

Lent VI
April 10, 2019
Lincoln Heights Lutheran Church
The Crosses of Lent: The Cross Crosslet – Mission

Dear Friends in Christ,

Our church body, the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, has an amazing opportunity to do mission work in Vietnam. We heard about it Sunday and there is still information available on the table tonight. Please take some. When some hear that we are doing mission work in Vietnam, the reaction may not be a positive one. Vietnam has been an enemy of the United States. There is a wall in Washington DC. with names of Americans who died at the hands of this enemy. Why would we be doing mission work with the enemy? A simple answer is that we are not. The mission work being done is among the Hmong people who live in Vietnam. This ethnic minority helped the United States. They were and are our friends and they live as oppressed people in Vietnam. So our mission work is to our friends.

But what if it wasn't? What if we were training as pastors those who once had taken up arms against the United States? What if we were doing mission work among those whose actions put names on that memorial wall in Washington DC.? That would be difficult. To desire the eternal salvation of an enemy is hard. The only way this can happen is through the One who brings peace and the One who is our peace, Jesus Christ.

The cross of Lent for us to consider tonight is the Cross Crosslet which is the mission cross. The four crosses point to the four directions of the compass, the four corners of the earth. For that is where the gospel is to be taken, to all the world. And these four crosses intersect in the middle, uniting all who believe together into one body, the Holy Christian Church. It is only through the cross of Christ that there can be peace between God and sinful humans. Only through the cross of Christ can there be true peace between sinful humans and other sinful humans. The Word of God for us to consider is:

Ephesians 2:14–18

For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.

The apostle Paul was called by the Holy Spirit to be a missionary. When he arrived in a new city, he would find the place of Jewish worship, usually a synagogue if there were enough Jews in the area. Paul proclaimed that Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament, died and rose again as the Messiah was to do. When the Jews who did not believe the gospel drove him from the synagogue, he would go to the Gentiles with the same gospel message. Repent and believe in Jesus who died and rose for your salvation. The unbelieving Jews were upset that Paul preached Christ crucified. The Jews who believed his message would be upset or at least concerned that Paul would associate with the Gentiles.

There had been a dividing wall between Jews and non-Jews for many centuries. The Jews had God's commandments handed to Moses on the mountain. The Gentiles did not. The Jews had the priests and temple worship. The Gentiles did not. The Jews had the promise of a Messiah, a great king who would rule the world one day. The Gentiles did not. At the temple in Jerusalem, the dividing wall of hostility was a literal wall. The Gentiles were not allowed to go on the other side of the wall. Only Jews could be near the temple. There were warnings posted that read something like, "Foreigners must not enter inside the balustrade or into the forecourt around the sanctuary. Whoever is caught will have himself to blame

for his ensuing death.” Archaeologists have found a part of a sign like this engraved in rock from the time of Christ.

Gentiles were the enemies as far as Jewish religious life was concerned. They could not even enter the temple area beyond a certain place or they could be killed. But was it God’s intention to keep the Gentiles out of his family? Of course not. He revealed throughout the Old Testament that he desires to bring all people to himself, to save all people. Our Old Testament reading on Sunday from Isaiah 2 tells us: *“In the last days the mountain of the LORD’s temple will be established as chief among the mountains; it will be raised above the hills, and all nations will stream to it.”* (Isaiah 2:2).

God’s plan to bring all people to himself is accomplished through Christ. Jesus tears down the wall of hostility between various people groups, here between the Jews and Gentiles. Jesus does not just tell the Jews to like the Gentiles and the Gentiles to get along with the Jews. Jesus tears down the wall by offering his own body on the cross. For on the cross, by the sacrifice of his own flesh, Jesus abolished the law. This does not mean that the law no longer applies to us. Rather, the penalty for breaking the law no longer applies to those who believe in Christ.

The law says to love our neighbor. But we would rather love those who love us. Jesus says to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. But we would rather make rude comments about our enemies and pray that God gives them what they deserve for their sins against us. The law tells us to submit to one another out of love. But we are too important to serve others. What we are doing is too important to stop and submit to others. However, the Son of God who took on flesh died to pay the penalty we had earned for breaking God’s law, commandments and regulations. Because of Christ’s sacrifice, those laws do not count against us. In fact, our Father in heaven counts us as having kept his law, commandments and regulations because of Jesus Christ.

Jesus had two purposes for his sacrifice: *His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.*

We’ll take the second purpose first. Christ reconciled both Jews and Gentiles to God through the cross. We sinners were at war with God and we continue to fight against God’s commands. But our God desires peace with all people. Instead of destroying his enemies immediately, our peace loving God did the only thing that could bring an end to our conflict with him. Jesus offered himself on the cross as payment for our sin. The price of peace with God is seen at the cross of Christ. And this peace is for all people, Jews and Gentiles alike. The four crosses in our cross for this evening point out to the four corners of the earth, showing that the cross of Christ is for all.

Those four crosses connect in the middle, showing the unity and peace between all the people who trust in Christ. The other purpose connected with reconciliation is to create in himself one new man out of the two. Christ desires to unite his people, both Jew and Gentile into one Church. Just as he accomplished our reconciliation with God he has also accomplished the unity of the Church. Paul is telling the Jewish believers in the church: “That Gentile who believes in Jesus is not a second class Christian just because they did not grow up with the law and prophets like you did.” Jews and Gentiles are united by the cross into the one, true Christian faith. We are at peace whether we know it or act like it or not. Jesus has secured peace through the cross.

Sometimes when we think of missions, we think of missionaries going to places like Ethiopia, Japan or Vietnam. But not everyone can or should be a missionary like this. We can support world missions through our mission offerings and special gifts. Or maybe someone thinks of missions as knocking on doors and sharing a gospel message with our neighbors. Some in our congregation have done that and plan to continue. But that is not for everyone. Maybe your mission is a friend at school, a coworker, a neighbor or a family member. And sometimes God places an opportunity to testify to the peace Christ brought right here in this building.

Easter is one of those days when people who don't regularly go to church might go to church. Some of these are members of our congregation who for one reason or another have not been here. We who are here tonight, who are worshiping on Wednesdays and Sundays, might be tempted to look down on those who can't even make it once a month on a Sunday. But remember Christ's cross has reconciled us to God and to each other. There is peace and unity. Your mission opportunity is to strengthen the bond of the Spirit when you see a believer who hasn't been around church lately. Easter is also a time nonmembers might venture into a church. Maybe they went to church as a child but fell away. Maybe they had a bad experience with church and finally got the courage to step foot in a church again. Maybe they are searching for truth and belonging. Our mission is to welcome all in the name of the Savior who gives peace through his cross.

There are churches that have a sign members can read on the way out of the church building. It will say something like: "You are now entering the mission field." Very true, but let us know forget that the mission field can be in the church too. Everywhere God's Word and God's people are is a great place to proclaim the peace of Christ, the forgiveness of sins and the reconciliation of the cross. May the Cross Crosslet, the Mission Cross remind you of this. Jesus accomplished peace with God for all people in every direction. What joy we will have in eternal life to realize the unity Christ's cross has achieved with people from all nations.

Amen.