



Gjæk to God GJ-eour

The Cross:
Symbol of
Solidarity?

DENOMINATIONAL BROADCAST
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THE CROSS: SYMBOL OF SOLIDARITY

We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses.. .
Hebrews 4:15

Do you mind if I tell you about one of my most disturbing frustrations? Often people write me about theirs, so I guess it's only fair that I mention one of mine.

My frustration comes from being unable to get across to you the full meaning of what I am trying to say. Now I realize I'm not the greatest preacher in the world, but that's not really my problem—that's not the reason I fail to communicate fully what I would like to say. Rather, the reason is that there is something fundamentally wrong with the method I use.

My problem is not unique to me by any means. In fact, the more "successful," the more well-known, the more impressive a preacher becomes, the more he will have this problem. In other words, this frustrating problem is widespread, and there is a good chance that every preacher has it.

In talking about the Christian faith, I do things that make it difficult for you to understand the real meaning of Jesus Christ. I erect a barrier between me and you who

listen to me. For example, you hear me on the radio now, and as I speak, an engineer sits at the controls, making sure that I don't get too loud. And when I make a mistake or get to coughing, I repeat that part and the engineer takes out all the mistakes. So when you hear me, you don't hear all those sounds that we usually make when we talk with each other. Now this is the proper way to make a broadcast, but it does mean that there is something unreal about this program.

Regular preachers, those who get up before their congregations every Sunday to preach, have this problem, too. Many preachers have a little streak of showman in them. But even if they don't, the fact that they stand in front of everybody else creates a barrier between them and their listeners.

So this is my frustration. The very act of preaching, over radio or on television or in church, sets me off and makes it seem as if my words have nothing to do with real life. That wouldn't be so bad if my topic were different or less important. My message, however, concerns Jesus Christ, who is real and whose words and deeds are of utmost importance.

What you hear now comes to you from a distance, and it is being spoken by

someone who seems totally different from you yourself. It must seem strange to you to hear me talk. Jesus Christ, on the other hand, is ever so close to you. He understands you perfectly. He wants you to know what He is like. He wants you to know that you can have no experience that He has not had Himself. He understands. There is a solidarity between Jesus and you and all of us together. Jesus and we are alike. How can I make this clear?

I know of only one way: I must tell you about the cross of Calvary. For at the cross Jesus showed us that He is like us totally. To get across the absolute truth that God wants you to know, I have to talk about the cross over and over again. The cross alone allows me to overcome the microphone camera-pulpit barrier.

Please understand: Jesus will come close to us. He will join us in our life experience. He will suffer for us and with us. He will give His very life for us. Jesus will do all this.

Don't listen to me. Listen to the message. You need the message of the cross, and I need it. Jesus is God, and God came to suffer with us in order that we could be delivered from our sin and misery. That's the good news. And it's all part of the message of the cross.

The Christian faith is about a Savior who doesn't talk to us from a distance; He doesn't say things to us over the radio or from a television screen or even from behind a pulpit. The Savior at the center of the Christian faith is the Son of God who came and lived with us and died.

That Jesus is one with us is a very important theme in the Bible. The book of Hebrews emphasizes this with special force. In the second chapter we read:

Both the one who makes men holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers.

... He says, "Here am I, and the children God has given me." Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil (vv. 11,13,14).

These statements tell us that Jesus became part of the family of man. He became one with us. Jesus, the only begotten Son of God who received the glory of the angels throughout all eternity, became one with people like us who are in deep trouble. If a homeless, poverty-stricken person would knock on the door of a wealthy family and announce that he

wanted to come in off the street and live with them for a while, we would all understand his motives. He would enjoy eating at their table and being driven around in their limousine. But if the circumstances were reversed and a wealthy businessman would decide to live with the homeless and the poor, we would be flabbergasted. Why would he want to suffer so? But this is exactly what the Bible says Jesus did. He came to become a part of our family even though our family is in misery.

Even though so many aspects of the Christian faith give us the feeling that God is far away and that religion has nothing to do with our day-by-day experiences, the Bible teaches this basic message: God came to live among us and to share our plight with us. God did this through His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, who became our brother. What did He share with us?

First, He shared our suffering. Suffering is not a very nice subject to talk about. I realize, but preachers can't be expected to talk only about positive things. None of us escapes suffering. I know that the sound of my voice is coming into lives that are utterly miserable because of suffering.

Some of our suffering is psychological;

it's caused by the way we ~~some~~ people think the world's against them. They look at life gloomily, and they can't seem to break out of this habit. Others literally torture themselves with thoughts and ideas that are all twisted and mixed up. These people need special, professional care.

Some of our suffering comes because of our emotions. We may be disgraced or utterly disappointed with ourselves for some reason. Maybe you have lost your job, or you have failed a test in school, or your best friend has moved to another town. Maybe it seems as if your life is falling apart. Possibly divorce is staring you in the face, and you wonder what is going to happen to you and your children. This is suffering.

There is also physical suffering. Those who have never experienced it can't understand what it's like to lie there, afraid to move for fear the horrible pain will come back. They don't know how it feels to be unable to do anything for yourself-to have to call a nurse for everything. She tries to make you feel more comfortable, but nothing helps. In addition, there is the fear that everything will get worse and that you are going to die.

Jesus understands perfectly what we go

through. Hebrews 4:15 says that He is our great High Priest and that He can sympathize with us in our weakness because He learned what weakness is. Hebrews 5 says:

During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him (vv. 7-9).

This means that right now, in your misery, you can call out to Jesus. Don't be afraid. Don't be embarrassed. True, we preachers may come across to you as being very different from you, very distant and very strange. But Jesus is not far away from you. He is as close as a prayer. And your prayer doesn't have to be a beautiful prayer. Just talk to Him right now in your misery. If all you can do is cry and whimper, just do that and ask Him to save you. He knows what it means to cry and whimper; He remembers when He did it.

Do you want proof that Jesus knows and understands and sympathizes? Well,

look at the cross. This is what the cross is all about. Here is your Savior, and He's not wearing a flowing robe or a well-pressed suit. He's not speaking in a well-modulated voice that's being carefully controlled by an audio engineer. He is weeping and He is wailing. His suffering is intense beyond imagination. So turn to Him and pray to Him. He hears and understands.

Yes, Jesus is one with us in our suffering, but He is also one with us in our sins. Now, I don't want you to get the wrong impression. Hebrews 4:15 tells us that Jesus was without sin. Jesus was the only person to be conceived without sin. He was conceived by the Holy Spirit, and He was born of the virgin Mary. He escaped the contamination of original sin. Moreover, He never committed sin during His lifetime. Even when He became angry, He did not sin. All of His reactions were just and righteous. Every other person who appears on the pages of the Bible sinned, and many of their sins are recorded. But Jesus never did. Even so, Jesus became one with us in our sin.

Our sins were laid on Him. The prophet Isaiah talked about this already 800 years before Jesus was born. In the 53rd chapter of his book, we read: "We all, like sheep,

have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all" (v. 6). And in 2 Corinthians 5 we read: "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (v. 21).

Jesus Christ was and is the only begotten and sinless Son of the living God, and this Jesus became the great sin-bearer for the world. When He began His ministry, John the Baptist saw Him and announced, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29). Yes, that is what Jesus became, and that is what He did. We cannot visualize the magnitude of what Jesus did. About all we can do is think about our own sins—not only about the obnoxious, obvious sins but also about all of the sins we commit in the course of an ordinary day. Each of us must say what the apostle Paul said: "I am the worst" of sinners (1 Timothy 1:15). I don't know your sins, and you don't know mine. But I do know that my sins were laid on Jesus Christ. And when I think that Jesus bore not only my sins but the sins of the world, of all mankind, my mind reels and staggers before John the Baptist's statement.

Talk about solidarity, that is, solidarity.

The cross stands as the irrefutable proof that Jesus became one with us—not only in our suffering but also in our sins. From the Bible we learn that this sacrifice became the foundation of the forgiveness we receive when we believe in Jesus. Now our sins can be taken away. Now over my life the word *forgiven* can ring out in the courts of heaven, and the same word can ring out over your life if you believe in Jesus. The Bible uses all sorts of figures of speech to emphasize that once we believe in Jesus our sins are gone. It tells us that God throws our sins into the depths of the sea (Micah 7:19), that He removes them from Him as far as the east is from the west (Psalm 103:12), and that He makes them evaporate as the morning mist (Isaiah 44:22). God can do all this because He arranged for His only Son, Jesus, to take all our sins upon Himself and pay the price for them.

This is the extent of His amazing grace. I want to talk to you who are crippled. What if Jesus said to you, "I will take your crippledness upon myself, and I will be come crippled so you can walk?" You would be deeply impressed, wouldn't you? Well, Jesus did exactly that with your sins, and to be freed from your sins is more important than to be healed of your

crippledness. I want to talk to you who have cancer. What if Jesus said that He would take your cancer upon Himself so that you could be well? Jesus will do exactly that with your sins. I could go on mentioning diseases. The point is that all of these diseases are nothing compared with the greatest disease of all: our sins. Jesus comes into our lives to take our sins away.

When God comes so close to us, what must we do? Why we must believe in Him. Perhaps you heard about Velma Barfield, who not many months ago was executed in North Carolina. Velma was convicted of murder. And she was guilty. But while in prison, she heard a radio program just like this, and she became a Christian. She believed in Jesus Christ. Velma Barfield, criminal that she was, believed in Jesus who became a criminal and took His place on death row and was executed for the sins of His people.

Chaplain Phil Carter tells about Velma's radiant faith: "She was a comfort to every inmate, and she was a living witness of the transforming power of Jesus Christ, and she had an extraordinary ministry with the women here." Velma was guilty of the crime she was finally executed for, and she was guilty of much, much more,

just as you and I are guilty. But she believed the good news, she confessed her sin, she trusted in Jesus for forgiveness, and she looked forward to eternal life. When she was finally wheeled into that room in the prison and injected with a lethal drug, that room became the passageway to glory for that grandmother. Jesus was her Savior because Jesus had become one with her in her suffering and in her sin, and He had paid the price for her forgiveness.

One of the greatest dangers these days is that people will think about Christ and about religion in terms of certain radio and television preachers or in terms of their own preacher or their church. They may think that what happens over the airwaves or within their church is all there is about Christianity. Well, these things are important only if they point to that which is infinitely more important: Christ Himself, crucified on Calvary for our salvation. Everything must point to Jesus and the cross.

I hope you understand that Christianity is about a Savior who comes close to us in all of our need. It is so easy nowadays to get the impression that Christianity is expressed best by hosts of dignified and impressive people who are dressed in spe-

cial costumes and who have learned how to speak impressively about religious things. There is a great emphasis nowa days, too, on all the advantages that can be yours if you join yourself to the Christian movement. There are advantages, but none of them should obscure the fundamental fact at the center of the Christian faith. The cross is the ultimate proof that God came and became one with us in our suffering and in our sins. He carried our suffering and took care of our sins and guilt.

Now each of us must go to this Savior. Nothing may ever hold us back. Whatever our misery, we may turn to Him in the confidence that He understands perfectly, for He shared our misery. And, most of all, He took our sins upon Himself.

Confess your sins. Stop sinning. Turn to Christ and ask Him for forgiveness. He will save you through the cross.

PRAYER

Lord Jesus Christ, we are overwhelmed by the wonder of your love. We cannot understand how you, who are true God, would come into our sin-stricken world and become like one of us. We are so happy that we can call you our

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brother-that we are now part of the same family.

We bring our many needs to you. See our tear-stained faces, our pain-racked bodies, our desperate spirits, and help us in our deepest agony. We know that you are entirely acquainted with what we go through, for you experienced the same pain and misery. Through your Holy Spirit, help some who have never called on you to turn to you in their hour of need.

We cannot thank you enough for taking our sins upon yourself. Exactly what was involved in this escapes us. But we know that though you are sinless, you took our sins and guilt upon yourself and paid the debt we owe. Thank you, Jesus, for this perfect provision for our salvation.

Now strengthen our faith, that we may believe all that we have just thought about. Turn us to yourself and turn us away from our sins. Make us your redeemed children. We pray because of Calvary. Amen.

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