

The Reach of the Cross

Matthew 16:24-25 – Jesus tells the disciples, and any person, to take up the cross and follow him.

Introduction

1. What is the way of the cross that Jesus spoke of to his followers? Certainly many of the early followers of Jesus did literally go the way of the cross at the hands of Roman persecutors. Many centuries have come and gone since the mass crucifixions of Christians along the Roman roadsides. But still Jesus' command rings in our ears. There are other crosses besides those mad of wood.
2. I remember from several years ago a statement of Rev. Moon, which has stayed with many of those who heard it. He said that long before Jesus went to the cross on Golgotha, he already carried a cross inside; he called it the "cross of the heart."
3. Anyone who would take up this cross of the heart has to be ready to live, in a sense, in the place between God and the world, a sometimes deeply lonely place, sometimes a place of pain, a place where we are asked to reach out until it hurts, even like the form of Jesus on the cross.

The Way of the Cross

1. A story (to illustrate).

Some years ago there was a young and confident minister who was called upon to direct a series of religious training programs. In one particular program, many of the lay workers involved were in the midst of heavy faith struggles. The atmosphere of the program was quite heavy and uninspired. The minister had not faced this before, and finally decided to sit down together with all the students to try to facilitate some solutions, or at least to share. As this day of sharing progressed, the atmosphere became heavier and heavier. Nothing was happening. The minister's plan had fallen on its face; and so did his personal confidence. Even the prayer didn't work. That night the minister went to bed in a state of complete depression and personal defeat. He had reached out,

but couldn't find the hands of his members. Or perhaps his reach was too short. He was face to face with his own limited capacity, and a surprising pain.

The next morning in prayer God spoke to that young man: "Now you can begin to understand the way of the cross, and the heart of my son, Jesus. It is not an easy thing to bring God and His children together. It takes much more personal confidence. Can you try again for Me today?"

2. When Jesus proclaimed his Sonship to God over 1900 years ago in Judea it was not a hollow boast, not an empty proclamation. It was the heartstopping pronouncement of personal responsibility for the sins of this world, from one who had no sin. And that is where the way of the cross began. Here is the Heart of our Christian faith, the cross-bearing heart that reaches out every moment, every day.

Let us look more closely at that place in between God and man that is the place of the cross bearer.

The Cross of the Heart

1. There would be no gap, no place between God and man if there had been no fall of our first human ancestors. But with that transgression in Eden the gap yawned open.
2. There could be no perfect union between God and His children in the garden. Sin came between us and our Father. And that terrible gap between man and God, a no-man's land, came under the control of Satan.
3. With the advent and life of Jesus, we hear the words, see the actions, of one who daily leaped into the no-man's land, to bring his people together with his Father. The image of Jesus on the cross at Calvary is the final graphic symbol of what he did for 33 years: carried the cross in his heart.
4. Observing the image of Jesus on the cross, looking at that agonized reach, it is more than a physical reach that we see. Again, the reach of the heart. One arm reaching to God, the other fully extended to man. "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." Standing in that awful breach between God and man, cursed by a misunderstanding world, yet returning love and forgiveness, offering to be the bridge back to God – this is the reach of the cross, love over death.

Our Cross

In taking up the way of the cross, we, like the young minister I mentioned earlier, will at times experience painful lessons.

1. None of us will probably ever have to face the body-breaking experience that Jesus faced on the cross. But our cross will demand the breaking of our old selves, our old egos, the things that make us want to stop reaching and run back into the crowd. Without this breaking, there is no way to follow Christ.
2. There will be times when we want to withdraw our hand in the face of rejection. There will be times when we just desperately want to reach both hands to God, and hang onto Him for dear life! Yet, with understanding and love, He will tell us to extend our arm again to those who reject us. And again, and again...
3. Then there will come the short-armed experience, the feeling that you can't reach either God or man! This feeling of inadequacy is common to every pilgrim of the cross: know that you are in the good company of Paul and Peter, St. Francis, John Wesley, and Dr. King, who also experience the very same short-armed feelings. God will always want to encourage at such a time: so offer those feelings up. Remember, the sense that "I am not enough" is far better to keep us humbly striving upward than the feeling of "I've done it all" which can be the first step on a downward path.

Conclusion

1. There is a lot of "reaching" in our world today, by both high and low, weak and powerful, individuals and nations. But how many of it has anything to do with the reach of the cross?
2. There is full employment waiting for a whole generation who will take up the cross of the heart. In fact, at this moment in our history other alternatives are showing themselves to be bankrupt.
3. (Finish by reading, once again, the command of Jesus to his followers in Matthew 1:24-25.)