

Series: THE WAY OF THE CROSS
Sermon: "This is Your Life"
Scripture: Romans 3:21-26; 6:20-23
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This week, we are beginning a sermon series entitled, "The Way of the Cross." (The reference is not to the hallway in the back of the Worship Center that shares the same name.) This series will focus on the Cross as more than just a piece of jewelry, rather as the instrument through which God redeemed the world. The Cross is the great equalizer. When we stand at the foot of the Cross, we all stand on level ground. Regardless of the title you have, or how much you have, or with whom you have relationships – when we stand at the foot of the Cross, we all stand in the same place.

What does the Cross mean to you? A few years ago, I went to visit a new sanctuary that had been built in the North Hills of my home town in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The main worship area was a large room, and in the front of the room – from wall to wall – was an organ. I had never seen so many pipes in my life. In the center of the chancel, was a very small altar table, and on top of the table was a two-foot high brass Cross. The feeling when you walked in that room was as though you were there to worship the organ – instead of the One who gave us the gift of song. As the pastor was giving me a tour of the building, I asked him the significance of why the Cross on the table was so small. He stunned me when he replied, "The Cross doesn't matter that much around here."

Three months later, I was visiting another congregation in the south hills of my home town. This particular congregation worshipped in a very large church with a very impressionistic modern sanctuary. When I walked into the back of this sanctuary, I noticed two things immediately in the front of the room. The first was a pulpit suspended in the air approximately twenty feet above the worshipping congregation that looked like it had been taken out of the "Starship Enterprise" and hung right there. (I don't know how the pastor ever got up into the pulpit, but I know he didn't levitate up there on Sunday. I couldn't see the steps, but I figured they were there.) On the other side of the chancel was another symbol – a wrought iron cross in the most unusual shape I had ever seen. I began to ask that pastor about the history of that cross and he stunned me when he said, "The Cross doesn't really matter much around here." As one of your pastors on the very front end of our life together in this church, I want you to know clearly – the Cross really matters here.

I was talking to some members of the congregation who were here when this Worship Center was being built. They told me there had been some conversation during that time about not putting a Cross in front of the Worship Center. I am so thankful that the individuals who wanted a Cross as the symbol prevailed, and that we have this beautiful Cross hanging above us. I am so thankful for people like Dave Travis, Dick Biggs, Merv Skiles and the late Charlie Annis as well as others who hand-made

this Cross which now hangs here as a reminder to us. The reason it matters is not only because of the story of its origin – it matters because of all that it symbolizes. The Cross reminds us of a God who created us to live in a relationship with Him, and how the human family has strayed far away from what God intended for that relationship. The Cross reminds us of how our God sent His Son, Jesus, into the world to save us. It reminds us of a day when love was stretched out and nailed to a Cross and that Jesus suffered, bled and died. Because the Cross is empty, it reminds us that Jesus was put into the ground for three days. It reminds us that God's Son can change the way we live our lives. We will live abundantly here if we will place our faith in Him.

Right up front, I want to reiterate that the Cross really matters around here – but in order for us to grasp the fullness of its meaning, we must first grasp the profundity of our need. In order to do that, we will be taking a look at the book of Romans. This is a tough book – with difficult grammar, deep logic and big words that can sometimes get in the way. The study of the book of Romans has been the key in the reformation of the church for ages. Martin Luther was studying Romans when he discovered the doctrine of justification by faith – this changed the nature of the church. John Wesley was at a bible study where they were reading the preface to Luther's commentary on Romans when his heart was strangely warmed – that birthed a Methodist revival of which we are still part of today. The book of Romans has been called a "little New Testament" because it contains the Gospel – the basic plan of salvation – within its content. Luther said, "If Romans is a 'little New Testament,' then Romans Chapter 3 is a 'little Romans.' "

The book of Romans has such big words as righteousness, justification, redemption, atonement, holiness and sanctification. I want to help simplify some of those big words in these verses and help to answer in life some of those big questions such as: Who am I? Why am I here? What is my purpose for being? How can I get right with God and others? These are "big" questions that demand a "big" answer that can only be found in a relationship with Jesus. So how is your relationship with Jesus this morning? How is your life? Are you who you want to be? By examining the state of your life and mine, we can find the answer. For the next few minutes, this is your life.

Your life can be captured in three words. You are going to be somewhere in the middle of this story. The first word is GENERATION. Generation speaks about the way we were created to be. We were created to live in a relationship with the holy, loving, providing and caring God. We were created to be perfect – without sin – fully human, fully alive, just like it was back in the Garden. In Genesis 1:26, we get a glimpse into a conversation that's going on with the members of the Trinity and the Host of Heaven – this is what they said, "Let us make man in our own image, in our own likeness and let them rule over creation."

From the very beginning, we were created to live in a relationship with God to reflect the character of God in our lives. The eighth Psalm tells us that we were created to be "the crowning touch of creation." God created us just a little lower than the angels so that we might reflect the character of God and the world. Is that the way

it is today? When you look at our world and our lives, is that the way it is? We start out with such great potential. When the doctor hands an infant to their parents for the first time, is there anything any more perfect than a newborn child? As soon as that newborn child learns how to keep score, and as soon as that child learns that they can get what they want by acting certain ways, our real inner nature begins to come out. G.K. Chesterton once said, "What else may be said of man, this one thing is clear – we are not what we are capable of being." I think we know that. I think – deep down in our core – we know that something is not right. I believe that is the Spirit of God whispering into our created nature, reminding us of who and what we are created to be.

Years ago, Thomas Carlyle put it this way – "Mankind's unhappiness comes from our greatness." This is because there is an infinite within us – with all of our cunning, we cannot quite bury underneath the finite. You see in our creative nature – the *Imagio Dei* – the image of God is created within us. In all of our lives, our souls are restless – as Augustine says – until we find our rest in God. We know that our lives were created to be more than they are; Wesley called this kind of knowledge "Prevenient Grace" – 'pre' meaning 'before,' and 'venient' meaning 'life.' Prevenient Grace is the grace of God active in our lives before we ever come to life in Christ, telling us there is a better way. This yearning is a gift from God preparing a way for us to live God's life, to live God's dream for us. Prevenient Grace whispers into our hearts at the depths of our souls.

So what went wrong? Why aren't we the people we were created to be? The second word is DEGENERATION. Degeneration speaks about the way life is – broken, sinful and estranged from God and other people. Without getting into all the details, sin's disobedience entered into the human family; and we have been infected ever since. Paul talks about it this way in Romans 3:23 – "All have sinned and have fallen short of the glory of God." Sin and its consequences are a part of the flavor of the human family. I want you to imagine that I am holding a big jar of pure, clear water – right out of the spring – poured into the bottle. You pay more for this water than you do for gasoline. Now, I take a half of a cup of salt and pour it into the water. No matter how much or how little of that water we pull out, from that point on, the water will reflect the saltiness that entered into the jar. The same is true in the human family – when sin entered the human family, it entered us all. Since that very first act of disobedience back in the Garden, the blood stream of the human family has been infected and polluted. The result is brokenness, separation, death and estrangement from God.

Romans 6:23 tells us that "the wages of sin is death." Can you see the consequences of this in your life? I can see it in mine. We can see it in our shattered relationships and in the market place. We can see it in our habits or in the things that we watch and listen to in the media. You can see it in the biggest news story of last month. How many of you have been watching the unfolding tragedy and death of Anna Nicole Smith? It is a mess. We can see it in the crutches that we use to seek out our daily existence, and it stinks. This is a common thing for all of us.

When I was in college, there was a fraternity on our campus that was known for the practical jokes it would play on its members. One morning, one of the fraternity brothers was 'sleeping off' the night before, and his brothers had decided it was time for him to get up. They took some limburger cheese and combed it into his mustache. It didn't take very long for him to wake up. He stood up and said, "This room stinks." Then he walked out into the living room where all of the brothers were seated and said, "This room stinks." Then he walked out the front door to the house and, standing in the front yard, he said, "The whole world stinks." When it comes to our condition, it doesn't take much to figure out that we are a great deal like that guy – we know things aren't right, we know "it stinks." As we look more closely, we learn the problem is right under our noses – it's not in any body else's heart, but ours.

Thirty years ago, Alexander Solzhenitsyn wrote a classic book titled, *The Gulag Archipelago*. In the book, the author describes the human condition. He said, "If there were evil people somewhere in cities committing evil deeds, and if it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them, but the line of good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. Who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?" This is your life – isn't it? It's my life, too. We were generated for one thing, but we have sinned and degenerated into something dramatically different. That stinks! The reward for that kind of life is brokenness and eventually death. Death is not merely the cessation of bodily functions. Death happens when we cease to be who we were created to be.

What can we do? How can we get right with God again? The third word is REGENERATION. This speaks to the way that we can be made alive in Christ – restored in our relationships with God and one another. This word Regeneration literally means 'to be reborn,' to be recreated into the image that God had in mind when creation was first thought about. The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord (Romans 6:23). The wages of sin is death – that is the bad news. Now in the Bible, whenever you see the word 'but,' that means there is a change of thought coming – a contrast. The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord – that is the great news.

In the gospel of John, Jesus would say, "I came so that you would have life in super abundance." Romans is a book with some big, 'fifty-cent' words. I want to give you some 'five-cent' definitions. For example, 'justification' means that God makes it 'just-as-if' our sin never happened. 'Redemption' means to pay a debt so big that we can't possibly pay it ourselves – Jesus does that for us. 'Atonement' means that someone made a sacrifice that was big enough to cover our sinfulness. We could not possibly do that ourselves – Jesus does that for us. 'Righteousness' means to make someone right before God – Jesus does that for us. How can we become reborn? How can we be who we were created to be? How can that all be forgiven? How can we be made right before God and toward one another? Jesus is the key.

Romans 10:9 tells us if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, then you will be saved. Faith in

Jesus is the key because it changes the way God looks at us. For example, if I would hold up a piece of red glass in front of your eyes, the whole world would look red. If I would hold up a piece of blue glass in front of your eyes, the whole world would look blue. When we accept Jesus in the place of most importance in our lives, it is as though God holds up a 'Jesus-colored' glass – and when he looks at us, all that He sees is Jesus. Another way to see it is with the Chinese language. Chinese is a very complex language – it is actually composed of word symbols that are characters, and many of the words are combinations of other characters. When we place our faith in Jesus, we become 'righteous' right before God. The Chinese word for 'righteousness' is a combination of two other characters – the first is the character for 'me,' and the second is the character for 'lamb.' When the 'lamb' is laid on top of 'me,' it becomes righteous. You see, Jesus in the Scriptures is the Lamb of God that came to take away the sins of the world; and when we make the step in putting Jesus in the place of most importance in our lives, He covers you and me so that we look righteous in the eyes of God. This is your life – the GENERATION in what you were created to be, DEGENERATION in what we need to become and REGENERATION in what we can be alive in Christ. What do you want?

A couple of weeks ago, I bought a car and one of the things that they gave me was a key. When I was at the new car dealership, they took me around my new vehicle, showed me that it had four tires, how to open and close the doors, where to put the key, how to turn the stereo on, where the speedometer was and then they gave me my car. As I was driving off of the lot, I was reminded that that car has thousands of moving parts, computer systems that I would never be able to understand, and a combustion engine that I know I would have to keep gas and oil in it so that it would work. There are all kinds of movable parts that make the car work. I don't have to understand all of those movable parts in order to drive my car – all I have to know is how to put the key in the right place to turn on the ignition and go.

Your life is whole lot of moving parts and relationships. I know that some of you are desperately trying to figure some of that out, and when you lay faith in Christ on top of all that it seems to become complicated. We think that we have to figure it all out before we can ever live by that faith. The great news is that you don't have to understand everything about a car to drive it off the lot – neither do you have to understand everything about faith in Christ in order to be able to receive Him by faith. Put the key in the most important place in your life so that your life falls into place, and you will see – it works.

In just a minute, we are going to gather at the table and celebrate our family meal. This meal reminds us that, when we are at the foot of the Cross, we are all on level ground. This meal reminds us of our lives – generated, degenerated and regenerated. When you come today, receive this meal by faith so that you might continue to become the person that God had in mind when He first thought of creating you – fully alive, here and to come.

