

A huge meaning is staring us in the face right now. It is so close and so familiar that we miss it, as a son or daughter may be 30 or 40 years old before they realize how much their parents have meant to them.

I am talking about the cross that towers over this sanctuary and gives it an architectural focal point and its spiritual unity. We see it and we see through it. I do not say that to find fault. The cross supports and sustains us when we are not aware, like the steel supports this sanctuary, and earth supports biological life when we are not aware.

But today, I remind you of its meaning, and its meaning is huge. And its first meaning is that it no longer means what it meant in Roman Judea. Then and there it meant capital punishment. The Romans didn't invent crucifixion, but they perfected it as an instrument of political intimidation. Just imagine crucified men, one next to the other, lining Concord Pike from Silverside Road to Namaan's Road, and you get the idea.

Yet the thing holds no fear for us. It rises high in a place of worship. We wear it as jewelry. It inspires great music and bad music, and great art and bad art. People genuflect before it. What changed its meaning? The death of Christ by crucifixion changed its meaning. He made the most awful thing become the most blessed thing.

That change in consciousness points to the huge meaning we miss. The death and resurrection of Christ eradicated the cross as an instrument of political intimidation and recast it as the symbol of a decisive truth: God makes good come from evil; or in the words of our text today: **Where sin increased, grace increased all the more** – Romans 5:20. God is at His best when Man is at his worst. That's the meaning of the cross.

Friendship with God

That's the meaning of the first five chapters of Romans. Romans contains and conveys first things, foundational things that shape human existence: the judgment of God and the sin of Man; the love of God and the sacrifice of Christ; the gospel of God and the faith of Man. No New Testament writing lays out these first things quite like Romans. Sometimes it does so with brilliant brevity and brilliant clarity.

For example, a tiny net of words in Romans 5:10 captures and holds the entire meaning of Romans one and two: **we were God's enemies**. That meaning raises the question that poses an existential threat to every person who has ever lived: Am I God's enemy? Does God say I am His enemy? Romans one and two say you are.

Another tiny net of words in Romans 5:10 catches and holds the entire meaning of Romans three and four: **we were reconciled to him through the death of his son**. That meaning raises the question that poses an existential hope for every person who has ever lived: Does Christ reconcile me to God? Does God say Christ reconciles me to God? Romans three and four say He does, and central to reconciliation is the faith in Christ of fallen, fearful, and frail people – like us.

What is this faith in Christ we are talking about? Romans 10:9: **If you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved**. And look at the results of that faith. Romans 5:1: **Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ**. Jesus Christ has created a new community of faith, the Church, which has been restored to friendship with God.

One man has called friendship with God "the fulfillment of the transcendent dignity and calling of the human person." (*First Things*, "Pornography and Acedia, April, 2012, 45) Mass

media threatens to trivialize everything human. For example, how many “friends” do you have on Facebook? Anyone who has ever had a deep and abiding friendship feels in his bones how superficial Facebook friendship is. Friendship with God is the work of a lifetime. Faith in Christ has reestablished friendship with God. Your faith in Christ and your participation in the Church give you a share in that friendship.

On the other hand, your character and personality are still pretty much the same as when you first believed. If you had baggage from the past before you believed, you had the same baggage when you first believed. If you were sweet or grumpy or unpredictable or steady before you believed, you would still find it easy to be that way as a Christian.

“You are what you have made yourself. Conversion simply puts you in the position where God can begin to change you, which he does through the usual long-term methods of prayer, worship, confession, alms-giving, and the disciplines.” (*First Things*, “While We’re At It,” March, 2012, 67) That’s how friendship with God grows and deepens.

Disillusionment

The ministry of preaching is one way to grow and deepen friendship with God. The five sermons that begin today address some of the barriers and bridges to friendship with God. One barrier threatens friendship with God like a disagreeable odor threatens a social event. This barrier is a disease of the spirit. It is disillusionment with goodness.

I can introduce what I mean with a sentiment I read recently in a present-day novel. It goes like this: “There is no happiness in love, except at the end of an English novel.” (*The Marriage Plot*, Jeffrey Eugenides, 68) I don’t think that sentiment dominates our culture; I do think it has a firm foothold in our culture. I also say it is a sad sentiment, a forlorn feeling, as when we’ve misplaced something important and can’t remember where we put it or when we last saw it.

Our disillusionment with goodness extends beyond love and marriage to politics, business, sports, and religion. I will not talk about politics, business, and sports. I will not talk about child abuse among Catholic priests. I will talk about something much closer to the heart of evangelicals like us. I want to tell you a missionary story.

Wes Stafford is the President of Compassion International. He is an MK, a missionary kid. He grew up in Africa, the son of missionary parents. In his own words, he said, “I loved Africans. In my heart I *was* African. Every summer my spirit was restored by the loving-kindness of the poverty-stricken Africans in my village.” (*Christianity Today*, “A Candle in the Darkness, May, 2010, 25)

Ten-year-old Wes Stafford was about to board the plane that would take him and other MKs back to their boarding school in Africa, apart from their parents. Stafford writes: “At the gate, I took my mother’s face in my hands and couldn’t let go. I stared intently at her beautiful, kind face. ‘What are you doing, Wesley?’

“‘Mommy, I just don’t want to forget what you look like.’

“She dissolved into tears, and so did I. I saw a moment of opportunity, a glimmer of hope for rescue. In 30 seconds, I blurted out my plea.

“‘Mommy, please don’t send me back! Please don’t send me back! They hate me . . . they beat me . . . I’m scared.’ . . . ‘Please, *please!*’” (*ibid*, 24-25) He was going back to his boarding school, run by Christian missionaries, who did dreadful things to Wes Stafford and other small children and then intimidated them into silence. They broke faith with missionary parents, with mission board executives, and with churches like ours that

prayed for and gave money to and admired the missionaries and their labors.

“Poverty and abuse speak the same message into the heart of a child: ‘Give up. Nobody cares about you. There’s nothing special about you. Nothing will ever change. You always lose, so give up!’” (ibid, 26)

But Stafford’s story threatens us with the same message: “Give up on God! Give up on goodness! Nobody cares about your goody-goody ideas. Nothing will ever change. Give up!” That message stains politics, business, and sports, as well as religion. But for us it threatens even greater damage. Hear me! Please hear me! It threatens our friendship with God. That knowing, smirking, cynical message threatens our friendship with God.

Unless we take to heart the best antidote to apathy the world will ever see: **Where sin increased, grace increased all the more.** Stafford himself is living proof of that. Again, in his own words: “For 32 years, I have fought for little ones who have no voice and no choice. The passion that gripped me at age 10 still rages today.” (ibid, 26) That is not a man who gave up on children or missions or God.

Don’t you give up! Don’t give up on people. Don’t give up on God. **Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good** – Romans 12:21. That’s not Pollyanna piffle. It’s rooted in reality. God is at His best when Man is at his worst. That’s the meaning of the cross.

Truth and Mercy

I want to introduce you to someone you should get to know better. He is David, shepherd boy, King of Israel, sinner, man after God’s own heart. Look at Psalm 13.

How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?

How long will you hide your face from me?

How long must I wrestle with my thoughts

and every day have sorrow in my heart?

How long will my enemy triumph over me?

Look on me and answer, O Lord my God.

Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death;

my enemy will say, “I have overcome him,”

and my foes will rejoice when I fall.

Our spiritual ancestors among the ancient Jews did something as well and usually better than most Christians ever do. They spoke their deepest emotions to God in words that seem daring and perilously close to blasphemy. But their prayers have endured for 3000 years, while our incessant chatter has a shelf life of about 30 minutes.

When President Obama or Republican presidential hopefuls break faith with you; when Wall Street investors and the Occupy Wall Street protestors seem to betray what is best in our country; and when Barry Bonds or Tiger Woods or the owners of the New York Mets behave badly, and you look at your so-so life and your so-so income and start to think: “What’s the point? Why should I try? **When the foundations are being destroyed, what can the righteous do?**” then go ahead and pray your own version of Psalm 13. But don’t forget the rest of the Psalm.

But I trust in your unfailing love;

my heart rejoices in your salvation.

I will sing to the Lord,

for he has been good to me.

Such trust, such music of the heart is not for nothing, because in our friendship with God we remember: **where sin increased, grace increased all the more.** God is at His best when Man is at his worst. That's the meaning of the cross.

Come to Rifle Satan's Fold

Two of the most vocal atheists in the world today are Steven Pinker of Harvard and Richard Dawkins of Oxford. Dawkins sounds like a Fundamentalist when he attacks religious faith. I read recently the following statement about those two men. "That's one reason why folks like Steven Pinker and Richard Dawkins fight so vigorously against faith. They sense (that) only a handful of men of genuine piety and personal integrity would be needed to enflame a place like Harvard." (*First Things*, "The Public Square," March, 2012, 6)

The Church of Jesus Christ is the matrix for hope like that. In this matrix friendship with God is explored, grown, and deepened. In this matrix people find a firm foundation and a spiritual infrastructure sufficient for human flourishing. If you are not a Christian, you should become one today and become a participant in this friendship with God that holds out so much hope and help for people in these uncertain times. Tell me on the card that you'd like to know more, and someone will get to you this week.

One more huge meaning that is staring us in our evangelical face right now. It is so close and so familiar that we miss it. Today is March 25th. Yes, and? Well, nine months from today is Christmas Day. Yes, and? Nine months; that's about the time it takes to grow a baby in a mother's womb, last time I checked.

It is on this day that the Church for centuries has celebrated the moment when the angel, Gabriel, said to Mary, "**You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus.**" Do you think anyone thought any more about her pregnancy than that it was a shame she wasn't married? Did anyone besides the Virgin and those closest to her have any idea what had started when she first missed her period?

Where sin increased, grace increased all the more. But grace seldom makes a fuss. God can be quiet as a mouse when He prepares to break down strongholds and establish righteousness. He's our Friend, and we can trust Him to dispel the disillusionment that darkens human counsel and dampens human joy. We can trust Him to give us fullness of life.