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# The Parish Paper

OF  
ST. JOHN'S CHURCH  
SAVANNAH, GEORGIA

Vol.36 No.33

The Eighth Sunday after Trinity

07/17/05

## NOTHING STRONGER

Nothing is stronger than the cross of Jesus. There is nothing that hurts us that is stronger, nothing that worries us that is stronger, nothing that grieves us that is stronger. At the center of the cross is the will of love. And there love suffers every hurt, endures each worry, and accepts each grief, and conquers all.

St. Paul is the consummate thinker about these things. "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?" he asks. "Shall tribulation or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or peril or sword? ...Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other creature shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:35ff).

The cross is stronger. What made the cross of Jesus so perfectly strong was his life. The cross would be of none effect if the Lord had not lived in love from the beginning to the end. We know, of course, that he grew in wisdom and stature, but his growth was that of the one who would not "break a bruised reed" or "quench a smoking flax" as Isaiah put it. Jesus grew in the art of tender mercies, and his ministry perfected this. He did not condemn the woman caught in adultery but bade her go and sin no more. He did not rebuke Zaccheus the publican for his past but rejoiced in his lively repentance. He did not upbraid the thief crucified next to him, but promised to remember him, and to grant him a place with himself in paradise. Jesus practiced the art of tender mercy and grew in the love that would conquer all on the cross.

It is the power of God's love in Christ on the cross that Paul weaves through his thinking. Nothing compares to its power to bring us close to God. Law, Paul says, is not powerful enough for anyone to gain access to God. The Gentiles fail to keep their own moral standard. The Hebrews break the commandments and are judged law-breakers. The only means for us to come close to God is if God brings us close to him. And God did so when Jesus, who knew no sin, was made to suffer the penalty for our sin on our behalf.

Paul himself had been the righteous Pharisee. He had kept the law as well as anyone could, and he had gone a step further and persecuted

the Christian church as a sect which was ruinous of what he considered true religion. But when the Lord appeared to him, and later through meditation and reflection showed him the truth of the gospel, Paul came to realize his absolute need of the cross. "I am crucified with Christ," he says, "nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me" (Galatians 2:20).

Paul knew the love of God in Christ first hand, experientially, but he also knew it theologically. Law and the accomplishment of human pride can never satisfy man's relation to God or man's relation to man. Only love can accomplish this. And so the greatest function of law is that in the end it requires love to complete it. The law leads us to recognize our sinfulness, and thereby brings about the necessity of mercy, and love pours forth mercy as the gentle rain comes down from heaven.

But love also does something more difficult. Love ascends the cross to offer a loving will to the Father, a will of love so powerful, so pure, that the sins of the whole world are covered by its precious blood. Love gives itself to die our death that we might not die eternally. Love undergoes the dark night of the soul that we might awake in the light of God's holy hill. When Jesus offered himself he took our just death and gave us his perfect life instead. His was, and is, the work and will of love.

Now, in the midst of our daily hurt and worry and profound grief, the love of Jesus covers us still. No matter what the hurt, his hurt was equal. No matter what the worry, his concern was equal. No matter what the grief the dark night of the soul was his as well. And so now he can minister to us by his perfect offering on the cross and by his constant prayer which he offers simply by his presence with the Father. The Father looks upon him now and sees his perfect offering, and with him, they send the Spirit to comfort us.

I do not believe in the false jubilation of Christians who hold heartache and grief in denial and try to cover it with pious phrases and self-confident smiles. Jesus wept at the grave of Lazarus. He snorted in his spirit before he called him forth out of the grave. Jesus felt the impact of actual death, and it hurt him deeply. The only thing that mattered to him, after raising Lazarus, was his offering of himself to his Father. The Pharisees plotted to kill him. And in Bethany, Mary anointed Jesus' feet and wiped them with her hair. She had done this, Jesus said, toward his burial. Jesus had suffered human grief with and for Lazarus. After that he would desire a yet still deeper experience of death and anguish of soul for all of us.

Nothing is stronger than the cross. The prayer of consecration in the 1928 BCP, and in the Prayer Book tradition from the beginning, has it best. He made "(by his one oblation of himself once offered) a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation and satisfaction, for the sins of the whole world."

And so now, in our lives, here on earth, when we face unbearable hurt, constant worry, and unthinkable grief, we can look to the cross of Jesus and know that his love, poured out there in the depths of human experience, is more powerful. It is powerful not only in his experience of it, but also in the mercy and comfort and peace that he through the cross gives us. "There is, therefore, now no condemnation for those

who are in Christ Jesus," says St. Paul (Romans 8:1). Nothing is stronger than the cross, and now, by faith, he gives us the strength to cling to it.

**The Rev'd. Dr. Michael L. Carreker**

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