

Mathematically, the most important part of a circle is its center point. Every other point on the outer circumference of the circle is determined by its relationship to the center point. By definition, a circle is a shape made by all the points which are of equal distance from the center point.

For Christians, the center point of the circle is the cross. The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the heart and core of Christianity. The cross is crucial. In fact, the word crucial means, "cross."

This week and next week, I'm going to be preaching about our Epistle lessons from the 1st and 2nd chapters of Colossians. Both our lessons, this week, and next week, speak of the power of the cross.

Colossians, ch1. I could easily spend several sermons talking about the nuances of this wonderful passage. A lot of attention has been paid to this section, especially verses 15-20 which is the first half of our epistle lesson today.

The short version is this. vv 15-20 apparently are the words of a hymn that predates the rest of Colossians. There is some scholarly argument about whether it was originally a Christian hymn, or an adapted Jewish hymn, or even a pagan hymn with adaptations. If you want to get a PhD in New Testament, those are the kinds of issues you can delve into.

But the most fascinating thing is this. Paul apparently adapted the original hymn by dropping some additional phrases into this hymn. If you knew the original hymn, these phrases would stand out. It would be like writing them in all caps, bold face, underlined, and then highlighted in yellow. And one of these additional phrases occurs at the end of v20.

"Through him (through the Son) God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace." And then Paul adds the addition "through the blood of his cross."

For the original recipients, this would have stood out like neon. "Through the blood of his cross."

It would be like me saying, "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me / THROUGH THE BLOOD OF HIS CROSS. / I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see / THROUGH THE BLOOD OF HIS CROSS."

To us those words would be instantly recognizable as an addition. And these additional words make a huge point. Through Jesus, God brings reconciliation and peace. But he does it in a specific way, THROUGH THE BLOOD OF HIS CROSS.

It was obviously important for Paul. But is it important for us? Is it important for you? I'll deal more with those questions next week. Is it important for me? I want to deal with that question today. And to do that, I'm going to share with you a personal experience. I

mentioned this a number of years ago in the context of a sermon on Ephesians. But it works even better for a sermon on Colossians.

I'm always hesitant about sharing too much personal information in the pulpit. #1 The sermon is not about me. 'Look at Jim Haney' is not the object of this exercise. #2 I've heard many, many bad sermons where the pulpit was used as a therapist's couch to work out a preacher's own personal issues. That also is not the object of the preaching task. But in this instance, my personal story does relate to my understanding of THE BLOOD OF HIS CROSS.

Quick background for those of you who might not know me. I've grown up in the Episcopal Church all my life. My father, maternal grandfather, and great grandfather were all Episcopal priests.

I grew up with an intellectual interest in Christianity. I loved to debate my Baptist friends. To me the Bible was a weapon for winning debate points. But I had no faith. I was an agnostic until a conversion experience I had in college, but that's another story.

But even after becoming a believing Christian, I still carried with me a heavy, heavy dose of intellectualism about the Christian faith. And it manifested itself in a way that is fairly common in our culture. I was a cafeteria Christian. I went through the buffet line of Christian doctrines, and picked the ones I liked, and I rejected the ones I didn't like.

God's love, yes. God's justice, no. Heaven, yes. Hell, no. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, yes. Angels and demons, no. Resurrection, yes. Crucifixion, no.

Oh, yes, I believed that Jesus was crucified. But I didn't think it was all that important. It was just a sad event in Jesus' life because human beings can be so cruel at times. The crucifixion was merely an example of how great God's love was for us. It was Jesus' example of humility, even in the face of violence.

What I certainly did not buy is the idea that I heard growing up here in the Bible belt. 'Even if you were the only person on earth,' the line went, 'Jesus would have to die for you.' "No way," I thought. Jesus died because of our bad choices 2,000 years ago, not out of cosmic necessity. And all that stuff about his blood. Well, that was very primitive. Sure, that worked 2,000 years ago in cultures where animal sacrifice was normal. But now, come off it. Blood. At worst, 'blech.' At best, an anachronism.

In fact, in the spring of 1993 in seminary, I was taking a class on the epistles across the street at the United Methodist seminary. And once, during a class discussion, I said that all of this talk about bloodshed was not necessary for 20th century Christians. In fact, I said, it was nothing more than "Butcher shop religion." My professor suggested that I should take a close look at my own Episcopal tradition which contains a fair amount of references to salvation by Jesus' blood. I thought, "What does he know about Episcopal worship? He's a Methodist."

And then, about 8 months later it happened. It was December of 1993. I was done with finals and had almost 2 weeks off before Christmas. Renee wasn't going to be able to get

off work until the 23rd, when we were going to drive down to Texas for the week. So I had a nice window to rest and relax. During that time, I decided to take a few days of retreat at the monastery across the lake in Michigan.

The last week of Advent at St. Gregory's Abbey is wonderful. The monks set up an empty manger by the altar a week before Christmas. And they take their Mary and Joseph figures and place them at the back door. And then, before each of their seven daily services, one of the monks sneaks in and moves the figures about 2% closer to the altar. It's really neat.

So one day, I'm in the chapel, basking in the festive preparations for Christmas. I'm sitting there quietly praying. And it happens. I have what I believe is the only vision that I've ever had. First and only. I can't be sure, but I believe I was awake. I believe I was still aware of the chair I was sitting in. And yet in my mind's eye was a very graphic, hyper-realistic series of images that played out like a movie. Only there was no soundtrack. It was completely silent. I could still vaguely hear the winter wind outside the chapel.

And, given the season, the subject matter couldn't have been more jarring. I was looking down, from what I would term a high camera angle, at a middle eastern city street, with a procession of soldiers escorting a group of bedraggled men who were carrying wooden beams on their shoulders. And one of these men was wearing a circle of thorns on his head. The scene shifted several times as the procession continued. But there were two things that remained fairly constant. I was never very close to that man. And I could never see his face.

Years later when I saw Mel Gibson's movie, *The Passion*, it looked very different from my vision, except for one thing. The blood. Even from a distance, the man's clothes were heavily stained with blood.

I wish I could have pressed the record button, so that I could remember every detail clearly. But I couldn't. And now, after 23 years, much of the detail has faded from my mind. But there's one thing that is indelibly burned in my memory. And it is the last scene.

In the last scene, I saw the man on the cross. It was from a very high angle from above, and slightly behind. I still couldn't see his face. But I did see something else. And it was startling.

I saw myself. I saw myself lying on the bloody ground, beneath this bloody man. And I was lying on my side in a fetal position, and my arms were wrapped around his bloody cross.

And the next thing I remember was sitting in a chair in the chapel at St. Gregory's Abbey during the week before Christmas.

Primitive, butcher shop religion? Something that could easily be jettisoned? Well, it seemed like someone was trying to convince me that it was something more than that. It seemed like someone whacked me right between the eyes with a spiritual 2X4. It was enough to make

me want to reexamine the mystery of the death of Jesus Christ and the meaning of his blood shed on the cross.

The vision drove me back to the scriptures. I went back and reexamined John's passion. I also went back to take another look at the numerous passages in the epistles that I had written off as primitive nonsense. It drove me especially to the book of Hebrews which I had previously written off almost entirely. I spent a fair amount of my time in detailed study trying to understand what Hebrews was saying about Jesus' sacrifice, about Jesus' blood.

Next week, I want to talk more about the meaning of the cross. We live in a violent and troubled world. And I firmly believe that the only hope for our world is following a crucified Lord, emulating the way of the cross. I believe that, because I do believe the statements that I used to cavalierly dismiss, statements like Paul's from Colossians. I do believe that God did make peace through the blood of Jesus' cross. More on that next week.

For now, I seek to draw closer to our Crucified Lord.  
I endeavor to place my trust in him, who shed his blood for me.  
And I continue to seek his face.