**Crossing Into a New Creation**

**Text: 2 Corinthians 5:14-21**

**Preached by Bruce D. Ervin**

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I grew-up in a church that, for most of its history, did not have a cross. Big, old, cathedral-like Sanctuary; no cross. When I was in 8th grade, we called a pastor whose theology was a bit more orthodox than his predecessors’ had been. And he decided that we needed a cross. So he fashioned together two old fence posts, and he created, quite literally, an old, rugged cross. It sat in the Chancel for about two weeks. And then it disappeared. For the next couple of months it would alternatively reappear and disappear. Turned out that the Property Chairman didn’t like it. So he kept hiding it.

Well, Pastor Bayer had an idea. He located two steel I-beams. Had them welded together. And then three hefty men hung that I-beam steel cross on the massive limestone wall at the front of the Sanctuary. And there it has remained for 50 years. As Pastor Bayer later said, “I got a cross that was too heavy for the Property Chairman to move!”

The Cross is heavy indeed. It was heavy for Jesus – horrifically heavy – as he bore it on Good Friday. And it has been heavy for the Church, whenever we have taken it seriously. Listen to how Paul talks about the Cross in today’s scripture: “For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died” (2 Corinthians 5:14). Did you hear that? “Therefore, all have died.” He’s talking about us. He’s talking about the Church. He’s talking about everyone who has ever believed in Jesus. To follow Jesus is to die. The Cross is all about death. One dies to one’s self, one dies to an old way of being and doing and living…so that one can live for Christ; so that one can live for others through Christ. As Paul puts it, “And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them” (2 Corinthians 5:15).

I want to talk about the Cross this morning. Not in some abstract, theoretical way but in a down-to-earth, practical way. Because, whatever else the Cross might be about, it’s about death. People died on crosses. The Romans nailed people to crosses, where they perished in excruciating pain. But there was this one Cross from which emerged new life.

Let’s be clear that crosses were simply a fact of life in 1st century Palestine. The Romans routinely murdered anyone whom they viewed as a threat by nailing that person to a man-made tree. And the cross wasn’t their only method of state-sanctioned terrorism. Those deemed enemies of the state might be burned alive, or killed by wild beasts in a public arena, or beheaded. Many early Christians suffered horrible deaths through one of these methods.

You see, it was a dangerous thing to be a Christian in the 1st century. When you proclaimed, “Jesus Christ is Lord,” you were saying, “the Emperor isn’t Lord.” You were pledging your allegiance to a Source of authority that was higher than the state. And the state was not amused. So Christians were arrested, and tortured, and killed. Often by crucifixion. And Jewish dissidents were crucified as well. One of whom was named Jesus.

But here’s the thing: an early Christian, facing execution, was able to bear that burden, knowing that he or she had already died. That follower of Jesus had died spiritually and emotionally, and had seen something of the hope that lies beyond death; something of the hope that transcends death. Paul says, “One has died for all, therefore all have died.” Elsewhere Paul says, “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God” (Galatians 2:19-20). Paul and his fellow early Christians knew well the journey of being so transformed by the love of Jesus that it was as if their old selves had died, and they were living a new life in community; a new life in which they were no longer living for themselves but for Christ and for others. This life in Christ was filled with such joy and hope that they weren’t afraid of physical death, for they knew that this new life would continue in an even more glorious way in the world beyond.

We know something about this journey. We Disciples know something about this journey. It’s called a conversion experience, and it’s been part of our tradition going all the way back to our founding at the Cane Ridge Revival. A conversion experience: you’re so overwhelmed by the love of Christ, so filled with joy and so full of love that you feel like a new person. For many of us, it happened at church camp. For others, it was a response to a particularly powerful sermon. Sometimes it occurred after weeks of wondering who you really are; maybe even months of self-loathing and confusion and despair. For me it was a process of many years. Church camp contributed to it. One particularly powerful sermon was part of it. But when it all came together I was standing on a street corner, waiting for the light to change. I was overwhelmed with doubt and despair that morning. And then, it was as if God said, “Hey, Ervin.” And I said, “What?” And God went WHAMMO! I felt like I was connected to everyone and everything around me. I felt like we were all caught up in one amazing, loving, Reality; as if we were all part of one Whole.

That was the moment when God became real to me. That was the moment when I died to my old self and became what Paul calls a new creation in Christ Jesus. Prior to that point I could be kind of cold and cerebral, unsure of myself and still trying to figure out what I wanted to be when I grew-up. Even though I was 31 years old and had been ordained for 5 years. Prior to that point I had this nagging sense that my real self was somehow trapped within me. Well, the trap was sprung on that January day in 1986. The One who proclaimed release to the captives set me free on that street corner. It was as if my old self had been crucified with Christ. It was as if I’d been raised to a new life; a new life in which I was no longer living for myself, but for everyone and everything around me.

“If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” That’s the way I felt. And that’s the way that Paul expressed it. He, of course, had had a similar experience; on the Emmaus Road.

In Christ, we are a new creation! That’s the joyous side of the Cross. It’s a doorway to a new life; a life in which death has lost its sting. A life in which all things are possible. I mean, if God can make a new creation out of a hopeless sinner like me, there’s no telling what else God can do! Which is why Paul is bold to say: “we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Corinthians 1:23-24).

“We preach Christ crucified.” “He died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves.” That’s what our faith is all about, brothers and sisters. That’s what the Cross is all about. Having died in Christ, the new life that we now live we live not for ourselves, not for our congregation, not for anything that sounds even a little bit like self-interest. No, we live for Christ; and we live for others, through Christ. For he died and was raised not just for me, not just for you, not just for us; no, he died and was raised for all!

So what does this mean, in practical terms? What does this mean for you, as a follower of Jesus; what does this mean for me, as a follow of Jesus? What does this mean for our life as a congregation?

Well, it means, first of all, that life in Christ is all about relationships. It’s about building relationships, it’s about enjoying relationships. I mean, if the life that we now live is no longer for ourselves, then it must be for others. And you can’t live for others without building relationships with others. That means that we do what we do as followers of Jesus not for someone but with someone. When you do something for someone it’s so easy to fall into the trap of thinking, “Oh, look how wonderful I am, doing all this hard work in order to take care of you.” That way of being a Christian smacks of self-centeredness and self-righteousness. That sounds a lot like the old life to which we’re supposed to have died. When we do something with someone we recognize that we are one with them in Christ. We recognize that Jesus died just as much for them as for me. We recognize that we are all in this together, as a community. Jesus, through the Cross, reconciled us not only with God, but with one another; with all others. We have been given the ministry of reconciliation. That’s the ministry of building relationships with others: not a self-serving, one way relationship; but a two-way, reciprocal relationship. Reconciliation has to do with building relationships, and serving with others, and seeking not first and foremost the survival of a congregation and its current ministries, but the common good of the entire community; be it the city or the nation or the world.

We preach Christ crucified, who died for all and was raised for all. This means that it’s about building relationships, and it’s about cutting our losses. If it is through death that new life is found, than probably some things about our current ministry have to die in order for our congregation to find new life. If it’s not life-giving, if it’s not life-creating, it it’s not about offering new life to others, then it’s not about Jesus, and it probably needs to die.

One thinks of the people of Israel, cutting their loses in Egypt and moving forward toward the Promise Land; seeking new life in the Promise Land. They left behind their old life in Egypt; they left behind everything in Egypt. Not that they had a whole lot to begin with, being slaves way down in Egypt land when Moses said to Pharaoh, “Let my people go.” But they had work. They had food. They had enough of a life that some of them didn’t want to go, and others wanted to turn back as soon as the going got tough. But God’s pillar of fire went before them, and they followed. They gathered up what they could carry on their backs, and they followed. The Red Sea parted, and they followed. The Egyptians were all weighed down with their chariots and their weapons and they got bogged down in the mud. But the Israelites, traveling light, made it through the wilderness, to the Promise Land. They died to their past, they cut their losses, and they moved forward; together.

We preach Christ crucified, who died for all and was raised for all. That’s about building relationships, and cutting our losses, and experiencing joy: the joy of being fully alive; the joy of new life. “If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation!” But you can’t experience the joy of the new until you’ve let go of the old. Kind of like having a cataract removed. That cataract has been growing for some time, but you can still sort of see, so you’ve been putting off the surgery. But finally you bite the bullet and the cataract is removed and then – oh my goodness – everything is so clear and so beautiful and you wonder, “Why didn’t I do this a long time ago?!”

It’s a moment of pure joy. To be a new creation is to be filled with such joy. “Everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new.” It is toward such joy that the love of Christ urges us on. It is the joy of living no longer for ourselves, but living for Christ and for others.

“In the Cross of Christ I glory, towering o’er the wrecks of time.” That’s what the old hymn says. The Cross of Christ, and the power of death and resurrection that it proclaims, calls into question all that has been, and still is. These are the wrecks of time which pass through the crucible of judgment that is the Cross.

In the Cross of Christ I glory. That’s the joy that can be known when we cut our losses, let go of the past, die to our old selves, and let God raise us to a new life. It’s a life in relationship with all of God’s children – young and old, rich and poor, black, brown and white, gay and straight – all of God’s children; all made in the image of the God and Creator of us all. Amen.