

## Beyond the Diminished Cross

There is a lot more to the cross of Jesus than you are likely to learn from those who endlessly say, "Jesus died for our sins. Jesus took our place on the cross." We have diminished the cross, made it all about the way to heaven and not at all about living on earth. I find it curious that on Pentecost Day when the Holy Spirit was poured down on the disciples and Peter stood in front of a Jerusalem crowd to preach the first "gospel sermon," he didn't say, "Jesus died for your sins."

Instead he said, "Jesus died *because of* your sins." To quote Peter, "Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you...you crucified and killed" (Acts 2:22-23). He went on to say he was the One promised by God and foreshadowed in the words of scripture, "this Jesus whom you crucified" (vs. 36).

Jesus was crucified because he rocked the religious and political boat in ancient Palestine. He came "full of grace and truth" (John 1:14), displaying perfect goodness and he "became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross" (Philippians 2:8). Death was inevitable for One such as Jesus, who embodied an expansive, radical love in a divided and violent world. He was seen by the leaders as a source of trouble. And they knew how to take care of trouble. In the words of the high priest, "It is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed." (John 11:50).

The other people did not lift their voices to protest his death. They went along with the violent deed. They placed their trust in leaders who relied on the power of deadly force rather than on the guidance of God in the nonviolently loving Christ. They trusted in violence to bring stability and preserve their nation rather than trust in the "grace and truth" made known in Jesus. They believed they could make the world safer by strategically shedding blood, in this case the blood of our Lord.

But they got it all wrong. Jesus saw the future that his nation's trust in deadly force would bring. He grieved as he looked upon his nation's capital and said, "If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes" (Luke 19:42). Jesus, like the prophets before him, was no supporter of peace through strength. He knew that deadly force leads to more deadly force with consequences spiraling out of control. A few decades after his crucifixion, Jerusalem lay in ruins.

I cannot help but think of these things as American political leaders consider again military action in Iraq and elsewhere, despite previous tragic failures to anticipate the outcomes. We mask violence with noble words, not just with war, but in so many areas of life and we deceive ourselves. As one social commentator recently put it, "We cheer for cruelty and say that we are asking for personal responsibility among those people who are not us. In our politics, we have become masters of camouflage. We practice fiscal cruelty and call it an economy. We practice legal cruelty and call it justice. We practice environmental cruelty and call it opportunity. We practice vicarious cruelty and call it entertainment. We practice rhetorical cruelty and call it debate."

It is not enough to claim, "Jesus died for our sins." Jesus died *because of* our sins. He died to show us that love is stronger than death, that absorbing violence is more faithful than inflicting violence while claiming our deadly force will produce some good end. He died to show us what love looks like when it doesn't relent no matter what it faces. The way of the cross is much more than something we believe in; it is the pattern of faithful practice.

The nonviolent love of Jesus that led to the cross and looked like defeat was vindicated by God. "This man...you crucified and killed ... God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power" (Acts 2:28). This self-giving Jesus calls us to follow him.

He calls us to *bear the cross*, not just talk piously about it. "If you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God's approval. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, *leaving you an example*, so that *you should follow in his steps*.... When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly" (1 Peter 2:20-22). Practicing love while trusting God with the outcome rather than forcibly trying to make things come out right is the essence of the way of the cross.