

“Jesus Did Not Die For Our Sins”

Rev. Bill Freeman

March 20, 2016

Menifee United Church of Christ

I. INTRODUCTION

1. JOHNNY IS AT HIS GRANDMA'S FOR THE WEEKEND.

Johnny is at his Grandma's for the weekend. Johnny is 8-years-old. His Grandma takes him to the park on Saturday morning. It's a beautiful park. His Grandma says, "Johnny, do you know that God painted this beautiful park?" Johnny says, "Yes, Grandma, I do. God painted it with God's left hand." His Grandma says, "What makes you say God painted it with God's left hand?" Johnny says, "Because we learned in Sunday School that Jesus sits on God's right hand."

2. WHAT IS JESUS' RELATIONSHIP TO GOD AND US?

What is Jesus's relationship to God and us? Well, the Bible says Jesus is God's Son. The Bible says Jesus is our Lord and Savior. And the Bible says, which Johnny almost had right, that Jesus sits at God's right hand. Today is a good day to ask: What is Jesus' relationship to God and us? Because today is Palm Sunday. Because today is when Christians celebrate Jesus' triumphal entrance into Jerusalem, triumphal even though he did not ride on a mighty horse, but he rode on a donkey (which Democrats should not take to mean that Jesus is therefore necessarily a Democrat). And because today is when people waved around palm branches and said things like, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord." Today is also a good day to ask: What is Jesus' relationship to God and us? Because today is also Passion Sunday. Because today is the start of Holy Week. And because today is when we remember that Jesus is riding on a donkey toward his own death. By week's end Jesus will be betrayed, denied, and deserted by his own disciples. By week's end Jesus will be accused of being the King of the Jews, which we now know was way too limiting. And by week's end Jesus will be put to death.

II. A BIBLICAL EXAMPLE

1. JESUS WAS CRUCIFIED.

Jesus was crucified. Jesus said of those who put him there, according to the Gospel of Luke, "God, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing." Jesus hung on the cross from noon until three in the afternoon. Jesus cried with a loud voice, "God, into your hands I commend my spirit." And Jesus then breathed his last.

2. WHY DID JESUS DIE?

Why did Jesus die? There are at least two very different answers to that question. There's the Fundamentalist Christian answer to that question. And there's the Progressive Christian answer to that question. The Fundamentalist Christian answer to that question - Why did Jesus die? - is: God created us and hates us. God hates us for our sins. God condemns us for our sins and required that Jesus die for our sins. The Progressive Christian answer to that question - Why did Jesus die - is: God created us and loves us. God knew we would sin and loves us anyway. So God forgives us for our sins and did not require Jesus to die for our sins. Obviously the Fundamentalist Christian answer to the question - Why did Jesus die? - differs greatly from the Progressive Christian answer to the question - Why did Jesus die?

III. A CONTEMPORARY COMMENT

1. A PREACHER ONCE TOOK ON FUNDAMENTALISM.

A preacher once took on fundamentalism. Harry Emerson Fosdick preached a sermon in a New York City Presbyterian church back in the 1920s, "Shall The Fundamentalists Win?" Harry Emerson Fosdick said you didn't have to take the Five Fundamentals literally to be a Christian. Harry Emerson Fosdick said you could be a liberal (or a Progressive) and still be a Christian.

2. WHAT ARE THE FIVE FUNDAMENTALS?

What are the Five Fundamentals? One: a belief in the virgin birth of Jesus. Two: a belief in the inerrancy of scripture. Three: a belief in the miracles of Jesus. Four: a belief that Jesus died for our sins. And five: a belief in the resurrection of Jesus. Harry Emerson Fosdick believed that Liberal (or Progressive) Christians could have a different take on the Five Fundamentals. One: an understanding that another word for virgin in the ancient languages is young maiden or young girl. Two: an understanding that when the scriptures say things like the heavens and the earth were created in six literal days, that scientists tell us the scriptures are in error. Three: an understanding that when Jesus did miracles like fed the 5000, the miracle was that he got all those people to share with others the food that they had brought for themselves. Four: an understanding that Jesus didn't so much die for our sins as he died because of our sins – our sins of hatred, revenge, and war – so that when he preached love, forgiveness, and peace - the powers that be wanted him dead. And five: an understanding that the resurrection of Jesus was of his spirit rather than of his body. Because of that sermon, Harry Emerson Fosdick was kicked out of the Presbyterian denomination. Not to worry, though. John D. Rockefeller, a supporter of Harry Emerson Fosdick, built Riverside Church in New York City so that Harry Emerson Fosdick would have a place to preach. Not too shabby.

IV. ANOTHER BIBLICAL EXAMPLE

1. THE PROPHET HELPS US TO UNDERSTAND THINGS.

The prophet helps us to understand things. According to the book of the Prophet Isaiah, which was written hundreds of years before the birth of Jesus, God supports us. Isaiah writes: "The Lord God has given me the tongue of the teacher." Isaiah writes: "The Lord God has opened my ear." And Isaiah writes: "The Lord God helps me." Oh my. That doesn't sound like God created us and hates us. That doesn't sound like God hates us for our sins. And that doesn't sound like God condemns us for our sins and requires that Jesus die for our sins. Quite the contrary. That sounds like God created us and loves us. That sounds like God knew that we would sin and loves us anyway. And that sounds like God forgives us for our sins and would not require Jesus to die for our sins. And yet, Fundamentalist Christians would have us believe that God created us and hates us. Fundamentalist Christians would have us believe that God hates us for our sins. And Fundamentalist Christians would have us believe that God condemns us for our sins and required that Jesus die for our sins.

2. WHY DO PEOPLE SAY JESUS DIED FOR OUR SINS?

Why do people say Jesus died for our sins? Well, perhaps because that's what they learned in Sunday School. Perhaps because that's what they've been taught in church all their lives. And perhaps because that's what they truly believe. I have to admit, though, that I do find some preachers inconsistent. They proclaim: God created us and hates us. They proclaim: God hates us for our sins. And they proclaim: God condemns us for our sins and required that Jesus die for our sins. But then I'll hear those preachers contradict themselves. They proclaim: we are a masterpiece.

They proclaim: we are conquerors. They proclaim: we are victors and not victims. Well, which is it? I'm so confused.

V. A MODERN-DAY EXAMPLE

1. THIS WAS A FAIRLY FUNDAMENTALIST CHURCH.

This was a fairly Fundamentalist Church. As far as I can tell. For 52 years. Then about a year-and-a-half ago, I showed up. And all heaven broke loose. A Progressive Christian? Preaching a Progressive Christian message? That's when the fairly Fundamentalist Christians here began to leave. Mostly because I took the Bible lovingly, but not always literally, especially when it came to homosexuals. I performed this church's first same-sex wedding. Now, I'm pretty sure preachers here never preached against homosexuals. But when you never preach in favor of homosexuals. When you never preach against the seven homophobic passages of the Bible. And when when you never preach in support of same-sex marriage, doesn't silence amount to about the same thing as preaching against homosexuals? How can it be? How can it be? That no preacher preached in support of homosexuals here for 52 years? Because, as I say, this was a fairly fundamentalist church until I showed up.

2. WAS JESUS A FUNDAMENTALIST?

Was Jesus a fundamentalist? No. That's why Jesus died. That's why the religious fundamentalists had Jesus killed. And that's why they'd have Jesus killed today. They wouldn't like Jesus changing scripture, like when he said, "You have heard that it was said (in the scripture) that you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemies, but I say to you love your enemies." They wouldn't like Jesus disobeying scripture, like when he refused to kill the adulterous woman, even though scripture demanded it. They wouldn't like Jesus saying, "Blessed are you who are poor...But woe to you who are rich." They wouldn't like Jesus saying to a president, who wanted war with Iraq, "Blessed are the peacemakers." And they wouldn't like Jesus welcoming homosexuals. So I have no doubt that religious fundamentalists today, including some presidential candidates, would shout, "Crucify him! Crucify him! Crucify him!"

VI. CONCLUSION

1. JESUS DID NOT DIE FOR OUR SINS.

Jesus did not die for our sins. Jesus died because of our sins. Jesus died because of our sins of indifference, jealousy, and exclusion. Jesus died because of our sins of self righteousness, self-centeredness, and selfishness. And Jesus died because of our sins of hatred, revenge, and war. Jesus looked hatred in the face and preached love. Jesus looked revenge in the face and preached forgiveness. And Jesus looked war in the face and preached peace. And they killed him. Not because God demanded a human sacrifice for our sins. But because you can't go against the powers that be and live to tell about it. Gandhi knew that. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., knew that. And Jesus knew that. And they all died the death of a martyr, as prophets have a tendency to do. All of that is what many Progressive Christians believe about Jesus' death.

2. WHAT DO YOU BELIEVE ABOUT JESUS' DEATH?

What do you believe about Jesus' death? You have a God-given brain. And we don't ask you to leave it at the door when you come in. So you can believe whatever you want about Jesus' death. You can believe that Jesus died for our sins. Or you can believe that Jesus died because of our sins. You can believe that God had Jesus killed as a human sacrifice, to atone for our sins. Or you can

believe that the powers that be had Jesus killed for not being a religious Fundamentalist. Whatever you believe, I hope you know that your sins are forgiven. I hope you know that your sins are forgotten. And I hope you know that God doesn't want you to feel paralyzed by guilt for whatever you've done. Because God loves you no matter what you've done. Because God loves you unconditionally. And because God loves you forever. And I also hope you know that God has you in the palms of God's hands. Both of God's hands. Because Jesus is seated at the right hand of God and not on the right hand of God.

VII. CLOSING PRAYER

Let us pray: God of Love,

Help us to know that our sins are forgiven and forgotten.

Help us to know that Jesus did not die, that he's alive today.

And help us to know that Jesus is alive today in each one of us.

Now and forevermore. By the power of the Holy Spirit.

And in the name of Jesus. Amen.