



The Cross of Castaways

Text: John 9:31

Old Testament: Genesis 12:1-4a

New Testament: John 9:1-41

All around us are sanctuaries without the Cross. We at Hillcrest don't avoid it. Our sanctuary's Cross rises above us to remind us of why we're here.

Newer sanctuaries show an architectural decision made by church designers and congregations trying to appeal to young people. They're practicing the Golden Rule of a new Christianity. "Don't let your Christianity show!" Get rid of the Cross.

It's a different world today than when the Scottish Reformers banned the Cross from church sanctuaries. They considered the Cross a form of church idolatry that represented priestly power. Today, the unchurched find the Cross a turn off from belief in a loving God.

The thinking goes the unchurched won't enter a sanctuary where the Cross of Jesus' suffering for sin hits them in the face. Their God doesn't need Jesus' sacrifice for sin. They want God's love without the cost Jesus paid on the Cross.

This positive Christianity doesn't need a price for sin. They imagine a loving God without judgment.

If there is no divine judgment, then there was no need for Jesus to come to earth. There's no need for the Cross. Jesus died in vain. He wasn't the Savior we say He is. The challenge is to see in God's judgment His love on the Cross overcoming human sin.

Today's passage from John's Gospel is about a man who was born unable to see a cross, let alone THE Cross. But he lived under the Cross' burden of sin. Even though he could not see it, he could feel it daily. It was his daily experience, from which there was no escape – until he met Jesus.



Today's passage is also about Pharisees who COULD see the Cross and believed they were above it. It was their means to get rid of the stain in Jesus' sin of idolatry. For the Pharisees, the Cross preserved their nation's cleanliness before God.

The Pharisees thought a cross would solve the problem of Jesus' appeal to people who were willing to commit the sin of idolatry by worshipping Jesus as the Messiah. Actually, the Cross was God's way to resolve the problem of the blind man who was accused of sin because of his loss of sight.

The blind man's condition of disability had been from birth. According to God's law in Lev. 26:14-16, the man's inability to see was caused by his or his parents' violation of God's covenant. Disease and loss of sight were considered God's punishment for sin.

The Pharisees believed the blind man's condemnation by God's judgment forced the man to a life of begging on the streets. He was continually pleading with other Jews for their grace in order to survive.

"Show grace upon a blind man, you who live in righteousness because you can see. Have mercy upon me – a blind man – you who think I have sinned."

The blind man lived under the perpetual burden of being rejected as a social outcast. Either his sin, or his parents' sin, placed him before God's wrath. He was not equal with other Jews who lived a life of righteous obedience to the law before God. For the Pharisees, those who had sight were righteous before God.

The same burden of sin led the Pharisees to condemn Jesus to the Cross. Jesus was leading people to sin by suggesting He was the Messiah. Jesus sinned by pretending to be God. He was teaching idolatry of the worst sort. Jesus, the son of a carpenter from Nazareth, was presenting Himself as equal with God.



Only God could heal sinners. Only God could reverse the punishment for sin by employing divine grace to reverse the punishment of disease and blindness sinners merited. By healing people, Jesus was elevating Himself as equal to God.

Both the blind man and Jesus were charged with sin by the Pharisees. They were castaways in a world of righteous believers. They were second-class citizens who were unworthy of care or compassion. They were getting what they deserved – punishment for sin. In the case of the beggar, it was blindness. For Jesus – the Cross.

There are lots of people who come to churches feeling like castaways. They feel rejected by Christians who look at the speck in a castaways' eye without seeing the log in their own. Castaways come to church to seek relief from the judgment of their peers. They come to church to seek comfort from God's grace.

In a throw-away society, social castaways don't want to be discarded by family, neighbors, their church, or church members. They want to be accepted for their efforts to be faithful despite being condemned for their sin. They dare enter a sanctuary with hope for God's grace in the face of condemnation.

When they arrive in a foreign church sanctuary, they want signs of grace and mercy, not judgment. Their need for hope is so great, so real, so compelling, that new church designers believe a cross hanging in a sanctuary discourages their coming. Church growth gurus claim the Cross offends the castaways. The Cross stands between the seeker's sense of unworthiness and God's grace and mercy which Jesus offers them. So, the architects leave it out of new churches.

What makes the Cross offensive isn't its presence in a sanctuary. It's what righteous believers do with it to the castaways.



The Cross wasn't meant to condemn castaways to despair. The Cross was meant for castaways to have hope!

The Cross is for those who rightly worship God to make sure the castaways know the Cross' true purpose. The Cross of Jesus IS the path to God's grace and mercy!

Jesus shows the blind man and the Pharisees that the man's blindness isn't God's condemnation for sin. God uses blindness to reveal the power of His grace and mercy to overcome sin. The condition of suffering this man has endured from his community under the burden of sin's accusation was meant to reveal the power of God to overcome the burden of sin.

Jesus hangs on the castaways' Cross for hope and new life. Jesus' Cross changes the future of life's castaways who seek after a gracious God.

The Cross is Christianity's second greatest symbol of hope. It's been abused by Christians who carried it before them to destroy disbelievers' efforts to find faith in God. It's been disgraced by Christians who deploy it to convince those with guilt to think they are lesser in God's sight than the Church member.

The Cross' true place lies among life's castaways. They identify with Jesus understanding their plight. He is a castaway, just like they have been in society, or, in the case of the blind man, they actually are.

A congregation of Jesus Christ where love and mercy flow like an everlasting stream is where the Cross is a weathervane that points with the winds of God's spirit toward the Kingdom of Heaven.

In a congregation of Jesus Christ's love and mercy, hope and promise are lovingly, patiently offered in Jesus' name. They're the signature of a loving God who is there for the blind and the sighted, providing new life to all who love Jesus.



Years ago, a physician and her husband went to Croatia to adopt an orphan who was born blind. Her mother had been killed during the Balkan's War. The little girl had been saved despite being hit in the eyes by shrapnel that had killed her mother before she was born. There is the sense that the little girl was blind because war's sin.

Although this girl never saw daylight, she never felt condemned by God. She carries the Cross of a sightless life, by rejoicing God's blessings.

She felt three times loved. Her birth parents loved her. Her adoptive parents love her. And she was not castaway in an orphanage because God loved her.

She went to church Sundays with a cheery voice and a happy heart. She couldn't see the Cross above her in her sanctuary. But she knew God gave her love that made her blindness His opportunity to see God's grace.

She is happy to be alive. Her daily smile radiates from her sight of God's love.

We are surrounded by people who live in darkness, blinded by fear of the Cross' judgment. They feel cast off by people without a place of security. There are people of the Church who use the Cross to evoke fear in castaways. They do this to convince people they castaways that they are lesser people than the church member. They strip away hope by dismissing God's grace.

Such church people are like Pharisees. Their judgment is unworthy of God's purpose for the Cross. The Cross' glory shines in hope and gratitude among those who embrace its wooden timbers.



I once was asked to become the pastor for the national executive of my fraternity who lived out of town. His predecessor was a member of the church I was serving. The young man was dying of AIDS.

He had been a Presbyterian his whole life. But as an adult, he gave up going to church because he felt judged by his church. He felt rejected by Christians.

His struggle was that he was being judged by God by contracting AIDS. My ministry to him was to help him know God loved Him. Jesus' death on the Cross and resurrection from the dead was for him to know God's grace and mercy.

During the final months of my fraternity executive's life, he experienced God's grace healing him and his family. Relationships that had been broken by judgment were rebuilt and restored. People in his personal and fraternal life he never thought would accept him rallied around him and gave him support.

I visited him a few weeks before he died in his hospital room. He wasn't angry with God, but lifted his hand to me to offer a prayer of gratitude to God for his love and mercy. This was what Jesus' Cross was intended to do for all of us.

Paul writes in Romans 6:23 the wages of sin is death. Death is the great equalizer where there is no greater or lesser sin. There is no exemption from death for goodness and righteousness. As Paul writes in Romans 3:23, "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God."

Disease and death don't mean God's grace is absent. Just because we can't prevent the inevitable end of life through intelligent design or government edict, doesn't mean God's mercy is gone from the world.

We are facing an unprecedented time of anxiety this Lent. That anxiety isn't over the Cross' absence from the world. That anxiety isn't over Jesus dying for our sins.



The anxiety isn't even if we were to contract the virus, people would think we are sinners. Our fear is that we might lose our life from a virus despite doing everything we can to keep from getting it.

We are so far removed as a culture from considering the relationship between sin and death that we dare to live without believing we need Jesus' Cross.

We can distance ourselves from the diseased and keep them away from us. We can scientifically engineer our way to salvation through viral research so that we don't have to experience suffering. We can avoid disease with our own efforts and strength.

Such thoughts fail to consider that we are putting ourselves right where we need Jesus' Cross. We've done what the Pharisees accused Jesus of doing. We've equated ourselves with God. We can prevent the disease from getting us. This is idolatry.

Only God can overcome disease and death. Jesus has shown us this. Our need for faith in Him brings us to embrace His Cross.

The Cross of castaways never is distant from us. It draws us closer to each other through God's love. It makes us victorious over disease and death.

May we always honor the Cross' intention by being emissaries of God's love regardless of the cost we pay for the effort. May the castaways who come here see in us the Cross of God's grace to them!

The Cross of the Castaways stands with honor and glory as God's gift of grace. Let us live like Jesus', and be people who embrace the castaways for God's glory. Amen.