

**SHIELDED FROM IMAGES OF VIOLENCE**  
**Sermon Series: “The Offence of the Cross”**  
**February 25, 2018 –Romans 5: 12-17**  
**The Church of the Covenant**

I remember being given a tour of The Church of the Covenant by the committee that was tasked with finding the next Pastor about ten years ago now. I attended the church prior to the new wing with the Commons Area and the Covenant Center were built. So we walked into the Commons area and I was going “Nice, nice; this is very nice.” Then I looked over to the left and saw the giant depiction of Jesus dying on the cross called “The Sacrifice” and I went Woah! Shazaam! These people take Jesus and His cross seriously; I want to come to *this* church...

I am preaching in Lent about “The Offence of the Cross”; how the modern, secular world finds reasons to find offence with the cross of Jesus. How people struggle with what kind of loving God could send His only begotten Son to die such a horrible death. How just even the image of the cross is a graphic offensive image of extreme violence which offends our delicate, modern sensibilities. It is ugly and it is terrible; but so is our sin which it seeks to erase in the blood of the Lamb. So many people in today’s world seek to shield themselves from such images.

I remember in a former church of mine some 17 years ago, a Sunday in Lent where the Christian Ed Director did a Children’s Sermon on the cross of Jesus. It was good; it wasn’t graphic at all; personally I felt it was age appropriate and appropriate to the season. But later that week a man stormed into my office, an important man in that congregation, brimming with anger, and saying how deeply offended he was by the inappropriate Children’s Sermon and how we needed to fire the CE Director for her error. He said, “My God, my wife and I have spent our whole life seeking to shield our children from graphic images of violence and we come to church and our children are assaulted even here!!!!”. “I am deeply, deeply offended and you need to fire her!” I tried to calm him down. I’m never going to throw some staff member under the bus because someone gets angry. But then he wanted me to agree with him, that the cross should never be presented in church where a child or a youth might ever hear about it. And I couldn’t agree with him. The cross is so central to Christianity. It is so ugly because our sin is so ugly. But it is a graphic image of violence, may I say, transformed by the LOVE of GOD...So because I wasn’t willing to throw a staff member under the bus and I wasn’t willing to agree to throw away the cross, I also became bad and wrong and the man and his family eventually left the church and I took a lot a “hits” because of the offence of the cross. Gladly. Because Jesus has taken far more “hits” for me than I will ever take for Him.

We live in a world that takes offence at everything. Thin-skinned, over reactive, hyper-critical, go for the jugular, verbally assaulting, angry and threatening behavior, is not GOOD. It is evil. I am offended by the ease with which people take offence. Even good Christians are impacted by this sin of our current world. And that thin-skinned sin has itself been nailed to the cross and can be washed away by what some people call the offensive, graphic image of violence that Jesus chose to be nailed to for us and our salvation. Its not offensive; it’s the absolute sign and symbol of His passionate love for us.

Even theologically we can de-centralize the cross from its pivotal role in the forgiveness of sin. There are theologies out there that refer to everything as the “Christ Event”. Reconciliation with God comes from a whole host of things. Jesus’ birth and His life connected to His teaching, and His healing, connected to His death, connected to the resurrection. Some would argue that reconciliation doesn’t come from one thing, the cross, it comes from all these things. Certainly, everything that God does through Jesus is connected and part of one gracious design to love and reconcile us. But to take the cross down from its lofty perch, to remove the substitutionary blood atonement from its central role, means to me –No cross, no crown; no dying to self, no rising to eternal life; no pain, no gain; no agony on Good Friday, no eternal victory on Easter Sunday. We rob the church of its holy power to transform lives mired in sin when we remove the cross from its central, pivotal role. By seeking to shield ourselves from this graphic image even theologically we in effect say –no cross, no holy power to transform people’s lives.

Our scripture verses from Romans chapter 5 are speaking about how sin entered the world through the fall of man, with Adam and Eve in the Garden. Think about it: there was only one rule –don’t eat of the fruit of that one tree. But Adam and Eve broke that one rule, and their sin set into motion a world filled with broken-ness, and death, distance and enmity with God. They lived in a perfect world, in perfect relationship and perfectly in God’s presence, and they had but one tiny rule, and that one tiny rule they broke. But Jesus Christ is the second Adam, grace and truth, the Son of God, the fulfillment of the law, the One whose very death could wipe away the power of sin and death for all time...if we but believe and live our lives for HIM! Christ died on the cross and this is a FREE GIFT. We were not worthy to receive it. Indeed, while we were yet sinners Christ died for us. He didn’t have to do this but went willingly to the cross. The free gift was given through the cross. The free gift is GRACE poured out at Calvary. The free gift of that one man Jesus abounded for many. In the same way that sin came into the world by Adam’s disobedience, the forgiveness of sin came into the world by the free gift of Jesus Christ on a cross poured out at Calvary through His blood. *“The free gift of that one man Jesus abounded for many.” (Romans 5: 15)* It ABOUNDED FOR MANY. Abounding means that it geometrically expands without limits. Wherever Jesus Christ is proclaimed and the cross is lifted up and His death on the cross is central to the preaching and the people, the work of transformation of people’s lives will ABOUND FOR MANY. Limitless, abounding, powerful, life-changing, community transforming, infinitely expanding through the power of God’s love poured out at Calvary for us. Offensive though it may be, it is why we must lift high the cross.

I love the moment in our Commons Area where little children from the Preschool are entering or exiting the Commons and they see the giant cross of Jesus for the first time. They ask a question to their parent or grandparent and then I see them stopping and taking a moment to explain the cross to that little child. I wish I was a little bug on the wall to hear exactly what they said. I would hope it would be something like: “No, its not an offensive symbol. It is the source of your life, the absolute sign and symbol God loves you.” TAKES A BIG CROSS TO TAKE AWAY MY SIN. Amen and Amen.

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IF THIS HAS BLESSED YOU, PLEASE PASS IT ALONG TO A FRIEND!*