

This morning, I am in the fourth week of a sermon series I've entitled "The cross: why the death of Jesus matters." As we head towards Easter, I will be doing my best to explain what the death of Jesus on the cross means for us and for the world. For those of you who have called yourself a Christian for a long time, I would encourage you to take to heart the words of David Prior in his commentary on 1 Corinthians: "*We never move on from the cross, only into a more profound understanding of the cross.*"

Three weeks ago, we looked at Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 15 that "Jesus died for our sins," seeing how Jesus' death deals with our sin problem which has separated us from God. Two weeks ago, we looked at how the cross bring meaning to our suffering. And last week, we looked at the life-transforming power of grace that is available to us at the cross, how God knows us completely yet loves us perfectly because of Jesus' death for us. This morning, I want to talk about why the death of Jesus matters for relationships and community.

When I look at the world, there are a lot of reasons to be concerned when it comes to the state of relationships and community in our country. **Two words in particular come to mind: loneliness and fragmentation.** Or, you might call it isolation and polarization. One of the horrible ironies of the past 20 years is that we live in the age of social media, where it is possible for you to connect with just about anyone in the world in a minute. And yet according to no less than the Surgeon General, there is an epidemic of loneliness in our country. Some of you know this firsthand. At the same time, it is possible to have 1000 friends on Facebook and still have no one who really knows you, not one person who you feel you can call when you are depressed who will listen, love, and care for you. You can have 200 people who will like a picture of you and yet no one who likes you enough to be there when you are in need.

We have seen this in Fight Club, our Wednesday night men's group, where over the years we have had men come who truly feel they have no one else to share with, no other men who will listen to them or care about them, nowhere else to unburden their troubles. And I have seen this in counseling, where sometimes I feel like the closest friend that some people have because of how much detail they share with me.

And the other painful reality we see in our culture is just how fragmented, how polarized we are. People are so divided over political and social issues, not understanding how anyone can see the world differently than they do. At times, the country feels like it's on the brink of civil war or societal collapse.

But at the cross, we find the answer to both the loneliness epidemic and our polarized culture.

**Let's start with loneliness.** When we look at Jesus on the cross, we see the ultimate experience of aloneness. Here we have Jesus, betrayed and abandoned by his closest friends, handed over to the Roman authorities by his religious contemporaries, and, above all, forsaken by God, his heavenly Father on the cross. And, if we rewind a little, before the cross we see Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, where his aloneness is even more vividly portrayed. After celebrating the Passover meal with his disciples, what we call the Last Supper, Jesus goes out to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray, taking along with him his three closest friends, Peter, James, and John.

*Matthew 26:37–41 - He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled.<sup>38</sup> Then he said to them, “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.”<sup>39</sup> Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.”<sup>40</sup> Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. “Couldn’t you men keep watch with me for one hour?” he asked Peter.<sup>41</sup> “Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.”*

And in Luke’s account of Gethsemane, we find this:

*Luke 22:42-44 - “Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.”<sup>43</sup> An angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him.<sup>44</sup> And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground.*

As Jesus leaves the last Supper to go out to pray to the Father, he says that he is “overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death.” The phrase “overwhelmed with sorrow” comes from a Greek word which is used to denote the most extreme anguish which the soul can feel—excruciating anxiety and torture of spirit. And Jesus is in such agony that he is sweating blood, a phenomenon called hematidrosis that only happens under extreme stress and anguish. Why is Jesus experiencing such sorrow, such anguish, such torture in His spirit?

**We find the answer in what he prays.** Listen again to v. 39: “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.” He asks

the Father to take away from him “the cup.” At first glance, that phrase may seem to simply refer to a difficult ordeal. But when you look back through the Bible, you discover that the cup has a more precise meaning:

***Psalm 75:7-8** - But it is God who **judges**: He brings one down, he exalts another. In the hand of the LORD is a **cup** full of foaming wine mixed with spices; he pours it out, and all the **wicked** of the earth drink it down to its very dregs.*

***Isaiah 51:17** - Awake, awake! Rise up, O Jerusalem, you who have drunk from the hand of the LORD the **cup** of his **wrath**, you who have drained to its dregs the goblet that makes men **stagger**.*

***Jeremiah 25:15-16** - This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, said to me: "Take from my hand this **cup** filled with the wine of my **wrath** and make all the nations to whom I send you drink it. When they drink it, they will **stagger and go mad** because of the sword I will send among them."*

***Ezekiel 23:33-34** - You will be filled with drunkenness and **sorrow**, the cup of **ruin** and **desolation**, the cup of your sister Samaria. You will drink it and drain it dry; you will dash it to pieces and **tear your breasts**.*

***Revelation 14:9-10** - A third angel followed them and said in a loud voice: "If anyone worships the beast and his image and receives his mark on the forehead or on the hand, he, too, will drink of the wine of God's **fury**, which has been poured full strength into the cup of his **wrath**. He will be **tormented** with burning sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb*

Are you getting the picture? The cup is more than just a simple metaphor for a difficult ordeal. **The cup is a metaphor for God's wrath, God's righteous judgment on human sin, God's punishment for evil and wickedness.** It causes men to stagger, to beat their breast, to go mad. When Jesus asks the Father to remove the cup from him, if at all possible, he is asking the Father if there is any other way to save us that would not involve having to bear the wrath of the Father on human sin. Can you understand why Jesus was overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death, why he was sweating blood?

Jesus was overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death because in the garden, he began to experience the Cup – the wrath of God, separation from the Father. And it caused him to stagger, to sweat blood. **In Gethsemane, the Father gave Jesus the choice.** This is just a taste of what you will experience on the cross – do you still

want to do this? Will you still do it? Will you love me even though I will crush you? Will you do it for these people who can't even stay awake with you?

And Jesus says, "Not my will but yours be done." And He drinks the cup of God's wrath for us.

**Hebrews 2:9** - *But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.*

Jesus experienced cosmic aloneness, so that we might never be alone again, so that we might be reconciled to God.

**2 Corinthians 5:17–21** - *Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! <sup>18</sup> All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: <sup>19</sup> that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. <sup>20</sup> We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. <sup>21</sup> God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*

Now, the promise to those who trust in Jesus is that they will never be alone. Even when you feel alone, you always have God with you.

**Hebrews 13:5–6** - <sup>5</sup> *Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you." <sup>6</sup> So we say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can mere mortals do to me?"*

**Romans 8:38–39** - *For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, <sup>39</sup> neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

**1 Corinthians 6:19** - *Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God?*

You are never alone. And not only is God always with you by His Holy Spirit, but He has adopted you into His family, so that now you have brothers and sisters everywhere.

*Matthew 12:46–50* - While Jesus was still talking to the crowd, his mother and brothers stood outside, wanting to speak to him. <sup>47</sup> Someone told him, “Your mother and brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you.” <sup>48</sup> He replied to him, “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?” <sup>49</sup> Pointing to his disciples, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers. <sup>50</sup> For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.”

**The cross answers the loneliness epidemic.** At the cross, we see Jesus experiencing cosmic aloneness so that we would never be alone again, so that God’s Spirit would always be with us. And we see Jesus dying so that we might be adopted into His family. In your loneliness, know that there was one who experienced a deeper loneliness, betrayal, and abandonment on the cross, so that you might never be alone.

*Isaiah 49:14–16* - But Zion said, “The LORD has forsaken me, the Lord has forgotten me.” <sup>15</sup> “Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you! <sup>16</sup> See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands;

**So what about the fragmentation of our culture? How does the cross offer a solution to our polarized society?**

Before we look at the cross, look at the approach favored in our country. Today’s justice movements are largely driven by Critical Theory or Critical Race Theory and intersectionality, which has taken over much of our education and corporate culture and politics. One of the hallmarks of this approach is dividing people into groups based on categories such as race, gender, sexuality, ability, religion, and class. One group is seen as the privileged, oppressor group, and the other as the targeted or oppressed group. And then the call is to elevate those who are historically targeted or oppressed while silencing or sidelining those who have historically been members of privileged groups. Everything is seen through the lens of power and oppression, and laws and policies are changed to encourage equity – equality of outcome. Instead of emphasizing our common humanity and striving for a world of love and justice for all, these movements emphasize what divides us, theorizing that this approach will lead to true justice.

The danger of emphasizing what divides us is that it just another form of tribalism – dividing people into group identities and then assigning one group undesirable traits. This has not gone well in the last century. As Thaddeus Williams put it, “We are Aryan, we are good; they are Jewish, they are bad. We are Brahman class, we are good; they are Untouchables, they are bad. We are Hutu, we are good; they are Tutsi, they are bad. We are white, we are good; they are black, they are bad. We are the Islamic State, we are good; they are infidels, they are bad.”

What is wrong with the world? Those people. The Jews. The capitalists. Black people. White people. Immigrants. Democrats. Republicans. This is tribalism - demonize one group, and treat every member of that group as the same. This kind of community leads to hatred and war. And this is where our culture is currently headed.

But there is a better way to deal with the polarization and fragmentation of our country, and it is the way of the cross. Don't forget that the society in Jesus' day was even more fragmented between Jews and Gentiles. But Jesus' death on the cross leveled the ground and brought them together into one worldwide family of God:

***Ephesians 2:8–22** - For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—<sup>9</sup> not by works, so that no one can boast. <sup>10</sup> For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called “uncircumcised” by those who call themselves “the circumcision” (which is done in the body by human hands)—<sup>12</sup> remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. <sup>13</sup> But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, <sup>15</sup> by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, <sup>16</sup> and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. <sup>17</sup> He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. <sup>18</sup> For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit. Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, <sup>20</sup> built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. <sup>21</sup> In him the whole building is joined*

*together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. <sup>22</sup> And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.*

Those who put their trust in Jesus are saved from sin and given eternal life. They are given the Holy Spirit and adopted into God's family. And in God's family, all the antagonism and hostility and reasons to divide must come down. It does not matter what might divide you in the world; in the family of God, you are one body, one family.

***Galatians 3:28-29*** - *There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. <sup>29</sup> If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise*

***Colossians 3:11*** - *Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.*

What is Paul saying? In the family of God, you have people who are all sinful at birth, spiritually dead. They have received God's grace that has saved them through Jesus' death for their sins. And in God's family, they are united; anything that might divide them in the world is to come down in the church. It does not matter what gender, what ethnicity, what social status, or anything else – you are to love each other as brothers and sisters. When you become a believer in Christ, that is your primary identity. The Ethiopian woman living in poverty is a sister to the wealthy suburban American man. You may be proud of your Irish heritage this St. Patrick's Day, but you are a Christian first and Irish second.

Now, maybe you object, saying that this still divides Christians from those who are not Christians. But remember – we are saved by grace, not by works, not by our brains or goodness or by anything we can boast in. And when we look at the cross, we see that the central image of our faith is a man dying for his enemies. If this is the case, then how can we look down on anyone or oppress anyone? As Jesus said:

***Matthew 5:44–45*** - *But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, <sup>45</sup> that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.*

The cross levels the ground between genders, ethnicities, social classes, or any other category that might divide people in this world. And it teaches us to love and

be willing to give our lives for those who are different than us. This is how the cross answers both our loneliness and polarization problem.

When justice movements point out real injustice or oppression, the church should be the first to respond. When it points out ways that we have not listened, we should listen. **But any solution that emphasizes what divides us rather than what unites us is not of God. Any solution to justice that privileges one group of people based on ethnicity, race, gender, or anything else is not of God.** God's vision of community is one where the things that divide us come down, as we adopt our status as a follower of Christ as our primary identity marker. And following Christ means that those of us who have been privileged must love our neighbor and lift up those who truly are oppressed or discriminated against, because they are made in the image of God and worthy of dignity. If there is systemic injustice, we work against that. If our hearts harbor bias, we repent and change. And if there is someone in need, we meet that need as God leads:

***1 John 3:16–18** - This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. <sup>17</sup> If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? <sup>18</sup> Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.*

And if we have been the victim of injustice, we follow the example of Jesus by loving and forgiving and trusting God.

***Romans 12:17–21** - Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. <sup>18</sup> If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. <sup>19</sup> Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. <sup>20</sup> On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." <sup>21</sup> Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

Any solution to injustice that feeds anger and hatred and division is not of God. The way of God is love, grace, forgiveness, and working for justice with courage and love, not violence. And the church is not innocent in this. When we have taken our eyes off of the cross and focused too much on politics and culture wars, seeking to "take back the country" instead of seeking first His kingdom and His righteousness.



No matter what barriers and divisions there are in the world, in the church there must be unity, because the ground is level at the cross. It is by grace we have all been saved, not because of our gender or status or ethnicity. So we can not look down on anyone else. We are one. We are family. Treat each other as family, as image-bearers. If the symbol of our religion is Jesus dying for his enemies, then how can we look down on or oppress anyone else? Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. This is how the cross answers our loneliness and polarization problems.