

“Signs, Symbols, and the Cross”

Isaiah 53:4–9

Dr. Christopher C. F. Chapman

First Baptist Church, Raleigh

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Sacramental theologians make a distinction between signs and symbols, and this distinction has significant implications for this day we call Good Friday. A sign has one clear meaning for all who see it while a symbol has many meanings. Signs are less subject to misinterpretation while symbols have a greater potential for confusion and inspiration.

For example, a red octagonal sign with letters s,t,o,p written on it has one valid meaning — stop. It is true that some see this sign simply as an invitation to slow down and look both ways before continuing to speed on toward a destination deemed to be worthy of such haste. And others hear voices like sirens coming from the sign calling out for them to write something on it, like, “Peace,” or “Justice,” or “Go Pack!” or “Go Heels!” But alas, the sign has one valid meaning — stop!

Not so with the symbol, for example, the American flag. What meanings do people attach to the flag and what feelings are stirred by it? Some think of military battles or friends and loved ones serving now. Others think of things like freedom and justice, our historical beginnings and current challenges. Some have warm feelings of devotion while others have a mixture of gratitude for our heritage with skepticism about our commitment to living up to it. And all these responses come from American citizens. The same flag evokes an even more varied array of responses from people around the globe.

Such is the difference between sign and symbol. The former has one meaning while the latter has multiple meanings. A stop sign may not leave room for confusion but nor does it inspire emotion. The flag, on the other hand, can really pump people up, if in varied ways.

I say all this not to introduce a lecture on traffic signs nor to launch a debate on patriotism but to say the cross is a symbol, not a sign. There are those who argue that the cross means one thing — forgiveness for sin through something we call substitutionary atonement, God’s sacrifice

of a Son our behalf. Yet other faithful people argue that if this is what the cross means, they want no part of it. Such a view says terrible things about the character of God. It says God requires brutal sacrifice to express love and forgiveness. What I would argue is that the cross has many meanings, each of which must be carefully defined, and all of which can inspire profound feelings and deep devotion.

We think first of the meaning we talk about most in Baptist life yet also the most troublesome one — forgiveness of sin. Some may wonder what the issue is. Is it not part of the irreducible minimum of Christian faith that Jesus died for our sins? It depends on how we understand his death. The promise of forgiveness is wonderful, and the reality of sin is undeniable, though we are disingenuous about our condition.

Davidson professor Sandy McKelway saw a prayer of confession in a worship order that read, “O God, our sins are ever before us – not that we have done anything all that bad...” (*Journal for Preachers*, Lent 2004) Do we believe this? Do we not realize how much wealth we hold onto in a world of desperate need, how evil and vengeful our thoughts and actions are at times, how mixed our motives are even in our most faithful pursuits? Not that we have done anything all that bad?

Forgiveness is wonderful and we all need it. Trouble arises when we think of God as being able to offer forgiveness only if suffering is involved. Some speak of the cross as Jesus’ way of appeasing an angry God. More at least view this sacrifice as necessary, as the only way, and as made just a bit worse by each sin we commit, as if God is keeping score and therefore exacting punishment in keeping with each person’s shortcomings. Some may say, “This is what the cross means for me,” while others will say, if only quietly to themselves, what my mother often said to me, “Could a loving God not find another way?” Is all this brutality necessary? Even Shakespeare argued against the need for a pound of flesh in *The Merchant of Venice*. Can God not do as well?

The language of sacrifice is found in many faith traditions, including Jewish tradition which frames the Jesus story, though we should note that parts of the Hebrew canon, like the beloved words of Micah 6, point to a better way than sacrifice. But the text we have read

from Isaiah 53 speaks of redemptive suffering on behalf of others, and the church has applied this text to the death of Jesus.

Yet, if we do so, we need to underscore the claim that God is in Christ in a unique way, which means that God does not require the suffering of another separate being. Since a part of God is in Jesus, this is self-sacrifice. What happens on the cross is not the appeasement of an angry God but the suffering love of a God who has been forgiving all along.

Thus, while I am not sure we can or should disconnect the cross completely from this matter of forgiveness, we need to exercise care in understanding what this means.

We also need to make room for other meanings, one of which is healing. It is a broader term, perhaps not a replacement for forgiveness, any more than brokenness is a replacement for sin, but it is a term that points to God's all-encompassing desire to address whatever distances us from God, each other, and our own best selves. We experience brokenness in each of these arenas, alienation, estrangement, and God in Christ seeks to heal all that is broken.

What does this have to do with the cross? Well, the language of Isaiah 53, if it is applied to the cross, is clear. He has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases... upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed." Other parts of the text speak of transgressions, iniquities, i.e. sins to be forgiven, but these parts speak of healing for brokenness and disease.

If the cross is viewed literally or symbolically as God's willingness to take on the suffering of the world, this means all suffering, not just that which comes from sin. It means God longs to heal whatever is broken, and the way God heals is not by waving a magic wand from heaven and miraculously wiping away all suffering and pain but by entering this world as one of us and healing wounds one at a time.

In his book *The Wounded Healer* Henri Nouwen wrote about God's way of healing and our calling to follow this way. He included a provoking story from the Talmud. As the story goes, Rabbi Yoshua ben Levi came upon Elijah the prophet while he was standing at the entrance

of Rabbi Simeron ben Yohai's cave. He asked Elijah, "When will the Messiah come?" Elijah replied, "Go and ask him yourself." "Where is he?" "Sitting at the gates of the city." "How shall I know him?" "He is sitting among the poor covered with wounds. The others unbind all their wounds at the same time and then bind them up again. But he unbinds one at a time, saying, 'Perhaps I shall be needed: if so, I must always be ready so as not to delay for a moment (pp. 81-82).'"

The Messiah in this story and in the Jesus story is a healer but a wounded healer, not one who stands aloof from suffering but one who is willing to enter the worst of it. The Messiah is the one who is willing to enter the home where abuse is wreaking havoc and seek to heal the abused and abuser. The Messiah is the one who is willing to go to the Kibera slum in Nairobi, Kenya where over a half million live in little more than boxes with little sanitation and risk his own wellbeing to offer healing to the masses. The Messiah is the one who walks across Israel, Gaza, and the West Bank right now and seeks a just peace for all.

That he ends up on a cross should not surprise us. Do people suffer there at this place of brutal execution? Well then, he is where he always is, with the most profoundly wounded, seeking the healing of all in his own distinctive way.

And this brings us to a third meaning of the cross — God's companionship in suffering. This is the most central meaning for me. I know my need for forgiveness and both trust God for it and believe that in some way the cross expresses God's longstanding desire to love, forgive, and heal. Yet because the healing we experience is often of a spiritual nature, that is, because many wonderful people get sick and die and thus never experience miraculous physical healing, what the cross tells us about where God is when we suffer is critical.

Where is God when the worst happens? Is God on leave, as Simon Wiesenthal wondered while watching friends brutally murdered in a Nazi prison camp? This is one possibility, but our faith suggests that God is present in suffering, as God is present with Jesus on the cross. He may feel abandoned, but he is not, nor are we. God is with us, God suffers with us, God weeps with us as One who knows our pain.

I will never forget a picture a child drew right after the terrorist attacks of 9/11. It was an image of the collapsed towers in New York, with smoke rising and at the top, a compassionate man, presumably Jesus, welcoming the souls of those who had suffered into the arms of eternity. It was a painful and comforting image for the families of those who lost loved ones that day. Yet, while this image has validity, I picture Jesus somewhere else, not high in the sky removed from suffering, but at Ground Zero, in the flames, at the very heart of suffering.

That's part of what the cross means. Where is God when we suffer? Not far away but right here with us, making sure we are never alone. Why God allows so much suffering is a question for another day, and one that I ask often, but as to where God is when we suffer, we need not ask, especially on this day. The Apostle Paul tells the church at Rome that there is nothing in this life or the next that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. If we doubt this, we need only look at the cross.

What do we see when we look at the cross? What do we think and feel? What does it mean to us? A man dies in a brutal way, like many others, we know this much, because he is too bold in his willingness to confront authorities, too stubborn in his refusal to be quiet about truth and justice. But what exactly does his death mean for us? Forgiveness, healing, companionship, and much more.

My plea is that we allow the cross to be the rich symbol that it is. It's not a sign, it's a symbol of the love of a God who will not be nailed down, pun intended, by any one word, image, concept, or meaning. So, let's survey the wondrous cross, survey it again and again, and allow God to teach us more and more what it means and who God is. Amen!