

Title: The Supreme Act of Love

Let us pray.

Most holy, Lord God, this is a day of mixed emotions, of sadness and of gratefulness, that your son was willing to be handed over and crucified for our sakes; be with us always in your loving embrace, we pray through Christ Jesus who died for us. Amen.

During Lent, the focus on the cross was getting larger and larger. Jesus was traveling to Jerusalem and his death. The instrument of his death was a cross.

I think that it is hard for us to comprehend the impact of a crucifixion. We don't see people crucified. Crucifixion has become an academic investigation to help us understand what the physiology of the thing is. And it is horrible.

In Jesus' time in the Roman Empire, crucifixion was common. It is interesting that crucifixion was so horrible that it was used during the Roman Republic sparingly. But during the Roman Empire, crucifixion became more commonplace. Maybe it was because of Spartacus' revolt that Romans became less queasy about crucifixion. Spartacus and his companions were all crucified. For as far as one could see, there were men hanging from crosses in Italy.

The Roman Empire became so big that the emperors were comfortable with province governors using crucifixion to keep rebellious individuals in check. There were and are people who are willing to die for their cause, but crucifixion gave rebels pause to engage the Roman legions.

In Galilee for reasons that are unknown to me, there was deep seated resentment against the Roman occupation. As such, crucifixions were not rare. Jesus and his disciples likely saw several people crucified and some of them may have been friends or acquaintances.

In spite of this awareness, Jesus faced Jerusalem, the religious authorities who wanted him dead, and a Roman governor who was ruthless, with a reputation for killing dissenters.

There were some who tried to sugar coat Jesus' crucifixion by saying his hands were tied to the cross. That is not how the Romans did it. The Romans wanted crucifixion to be as hideous as possible. People were not crucified to make them comfortable during the collapse of their lungs.

In spite of all of this horror, Christians adopted the cross to be their primary symbol of faith. We process in church following a cross. We sing songs about a cross, like "The Old Rugged Cross." We wear crosses. Bob Blair made crosses for Cursillo and makes crosses for the people of Trinity. Churches put crosses on their buildings.

To a first century Jew or anyone living in the Roman Empire, putting a cross on a building would be ludicrous and cruel. St. Paul said, "But we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles." (1 Corinthians 1:23) Of course, the difference between them and us is Jesus, an obscure itinerant preacher from a backwater province of the Roman Empire.

The Romans intended to kill Jesus as horribly as they could. They succeeded in that. However, there were unintended consequences. They assumed that Jesus was either dangerous or delusional in thinking he could be King of the Jews. Either way, Jesus had to go.

The cross becomes important only because of who Jesus is. Jesus is more than the King of the Jews. Jesus is the Son of God. You can't kill God no matter what instrument of death you use.

What happens theologically when Jesus died on the cross is call the Atonement. Many, many years ago, someone told me that the atonement means the at-one-ment. It is the reconciliation of humanity with God, the at-one-ment. In spite of the theological importance of the atonement, Christianity has never agreed on what or how the atonement works.

Some time ago, I was part of the Gridley Ministerial Association. During one of our monthly meetings one pastor said, "Let's talk about the atonement. That is one thing we can all agree about." I replied, "Which theory of the atonement?"

At its basic understanding, the atonement is God forgiving our sins, once and for all time. Our sins died with Jesus on the cross. This is what makes Good Friday good.

We can atone for a sin we commit against another person. Meaning that we would need to make some kind of action in response the affront such as asking for forgiveness. This is a transfer of power from the sinner to the victim.

Jesus' humanity acted for us to reconcile us to God. God's grace is to forgive us for all time. This assumes that we surrender ourselves to God. We sometimes fail to do that, but Jesus left us with an ethic of love.

Jesus died for us out of love for us. God reconciled with us out of love for us. God's grace is an act of love.

How should we respond? We are to love one another as we are loved by God. That is how God knows that we can give grace, a grace we already have.

From 1 John 4:7-8, "Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love."