
LOVE IS A CROSS

I want you to pay close attention today because we're going to do something a little bit different today and I want you to understand why and be able to explain it if anyone asks you.

Recently we celebrated Valentine's Day.

- St. Valentine was a third-century priest in Rome.
- Tradition say that Emperor Claudius was trying to eliminate Christianity from the empire.
 - Two ways Claudius did this was to outlaw Roman soldiers from being able to marry, and to forbid anyone from helping Christians.
- Valentine was caught marrying Christian couples, including soldiers, and otherwise aiding persecuted Christians.
 - Valentine was condemned to death.
 - After a beating with clubs and stones failed to kill him, Valentine was beheaded.

Because of his commitment to marry those who were in love, Valentine is commemorated as the patron saint of love, happy marriages, and those who are engaged to marry.

On Valentine's Day we exchange what as a symbol of our love? (*hearts*)

- The heart became a symbol of love in ancient times because it was believed to be the center of all human emotions.
 - Since love is a strong emotion, the heart became a symbol of love.
 - So, on St. Valentine's Day we give hearts to those we love.

But how many of you would give hangman's noose to show your love for someone?

- Or a miniature electric chair?
- Or a tiny little firing squad?
 - Not very romantic, are these?
 - They are instruments of death—of execution.
- Yet what do we see in the front of nearly every worship center?
 - The cross—another symbol of execution.
 - Why do we do this?
 - Because, for Christians, the cross is the greatest symbol of GOD'S love.

Isn't that strange—that an instrument of suffering and death is revered as a symbol of love— of divine love.

- Actually, there are a lot of people who believe that the GOD we worship is more about violence and death than about love.

Just look at the Bible:

There's the flood.

- GOD decides to destroy all humankind except for one family.
 - In ancient times, gods did things like that just because they could and because they cared little for those insignificant beings called humans.
- But this story ends differently than other ancient flood stories.
 - GOD promises that this will never happen again.
 - Because this GOD is different.
 - This GOD commits to living with people in a new way—a way where life is preserved and respected.

And then there's the story of Abraham's son.

- GOD gives Abraham a son through whom he's supposed become a great father.
 - And then GOD tells Abraham to sacrifice his son.
- Sacrifice was a big part of ancient worship.
 - When you take in a harvest, you take a portion of that harvest and place it on an altar as a sign of your gratitude to the gods who gave you the harvest.
 - The same with the new born sheep or cows or goats.
 - When the gods give you something you give part of it back.
- So, Abraham isn't surprised when GOD asks for the sacrifice of Abraham's son.
 - But what kind of GOD would demand your firstborn?
 - Not this one.
 - Because this is the GOD who provides.
 - This is the GOD whose actions are not based on destruction but relationships.
 - This is the GOD who wants to bless, to show favor, to show something new, something better, something that pulls people forward.

But the cross?

- How do we understand the cross?
 - In the second letter to the church in Corinth, Paul explains:
"For HE says, 'In the time of MY favor I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you.' I tell you, now is the time of GOD'S favor, now is the day of salvation."

It might have been Valentine's Day, but there is a saying I've always like: "Love is not a heart. Love is a cross."

- On the cross, GOD showed the breadth and the width of GOD'S love.
- On the cross GOD provided the sacrifice for our sin.
- GOD restored our relationship to where it was before the choices we made to go our own way instead of GOD'S way.
- GOD blesses us, shows us GOD'S favor, shows us a new way to understand GOD, and pulls us forward into GOD'S love.

So tonight, this year, instead of putting a cross on your forehead in ash, I'm going to make a heart.

- Now I know that's not traditional.
 - But as you go from here out into the world, people may see you with that heart.
 - And they may ask you, why do you have a heart on your forehead—or they may ask you why you have a heart instead of a cross.
 - Then you can tell them about the love of GOD who uses a cross to show how much GOD wants to be in relationship with us;
 - the GOD who chooses to restore relationships rather than punish for sin;
 - the GOD who blesses, shows favor, shows a new way to understand GOD, and who pulls us forward into GOD'S love.
 - Love is a cross and it symbolizes the GOD who not only offers love, but is love, and calls us to love, as God loved us.