10/25/26-- Dan Day: ***"Cherishing an Old Ragged Cross"***
Matthew 27:38-46 (Adapted from Day's forthcoming book: *Searching for High Ground*)

Replicas of the cross of Jesus may be seen in the sanctuaries and on the steeples of countless Christian churches today. But my impression is that the people inside these churches are uneasy about much talk about the cross. Our reasons are many and varied.

Some of us are just so sick of the flood of blood and violence in our world already that we don't want to see it deified on Sunday. Others of us see how power-hungry politicians have used it wickedly for centuries—by the 4th century it was used as the banner of a cruel empire, and then as a battle insignia for crusading "Christian" armies, and more recently brandished in our own nation by white-sheeted Klansmen and by January 6 insurrectionists on our nation's Capital steps.

Still others of us are uneasy by its association with one theory of the atonement which sees the cross as the sign of God's punishment of Jesus for the sins of humankind—as a blood price that had to be paid before God's anger against us could be softened and our sins forgiven.

In short, the cross is a neat, artistic symbol, an attractive piece of jewelry, but is a puzzling, uncomfortable topic for sermon or song today. So today I want to talk to you about cherishing this old ragged cross, and why I believe there's no better place to be than in the nail-scarred hands of Jesus.

Let me begin by giving you a word: loyalty. When the Gospel writers speak of Jesus dying for "us" we do well to note that this "us" was, first of all, his disciple band, the men and women who were his followers. They understood that he died in great part in loyal love for them, for his "friends"—for James and John and Susana and Mary Magdalene, even thrice-denying Simon Peter and so many others. Jesus would not tell them one thing in fair

weather and practice another when the storm came. This is why Simon Peter began to weep when the rooster crowed—he knew the grandest man he'd ever known was going to the cross displaying a loyal to Peter which Peter himself had not been able to muster for Jesus.

The Gospel of John offers us echoes of this "us" when it speaks of "a good man" who displays his great love for his friends by laying down his life for them (15:13). However, the meaning of this self-sacrifice explodes in significance when we hear Paul say: "Rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:7-8). Now "us" goes global and eternal, beyond that inner circle of initial disciples to persons not yet born and to continents not yet discovered. Now "us" includes us. He'd rather die than desert us.

In a far-away place a man once was seriously injured in a car-wreck that killed his wife. He himself was little more than a bag of broken bones and damaged organs with little chance to survive. Through the haze of drugs and pain he discerned a crucifix was on the wall of his hospital room but it did little for his Baptist sensibilities. But as the days of his recovery stretched on and his periods of lucidity grew, he pondered that ugly black thing on the wall. One day when his Baptist pastor came to see him, he told him:

"I've been studying that cross up there, preacher. Last week I realized it's been hanging up there for years, I guess. Seeing all kinds of hurt pass through here; sorta waiting on me to get here. And a couple of days ago, and I know you're gonna think I was high on drugs, but a couple of days ago I could swear Jesus kinda lifted up his dead and looked at me and said, 'Welcome.' That's it, just 'welcome.' But preacher, that's the first time since the wreck that I've truly felt any real hope."

Before you give any other interpretation to the cross, consider it as God's pledge of loyalty to you, wherever you are, whatever sadness shrouds you. When you have been hurt, bullied, cast aside—a crucified Savior is good news. He knows you, has been where you are! God has not ditched you, not yet, not ever. The first word of the cross is loyalty! Calvary happened for "us."

And what of our sins? The shame or guilt we bear? Doesn't God care about the sorry record of failures we have hanging around our neck? Yes, but not in the judgmental ways many imagine.

Note two details within the story of the crucifixion. The first is Jesus' cry of dereliction from the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" To make any sense at all of this we must acknowledge why Christian theology speaks of a Trinitarian God, of a God who can be Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And in Jesus' cry we are overhearing a horrendous rupture occurring between God the Son, Jesus, and God the Father. The Son, Jesus, is experiencing a loss of closeness to God the Father he's never known before. The One who has been supremely loyal to "us"—and to God!—now feels betrayed by the Father! Something with the majesty of God is undergoing heartbreak, revulsion, separation.

Maybe that's why three of the four Gospels report darkness came over the whole land as Jesus was dying—the sun stopped shining (Luke 23:44, et al) for three hours! This is the second detail, and I must ask, just what is this trying to tell us? That something is happening on a hill outside Jerusalem that God doesn't want to see? What is the meaning of this blackout, this celestial power outage? Are the Gospels trying to tell us a cosmic convulsion is occurring, a struggle so fierce that the energy was sucked out of the entire universe, it is emptied—that creation itself was spent, exhausted when Jesus finally cried: "It is finished" (John 19:30)?

Words fail me at this point, for I cannot comprehend, let alone express the inner workings of God's own self at such a time. I do not understand a fraction of what transpired that day; I only know God in Christ did something wonderful for "us" that day, on that cross—and it hurt! Forgiveness is not cheap.

What I think was going on in those fateful hours was that God was absorbing (and there's a second word to remember—absorbing), taking on the unbearable weight and sorrow of the sins of all humankind throughout history. God, in God's own self, was taking on the responsibility and punishment for all our gumming up of God's dream of a joyful world. No wonder the sun could not shine, but draped the world in darkness, as the heart of the Holy One wrestled with the agony of reconciliation.

All my life I've heard that the cross was about a debt that had to be paid, a punishment that had to be exacted, the books balanced. The setting for all of this was always a courtroom or an accountant's office.

But when Jesus talked about reconciliation and forgiveness he didn't talk about courtrooms or accountants' offices. He talks about a family. Remember? A son broke his father's heart and broke up the family by taking his share of the family's wealth and squandering it in selfish ways. But when he finally wakes up and comes home, broken, he's met with a party, not a reprimand. The father doesn't think of his child as a criminal but as a wandering loved one; nor does he need a pint of blood to be kind, or need to convene a court to tell him how to treat his own repentant child, Because this father has a heart that's willing to absorb the loss of wealth or reputation, to lose face or cash, because this father is more interested in the family than in his status.

So, when you think of the cross, think of God's loyalty to "us," and of God absorbing 'our sins and our sorrows and making them his very own.'

And let me tuck in a final word: challenge. This cross is meant to be a forever challenge. Let it be so for you, to display a great loyalty to the helpless, the powerless, the outcasts, the poor, the immigrant. Be as loyal to them as God is being to "us." Don't turn your back on those who need someone to stand up for them! And let this cross challenge you to absorb, to take on some of the brokenness, the pain, the yearning, the stigma of your neighbors, be they black, brown, gay, or trans. Be the friend others need!

This old ragged cross, so despised by the world, has so much to teach us two 2,000 years later. It's big lesson for this old man today, is that there's no better place to be than in the nail-scarred hands of this magnificent Jesus.