

Pastor Bill Sass – sermon for Sunday, March 21, 2021

GOD'S OPEN ARMS

“And I, if I be lifted up from the earth will draw all men unto me.”

John 12:32

The cross is so rich in symbolism. We see the vertical beam of the cross, reminding us of love that God has for us. And we see the horizontal beam representing the love that we are to share with all mankind.

Someone has said the cross is the pronoun, “I” crossed out—another symbol of the meaning of crucifixion.

There is one other representation of the cross I would like you to hold, however: the cross represents God's open arms. Isn't that a beautiful thought? The cross represents God's open arms.

This is why when we look at the cross we need not do so with mournful faces, though it does represent pain and suffering, though it does represent the unfortunate reality of our sinfulness, though it does represent the most awful deed ever perpetrated by man—the killing of God's innocent son. All of that is there.

Never-the-less when we look at the cross, we also see a positive affirmation of God's eternal love. When we look at that cross and see God's arms open wide, then we have a new feeling about our own lives. We see something that can redeem our lives. We find hope, meaning and purpose in that cross.

WE SEE DEMONSTRATED, FIRST OF ALL, GOD'S LOVE FOR HIS CREATION. “God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.” As we gaze at the outstretched arms, we see nail prints in His hands and scars in His side and feet. We see just how far God will go in order to buy back His beloved people.

There was a prophet in the Old Testament who understood that love. At least he had a glimpse. It was the prophet Hosea. Hosea had a wife who would not be faithful to him. She was always running after other men. This grieved Hosea

greatly, for he loved his wife very much. Finally, he thought to himself, "If I could just move her away from temptations here in the city."

So, Hosea bought a farm out in the country. He moved his wife away from temptations of city life, but she could not take life in the boondocks. She fled from Hosea and their farm back into the city. She returned her wayward living, and finally fell so low that she became a prostitute. Hosea went to look for her. By the time he found her, she had fallen so low that she was being sold on an auction block, like a head of cattle.

Then Hosea stood in the crowd while the auctioneer began to auction off his wife. Hosea heard men in the crowd make suggestive remarks about her, as they prepared to make their bid. Hosea's face burned with shame, humiliation, and disappointment. He was tortured by all the feelings you and I would have at that point. But when time came for Hosea's wife to be auctioned off, what did Hosea do? He reached into his pocket, and brought out enough money to buy her back himself.

Later at home, Hosea began thinking about this experience. He thought about his love for his wife, even though she had been unfaithful to him, and hurt him in every conceivable way. He concluded: "If my love for my wife is so great that I would be willing to buy her back after all she's done to me, just think how much more willing God must be to buy back His unfaithful people."

The book of Hosea is about the great love God has for His children, even though they have hurt Him deeply. Hosea lived hundreds of years before Jesus of Nazareth. One day God would buy back His people on the cross of Calvary.

What we want, and what we need, is knowledge that somebody cares for us. And the cross demonstrates someone does care. God's open arms.

In the second place, the cross represents God's invitation to all people. To everybody! God's open arms are wide enough for the whole world. Rich people, poor people, men and women, boys and girls, black people and white people, red people and yellow people, good people and sinful people, as we all are.

I'm glad the invitation is to all. I'm thankful no one is excluded. God's arms are open to everybody, and we dare not forget that. Regardless of who we are, or

what we have done, we can go home. God's door is always open. God's arms are always open.

This is the story of the prodigal son. The prodigal can go home—not because of any great virtue he has, but because of the love his father has for him. That is important because the harsh reality of life is that all of us are prodigals.

So, if you came feeling down on yourself, that there is no good left within you, and you are unacceptable even to God, take a good look at that cross, and see God's arms open wide. Because they are open.

The cross is a demonstration of His love and an invitation to everybody.

But there's one more aspect of that cross and that is God's arms are sending us to spread His love to all the world. We dare not keep this good news to ourselves.

If a person really believes in good news, they cannot keep it to themselves. Something good happens to you, and you are just about to burst before you tell somebody else. If you see the open arms of God, His great love and His great invitation to all people, then how can you keep that to yourself? God calls us to take His word to all people—to spread His love to everyone we encounter. And with knowledge that He goes before us.

F.B. Meyer noted the oriental shepherd was always ahead of his sheep. He was in front. Any attempt upon them had to take him into account. That is a helpful insight. God is in front. If we are his sheep, if He's called us to go out into a hostile world to spread His love, He goes in front of us. He opens doors that we could never open.

Someone has said there are two kinds of Christians—those who are thermometers and those who are thermostats. A thermometer simply reads the temperature, doesn't it? A thermostat controls the temperature. A lot of Christians are just thermometers. They reflect the times of which they are a part. Thermostat Christians, on the other hand, seek to influence, channel and control the environment of which they are a part. God's open arms are a call to be thermostats.

Now, His work does not come quickly or easily. Dr. Leslie Hunter told of a dream he had. In his dream he entered a spacious store in which the gifts of God were

kept. Behind the counter was an angel. In his dream the would-be purchaser said, "I have run out of the fruits of the spirit. Can you restock me?" The angel seemed about to refuse, so, in his dream, D. Hunter burst out: "In place of war, injustice, lying, hate, tyranny, I want love, joy, peace, and integrity. Without these I shall be lost!" But the angel behind the counter replied, "We do not stock fruits; we only keep seed."

That's what God has called us to be about, sowing seed. The Divine sower sows seeds of love and peace and joy and He calls us to sow that seed as well.

That wonderful legend of Johnny Appleseed going about the West, planting apple trees, cheers our hearts because somewhere deep within, we know we ought to be sowing seeds of the Kingdom, spreading God's love to everybody—young, old, influential, left-out, saint and sinner.

God demonstrated His love for us. In Christ's hands, feet and side we see evidence of that redeeming love that will pay any price to buy back His children. We see that invitation to every person, including the least deserving of all. And we hear His call—"Go make disciples of all nations."

God's open arms. Is there any more pleasurable experience in the world for a little child than to see daddy or mother or granddaddy or grandmother come up the walk and for that child to run to throw himself or herself into those waiting and loving arms? What joy there is to have the security that comes from knowing we are loved.

You and I can have that security. We can know that reality. Gaze upon the cross this morning and see there God's arms open for you.

AMEN!