

"It is Us!"

Sermon for Sunday, March 18, 2018

[Hand out the nails to the congregation first.]

SCRIPTURE: Mark 15:21-32 (This is the Holy Gospel...)

While I was attending seminary in Louisville, I also served as the part-time youth director at Edwardsville United Methodist Church on the outskirts of New Albany, Indiana. It was a church that had been enlarged with a new, larger sanctuary and the original small sanctuary had been remodeled into a small chapel area with the back of the original sanctuary turned into classrooms. In what was now the chapel area, a large cross was mounted on the wall over the original altar. What was unique for me was that this cross was a crucifix... meaning that it was a cross with the figure of Jesus Christ on it, which was a bit unusual in a United Methodist Church.

On the one hand, Protestant churches typically display "empty" crosses—we celebrate that the cross is empty, just like the tomb. Jesus is not on the cross any longer. He is raised back to life and seated with the Father in heaven! He is risen! But on the other hand, I would occasionally go into the chapel to sit and look at this image of Jesus nailed to the cross and reflect on the depth of his sacrifice. An empty cross, while sound theology, can also allow me to avoid the cost of Jesus' suffering and sacrifice.

So why did Jesus have to go to the cross? Why was the shedding of blood a necessary payment for sin and forgiveness? Back in antiquity in the Near East, when parties were making a land treaty, they had a custom. It's one that will sound strange to our modern ears. They would take animals and cut them in half and place the halves of each animal side by side in a gully area, where the blood would drain out of the animals. And then each party to the treaty would walk through the trail of blood... in essence making this commitment: "If I break the covenant, I will pay with my blood."

In the book of Genesis, God makes a covenant with Abram to be his God and that Abram will have descendants as numerous as the stars and that God will give to Abram this land to which he has brought him. And Abram asks God how he will know that God is really making this commitment. God instructs Abram to bring a heifer, a goat, a ram along with a turtledove and a young pigeon and to cut the heifer, the goat and the ram in half and lay the halves side by side. Sounds familiar, but now listen to this...

"As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram... Abram fell asleep! "When the sun had gone down and it was dark, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram..."

(Gen 15:12,17-18a)

God made this amazing commitment to Abram... he made a treaty of blessings and grace. But only one party made the commitment to pay the penalty—GOD! As Abram slept, God moved down the blood path alone—the flaming torch-- making the commitment to pay the price if either broke the covenant agreement. If God broke the covenant, God would pay the blood price. If Abram broke the covenant, God would pay the blood price!

**The custom may sound strange to our ears, but the point is that all the way back to Genesis, God offered himself as the reconciling sacrifice even when through sin WE break the covenant relationship with God.

Today we receive a nail to add to our Lenten crosses.

The nail symbolizes that it is our sin that sent Jesus to the cross.

When we sin, when we break our covenant relationship with God.

We are the ones that pound the spike into Jesus' hands and feet.

The old comic strip character Pogo says: "We have seen the enemy and it is us!"

When we think about sin, "it is us"!

When we think about who denied Jesus, "it is us!"

When we think about who caused the nails to hold Christ on the cross, "it is us!"

Not the Romans... not the Jews... not Judas... It is us!

But the nail also symbolizes "costly grace"... the undeserved love of God... the one who paid our price. I have this quote from Dietrich

Bonhoeffer in my office: *(Dietrich Bonhoeffer, The Cost of Discipleship)*

Costly grace is the gospel which must be sought again and again, the gift which must be asked for, the door at which a man must knock.

Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life. It is costly because it condemns sin, and grace because it justifies the sinner. Above all, it is costly because it cost God the life of his Son: "ye were bought at a price," and what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us. Above all, it is grace because God did not reckon his son too dear a price to pay for our life, but delivered him up for us. Costly grace is the incarnation of God."

The nail symbolizes how great is Christ's love for us... he loved us enough to claim us and redeem us... to bring us back into relationship.

Before we can rush to Easter, we must spend some time thinking about how much God loves us...

Enough to commit to paying the penalty for us...

Enough to sacrifice his beloved Son for us...

Enough to go to the cross himself for us...

Because "it is us" who has sinned, but "it is us" whom he loves.

[Lead congregation in a time of response]

Costly grace... it is costly because it cost God the life of his son.

But it is the means of forgiveness...

freedom from guilt...

resurrection from the deathly life of sin...

And it is ours by God's grace through faith... confession... and repentance.

Let us take a few moments and then I will close our time with prayer.