

A Progressive Cross

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Palm/Passion Sunday, April 14, 2019, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scripture: [Luke 23:26-49](#)

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“It took Jesus a thousand years to die.”¹

Those are the opening words of Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker’s important work, *Saving Paradise*. “Images of his corpse did not appear in churches until the tenth century. Why not? ...

“Initially, we didn’t believe it could be true. Surely the art historians were wrong. The crucified Christ as too important to Western Christianity. How would it be that images of Jesus’s suffering and death were absent from early churches?”²

I was stunned by these opening words when I read them about a decade ago. Like most Western Christians, I have long been familiar with pictures and carvings of Jesus on the cross, dying in agony. I was taught that the crucifixion of Christ saved the world and that everyone who was a Christian believed this. I rejected that belief decades ago, finding some very basic theological problems with it. But I’m getting ahead of myself.

I attended a conference last weekend that included keynote addresses by Nadia Bolz-Weber and Rachel Held Evans. Bolz-Weber gave a wonderful, if somewhat mocking, summary of this atonement theology most of us were taught. I wish I had a video tape of what she said. It was humorous. And it was accurate. Here’s essentially what she said – in a much drier format.

Humanity is an alienated state of relationship with God because of our sinfulness. That sinfulness (in this theology I’ve rejected) may be from the original sin of Adam and Eve or it may be because we are basically screw-ups. Whatever the cause, that sin, that disobedience, is a crime against God. “Disobedience requires punishment, or else it is not being taken seriously. Hence God must require a punishment, the payment of a price, before God can forgive our sins or crimes.”³ The only problem is that none of us is good enough, none of us is pure enough to pay that price, to endure that punishment. So, God sent Jesus to pay the price. God sent Jesus, His Son, to suffer the cruelty of crucifixion because only Jesus was good enough and pure enough to have his suffering count enough. Jesus is the price that had to be paid to free us from the punishment we so certainly deserve.

It turns out that this understanding, this theology of atonement, dates from the late 11th century, from 1097, in fact, in a book written by St. Anselm, archbishop of Canterbury⁴ – about 100 year after depictions of the crucifixion started showing up in Christian art.

¹ Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, *Saving Paradise* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2008), ix.

² *Ibid.*

³ Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week* (New York: HarperOne, 2006), 139.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 138.

My big problem with this theology is that it makes God out to be a child abuser. That's the thought I had about it 30 years ago. If God sent his Son to suffer, that's child abuse. And I don't believe that is an accurate understanding of God. I'm not the only one who's thought this. In a sermon published on the web, Bolz-Weber puts it this way: "The cross is not about God as divine child abuser sadly sending his little boy off to be killed because we were bad and, well, somebody had to pay."⁵

Yes, sacrificial imagery is used in the gospel accounts of Jesus' crucifixion and in references to the crucifixion in the Epistles, "but the language of sacrifice is only one of several different ways that the authors of the New Testament articulate the meaning of Jesus execution. [For instance,] They also see it as the domination system's 'no' to Jesus (and God)..."⁶ and that in that 'no,' the moral bankruptcy of the powers that be is revealed. And the New Testament authors also see the crucifixion as the revelation of the path to transformation. And they see it as disclosure of the depth of God's love for us.⁷

For instance, Paul writes "again and again of Jesus's death, of the cross and Christ crucified. It is 'the wisdom and power of God,' though it is 'a stumbling block' to Jews and 'foolishness' to Gentiles. It is the demonstration of God's love for us, the sacrifice that makes our redemption possible, and the path of personal transformation as dying and rising that lies at the heart of the Christian life."⁸

I sometimes wonder if all of it, everything from St. Anselm all the way back to Paul, is simply the byproduct of the human desire to make sense out of the senseless, to find meaning in the meaningless. It's not that the adage, "Everything happens for a reason" is wrong. I think it's true. It's just that sometimes the reason is, you're a jerk. Or that every action has an equal and opposite reaction and the laws of physics apply no matter what your spirituality is. Or you made bad choices. Or somebody else made bad choices. Or that there's evil in the world and the powers that be want to silence any challenge to their power.

Maybe Jesus died because the Roman Empire killed him. Full stop.

We want it to have some meaning, as have Christians through the millennia, and so we push a meaning onto it. We say that it's a sacrifice. And I think it was – in the broad sense of the word, in the sense that we say Martin Luther King, Jr. and Mohandas Gandhi and Oscar Romero and Dietrich Bonhoeffer each "sacrificed their lives for the causes to which they were devoted."⁹ In this sense, I'm comfortable speaking of Jesus sacrificing his life for his passion, namely, for his advocacy of the kin-dom of God. "The more specific meaning of sacrifice in relation to Jesus's death speaks of it as a substitutionary sacrifice for sin, a dying for the sins of the world."¹⁰ To that specific meaning, I say, "No."

⁵ Nadia Bolz-Weber, "Sermon on the Cross," *goodreads*, https://www.goodreads.com/author_blog_posts/948520-sermon-on-the-cross-christ-the-king-sunday (posted 21 November 2010; accessed 13 April 2019). I've done some editing to clean up typos a grammar.

⁶ Borg and Crossan, *op. cit.*, 139.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, 140-141.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 154.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 154.

Of course Jesus' death, Jesus' execution is a stumbling block and foolishness. What sort of self-respecting messiah would get himself killed? As Bolz-Weber points out, "During his ministry people had seen what he could pull off. Healing others, feeding others, providing huge vats of wine out of water for others – with those kinds of powers and a little more self-esteem? man ... Jesus could have had it all. 'Save yourself,' they chanted....

"The leaders, the first thief, the crowds, the soldiers – they all mocked Jesus as though to say obviously you're not the son of God because the God we know is powerful and vengeful and slightly insecure and would never allow himself to take this level of insult. The crowds made some fairly reasonable suggestions for what a genuine Messiah might do in a situation like his own crucifixion.... [But then] everyone thinks God should do what we would do if we were God. And then we judge God according to how we think God is doing with that....

"We'd love God to be the King of our particular value system. But here's the thing – most of God is unknowable. Period. And, really, we should probably be grateful for that.

"When it comes down to it the most reliable way to legitimately know anything at all about the nature of God is to look to how God chose to reveal God's self in Christ."¹¹ And maybe, just maybe we can see who God is in how God chose to reveal God's self on the cross.

If God is saying anything from the cross, I think it might be something like, "This this is the logical end of your value system. Here is where it will always end. In the suffering of God. [And] here is the extent I will go ... to defy your idea of me as a vengeful God. If you think I am about smiting your enemies then think again for I will not lift even a finger to condemn those who hanged me. I will simply not be known as the God of vengeance. I will simply not allow you to project your puffed-up human traits on me as though I'm a bigger, better version of the best parts of you or a bigger, badder version of the worst parts of you."¹²

If Jesus is exalted on the cross, it's to show us that "Christ's kingdom is comprised of thieves and Christ-deniers.... [For] from his roughhewn throne of a cross [(if it is any sort of a throne)] Jesus looks at the world ... [at] those who betrayed him, those who executed him, those who loved him, and those who ignored him, and he judges it all. The pronouncement is made and the judgment is ... forgiveness. 'Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they are doing.' ... From his cross, Christ ... loves the betrayer, the violent, the God killer in all of us."¹³

Amen.

Questions for reflection

If Jesus' crucifixion is to be viewed as a sacrifice, what does that sacrifice say to you and to the church? What it is calling you/us to do and be?

What does the crucifixion tell you (if anything) about God? about Jesus? about you?

¹¹ Nadia Bolz-Weber, *op. cit.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*