



Beneath the Cross of Jesus

TEXT
Philippians 2:1–11;
4:4–7

January 10, 2016 — Sermon by Rev. Jenny McDevitt

Today we continue our sermon series on The House of God, as we consider together what makes up this new sanctuary of ours. As Tom said last week, on the one hand, it's just a room ... but on the other hand ... it's like no other room.

This is a place where sacred things happen. It is a place where we whisper holy words to one another and where we stand on ancient promises. This is a place where we come to be reminded who we are, when we've managed to forget.

It's a place we can come when we are so broken, no one else will take us, and it's a place that is a shelter from the storm, and a rest for those who are weary. It's a place where there is always room for you at the table. It's a place where we tell the story of resurrection over and over again, trusting that the day *will* come when death is no more.

It is just a room ... but it is a room like no other. And in the center of it all, hangs a cross.

I wish you could have been here the day that cross came back home. It was the Friday before our Sunday return to this space. This space was still a

construction zone at that point, so at the request of the contractors, Tom, Kathy Lueckert and I put on our hard hats and came to help *Lift High the Cross*.

I should clarify that we were here in a strictly advisory capacity. None of us was about to be trusted with heavy lifting and a brand new ceiling. And to tell the truth, all three of us came in in the middle of busy days, all three of us, I think, considering this to be just one more thing to check "do" on a really long "to-do list."

But as the cross was carried into the room, and placed on the lift that would bring it clear up to the ceiling, all three of us got awfully quiet. We simply couldn't take our eyes off it. It was a holy moment.

There was a pause in the action, and I couldn't help myself. I wandered over for a closer look. For a couple of minutes, while they figured out cables and hooks, it was just me and that cross, up close.

They started up again and I cleared out of the way. Tom came up alongside of me. "What were you thinking about?" he asked. If ever there was a moment for a deep theological insight or a brilliantly wise comment, that was probably it.

Instead, I offered the truth: "I can't get over how big it is," I said. "It's really big. That cross is bigger than I am."

Tom, my trusted friend and colleague, looked at me and said, "Well, Jenny, most things are."

The cross is bigger than I am. That's not sophisticated theology.

But somehow, despite all the studying I have done to prepare for this sermon, I think that has become the most honest thing, and maybe the most important thing, I can say today.

Because no matter how hard I try, I have to admit — I don't really understand the cross.

And I think that might be okay. Some things need to be beyond our understanding.

Here's something of what I mean by that. A number of years ago, Ray Fuller was interviewed by *The Washington Post*. He is a scientist who worked for the Eli Lilly drug company, and he helped develop the drug Prozac. He was asked a number of questions about the fact that he and his colleagues openly admitted they could not explain exactly how that drug worked. They could not explain everything about *how* it altered someone's brain chemistry to help beat

back depression. They just observed that in many cases, it did.

“Here’s the thing,” he said, “if the [human] brain were simple enough for us to understand in its entirety, we [humans] would be too simple to understand it.”¹

If the cross were small enough for me to understand it in its entirety, it would be too small to save me or anybody else. And I think that is the temptation of so many: to reduce the cross and its redemptive power to something we can wrap our heads around.

Here’s one of the ways this so often happens — the cross gets explained like this:

We are sinners and we deserve the consequence of our sin. We should suffer for it, but Jesus suffers in our place, on the cross, so that we might be made right with God.

That’s pretty easy to work out, right? Someone does wrong, someone has to pay for that wrongdoing. Jesus stands in our place, so the debt has been paid and therefore we are saved.

If you’re only interested in the economics of that, I suppose that works just fine. It’s a transaction. That explanation of the cross is called substitutionary atonement theory. It’s also been called “the most unfortunately successful piece of theology ever written.”²

The problem with that theology is that it suggests Jesus came to save us from God — which would mean that God is full of nothing more than wrath and judgment, just waiting to hand out punishment, prepared to tell us all to just go to hell.

Salvation, by that metric, is nothing more than a great escape from eternal damnation. What an insult that must be to the creative God who set the stars in the sky and sent lizards crawling on the land and dolphins jumping through the waves, who fashioned us with bone and ligament and tendons, with hearts that beat and lungs that breathe and cells that replace themselves.

What an insult that must be to the gracious God who said, “I have called you by name and you are mine.”³ “I have loved you with an everlasting love.”⁴ “Arise and shine, for your light has come.”⁵ “Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.”⁶

What an insult that view of salvation must be. That understanding of the cross? It is simply too small. I need the cross to be bigger than that. And the cross that I know — the cross that we encounter in scripture — I’ve already told you, I don’t really explain it, but the first and last word of that cross is always love. Because it is on the cross that Jesus broke the power of death so that we might be free to live.

I think Paul understood that in his bones. Our scripture readings today — they both come from the same letter, his letter to the Philippians, which he writes from jail. If you are spending the day in jail, it is not your best day. And still he says: Rejoice. “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.”

You simply do not write that from jail unless you are also writing from under the shadow

of the cross, because the cross is where everything changes.

Before it was anything else, the cross was an instrument of torture. It was a method by which the Roman empire executed people — killing them publicly and slowly and painfully. The cross was intended to strike fear into the hearts of anyone who saw it. It was not uncommon for the road to Jerusalem to be lined with crosses, every one of them bearing a body.

Yet before God was finished with it, that symbol of fear became a symbol of love — a symbol of love that would go to any depth and endure any agony, a love that even in its worst and hardest moment would never abandon us, would never let go of us.

I need the cross to be that big, because I need a place to go when I am afraid. I need a place to go when I have messed up yet again, when I have done wrong by someone I care about, and I am afraid that this time, they are going to give up on me. I need the cross to be bigger than my mistakes.

I need a place to go when I am in over my head, when life has thrown me a curveball I do not know how to handle, and I am afraid this time the walls are going to come crashing down. I need the cross to be bigger than my anxiety.

And I need a place to go when I turn into a total control freak, when the tasks pile up and I try to do too many things at once, because I am now somehow afraid the world will

not keep turning without my assistance. I need the cross to be bigger than my ego.

I don't know about you, but I need the cross to be bigger than all of that — bigger than my mistakes and my anxieties and my ego, bigger than my hurt and my inadequacy and my uncertainty. I need the cross to be bigger than every one of my deep-seeded fears. And it is — not because Jesus steps up onto the cross to make amends for my fears, but because in the cross, Jesus shows me that somehow love, when it is strong enough, casts out fear. I do *not* understand it, but I have learned — I am learning — to trust it.

It's a bit like gravity in that regard. I don't understand gravity. I can tell you some things about gravity, but I don't fully understand it. I've just learned to trust it, so much so that when I climb a ladder, I hold on for dear life, because I trust that if my foot slips, or I lean out too far, gravity will in fact send me crashing to the ground. Not understanding how gravity works doesn't keep me from trusting that it will.

The cross is bigger than all my fears, and I am grateful for that every day of my life. But even more importantly, it's not just that the cross is bigger than my fears. It's that the cross is bigger than *me*, which is to say the cross saves me from the delusion that my fears are the ones that matter most.

“Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,” Paul writes, “who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard

equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking on the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death — even death on a cross.”

As best as I can tell, being obedient to God means remembering and living all that we have been taught.

It means remembering that the greatest commandment is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and to love your neighbor as yourself.⁷

It means remembering that we are to welcome strangers, because that's how we end up entertaining angels.⁸

It means remembering to put away our weapons so that our swords might be beaten into plowshares,⁹ so that maybe, one day, we might learn to feed each other instead of fight each other.

It means remembering to look out for the widow and the orphan and the outcast.¹⁰

It means remembering to lift up the lowly and stand up for the oppressed and make space for voices long silenced.¹¹

And if any of that sounds scary to you, you are in your right mind. Every one of those things could come with great risk to us or to those that we love, and risk and fear — they speak the same language.

But when fear shows up, remember — maybe, just maybe, our fears aren't always the ones that matter most. And you know, when we stop letting our fears

have center stage ... we might actually, in time, become less afraid.

That sounds an awful lot like salvation to me. It's a tall order.

Thanks be to God, that's a really big cross.

¹As recounted in *The Beast: A Journey Through Depression* by Tracy Thompson, p. 13

²Richard Rohr, *Eager to Love: The Alternative Way of Francis of Assisi*

³Isaiah 43:1

⁴Jeremiah 31:3

⁵Isaiah 60:1

⁶John 14:27

⁷Matthew 22:36–40

⁸Hebrews 13:2

⁹Isaiah 2:4

¹⁰James 1:27, among other references

¹¹Luke 1:46, 55, among other references

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's Web site: www.villagepres.org/sermons.