus] to grief [or death.]" Jesus as the sin bearer endures the full wrath of God against sin. God pours out all His righteous judgment against sin upon Jesus on the cross. This is the judgment of God's pronouncement against sin in Genesis 2, "the day you eat of [the tree of the knowledge of good and evil,] you shall surely die." (Genesis 2:17)

Sin is ugly and the judgment of sin looks ugly. That is why Jesus weeps over Jerusalem when He draws near. Jerusalem will suffer God's judgment because they rejected the time of their visitation. I've included in your bulletin a copy of an adaptation of Josephus' account of the destruction of Jerusalem which Jesus is prophesying in our Gospel passage. I thought long and hard about whether to include this account because even if you've been desensitized to violence like I have by television and movies, you will be shocked with the graphic detail in this account.

It is worth your time and uncomfortableness to read it because it spells out judgment against sin if it isn't dealt with. This same kind of punishment will happen to sinners who don't take care of their sin. This should make us uncomfortable. It primarily makes us uncomfortable because we know we're sinners. Your sin put Jesus on the cross. That should make you uncomfortable.

The people of Jerusalem didn't know the hour of their visitation. They didn't know that Jesus on the cross is what brings peace to sinners. They were obstinate in their unbelief and God judged them with a horrible destruction. God preached the Gospel through His apostles for about 40 years before He brought destruction upon Jerusalem. God may allow you to persist in unbelief for a time, but at some point, He judges earthly kingdoms. The kingdom of the Jews fell. The kingdom of Greece fell. The kingdom of Rome fell. At some point the kingdom of the United States will fall if Jesus doesn't come first. God caused Josephus to write in vivid detail the fall of Jerusalem so that we might learn from their obstinance and repent. The first words of Jesus' ministry recorded in Mark are just as true today: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe the Gospel." (Mark 1:15) That is the churches proclamation to the world even today. This is the message of Jesus on the cross: repent and believe the Gospel!

Lutherans historically have had crucifixes in their churches because they not only see the judgment of God, but they also see the love of God for us. Jesus takes your place on the cross and bears the full brunt of God's righteous anger for your sin. No one made Him do it. Jesus volunteered before the foundation of the world to suffer His Father's wrath so that you don't have too! Your sin is paid for in full. I don't care how bad your sin is. It is paid for by the blood of Jesus on the cross. He is the spotless Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Jesus knows that you cannot pay for your sin. He knows that you cannot bear the brunt of God's wrath. He doesn't expect you to.

Paul determined to preach nothing but Christ and Him crucified “for the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.” (1 Corinthians 1:18) Christ on the cross is the power of God to save sinners, even you and me! God desires all to be saved. “For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time” which is the time of His visitation. (1 Timothy 2:5-6) The time of His visitation is 2,000 years ago and today. 2,000 years ago, Christ came in the flesh to save a people for Himself. Today He comes in His Word and Sacraments. Today is the day of His visitation. That is why the author of Hebrews says today is the day of salvation. He says, “today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion.” (Hebrews 3:15, see also Hebrews 3:7-4:13) This is also the message of the church, today is the day of salvation!

The second distinction about cross-less Christianity is that we don’t want to bear the cross in our own life. Jesus says:

“If anyone would come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses His life from My sake will find it.” (Matthew 16:24-25)

Too many Christians want Jesus without the cross. That is, they want to keep wallowing in their sin and still be saved. Listen to the warning of the prophet Jeremiah from today’s Old Testament reading:

“Behold, you trust in deceptive words to no avail. Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before Me in this house, which is called by My name, and say, ‘We are delivered!’ —only to go on doing all these abominations? Has this house, which is called by My name, become a den of robbers in your eyes? Behold, I Myself have seen it, declares the Lord.” (Jeremiah 7:8-11)

This sounds very much like Paul's words in Galatians:

"Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up." (Galatians 6:8-9)

I do not want you to be unawares that the Christian life is a life of constant struggle. You know this. Paul describes this life well in Romans 7. And when Paul struggles with his own apparent lack of good works, he looks to Christ on the cross: "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (Romans 7:24-25) And then Paul adds this wonderful promise to the Christian: "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus!" (Romans 8:1) Christ was condemned on the cross already for you! He took your condemnation and pronounces you righteous! What a wonderful comfort this is! Christ continues to be your mediator. Through faith in Him, you receive this wonderful grace. It is by faith alone that you are saved and continue to be saved. Your prayer is the prayer of the dad whose child is demon possessed, "Lord, I believe, help my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24)

When you are weak in faith, look to Christ on the cross.

When you are struggling with the cross Jesus has placed on you and feel like you can't bear it anymore, look to Christ on the cross.

When you are beset by your own sin, look to Christ on the cross.

When you are struggling to confess Christ in a sin-plagued world, look to Christ on the cross.

There is your Mediator. There is your salvation. There is your comfort.
There is your strength.

And Jesus doesn't leave you helpless in the midst of your struggles.

He gives you His Word. He gives you Psalms to sing and pray. He gives you sweet promises that you can cling to in faith. He gives you warnings so that you might not stray. He gives you an account of Himself so that you know with absolute certainty what makes for peace with God.

He also gives you holy Baptism. He gives you something concrete to cling to so that you know that Jesus is for you and not against you. In your baptism, He also gives you His Holy Spirit so that you are made righteous.

He gives you holy Absolution so that you know beyond a shadow of doubt your sin is covered by His blood. There's no reason to fear God's judgment.

He gives you Himself in a personal way in His holy Supper. Jesus gives you something tangible so that you know He is with you in the midst of your struggles.

And you will have struggles. Jesus says, "If the world hates you, know that it has hated Me before it hated you." (John 15:18) The world hated Jesus and it will hate you. Jesus promises, "In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world." (John 16:33b) Jesus overcame the world by dying on a cross. It is the most beautiful sight in the world.

Whether or not a cross has an empty cross or a crucifix is not really important. It should have one or the other. The cross or crucifix has been one of the major symbols of Christianity since the beginning. I'm also not suggesting you all go out and buy crucifixes to wear. But I am suggesting that it is worthwhile to meditate about Christ on the cross.

Do you worry whether God loves you? Look at the crucifix.

Do you wonder whether your sin is too bad for God to forgive? Look at the crucifix.

Do you wonder if God understands your suffering? Look at the crucifix.

Continue to look to Jesus on the cross and live! He is your salvation!