

**A CRUCIFIED GOD**  
(from the series: A Need For Creed)

**Texts: Isaiah 53:1-12; I Peter 2:24-25**

**2/14/10**

**Introduction**

What does love look like?

A woman's husband had been slipping in and out of a coma for several months, yet she stayed by his bedside every single day. One day, when he came to, he motioned for her to come nearer.

As she sat beside him, he whispered, eyes full of tears, "You know what? You've been with me all through the bad times. When I got fired, you were there to support me. When my business failed, you were there. When we lost the house, you stayed right here. When my health started failing, you were still by my side. You know what?"

"What dear?" she gently asked, smiling as her heart began to fill with warmth.

"I think you're bad luck."

Most of us have a picture of what love should look like, and pain and suffering isn't part of it. So when we come to the part of Apostles' Creed which says, "*I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son our Lord...who suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried. He descended into hell*" love may not be the first thing that comes to mind. We will celebrate this Valentine's Day by exchanging candy and kisses, not crosses.

What shall we do with this part of the creed? Is it a picture of God's frustration and wrath? Is it a reminder that even Jesus couldn't keep bad people in line? Or is this dark statement a surprising confession about the tenacity of God's love?

**1. We Christians are sometimes accused of being a grim bunch. It's unavoidable when a crucified Savior hangs at the center of your faith.**

It's no accident that attendance swells at Christmas and Easter and declines sharply the rest of the year. What's not to like about a faith that celebrates the birth of a child and promises eternal life when you die. Sign me up!

It is possible to worship God the rest of the year in a way that gives the impression that the story is more about who died than who rose from the dead. Joyless, somber faith does keep some people out of church.

But that's not the biggest challenge. We live in a time when many folks believe that there's not much we can learn from pain. Hard times, suffering – especially death – aren't normal and should be avoided when ever possible. To practice a faith which makes much of a crucified Jesus seems odd. Shouldn't it be avoided too?

We Christians aren't immune from the cultural mood. We struggle with the suffering symbolized by the cross. Back in the 1950's a theologian named H. Richard Niehbur was fussing about the message of the church of his day and summarized it this way:

*A God without wrath, brought men without sin, into a kingdom without judgment, through a Christ without a cross.*

A great many believers are still in favor of that gospel. A great many churches have been built to proclaim it. Do not mention a God with wrath. Do not create emotional distress by suggesting that anyone really sins. Be accepting of everything by avoiding any hint of judgment. And speak of a loving Christ and not a suffering one.

By accepting this gospel have we lost anything that really matters? Let's be honest; by today's standard this seems to be a more acceptable message. We might even say it seems more loving. The cross is best mentioned (if mentioned at all) as that long ago and far away event that says little about the condition of this world, and even less about me.

*...suffered under Pontius Pilate, crucified, dead, and buried...* That's the dark stuff of the faith. The creed says we are stuck with it. What shall we do with it?

**2. Do you find it surprising that when we summarize our faith we confess a Lord “that suffered under Pontius Pilate”? Surely there are other things that could be remembered.**

The bible says that Jesus did so much good stuff! He changed water into wine. He healed sick people. He fed five thousand with a few loaves and fishes. But the creed goes to the darkest chapter of his life – and mentions by name a second string, cruel, indecisive, somewhat insignificant government employee named Pontius Pilate.

It didn't dawn on me until recently that this is the only part of the creed we can really prove. Beyond a doubt Jesus suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. We can believe he was born of the Virgin Mary, but we'll never be able to prove it. Pilate and Jesus, however, earn a mention in the ancient history books of Rome.

That gives me some hope. Our faith sometimes has a “Star Wars” ring to it...*in a time long, long ago and a galaxy far, far away*. But Christianity is not a collection of enlightened teachings by our version of Yoda. It is not the account of some Force that floats above the ugliness of this world. It is the flesh and blood story of a God who lived a human life...from the breakfast that he ate to the death that he died. Whatever else suffering in this life might mean, it at least means that God suffered too. There is no part of my life, no depth of my experience, which is unknown to God. My suffering doesn't make me abnormal. And it certainly doesn't make me alone. Sometimes that is enough when all comforting words fall short.

There's something else. When the grace, love, and mercy of God came to town in the man Jesus it was rejected. If love looks like Jesus we have to wrestle with the fact that a great many people said “no”. Pilate stood for the political system that could not accept Jesus. Pilate stands for the Jewish leaders who could not recognize Jesus. Pilate stands for the crowds who rejected Jesus. Pilate stands for each of us who find the crucified Jesus unattractive and unacceptable.

We can't clean Jesus up enough to make everybody love him. We've tried. Isaiah in speaking of a suffering servant of his day and ours says:

*Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised and we esteemed him not. (53:3b)*

There is a scandal to admitting that we need to be loved by a crucified Christ. You understand. To accept such a costly love says something about me. And so does rejecting it.

Accepting the love of God is both the hardest and easiest thing people ever do.

### **3. So Jesus suffered under Pontius Pilate. And then he was crucified.**

It sounds like he went from bad to worse. What could be worse than dying under the shameful, hideous reality of Roman crucifixion? It doesn't get much gloomier than this. By all historical measures the love of Christ is defeated.

But what history can only record, only faith can explain. We do not have a strange, cruel, meaningless event here. Jesus was crucified...*for us*.

Isaiah's picture of the astounding love of a suffering servant is seized by the Apostle Peter as the clue of what happened to Jesus on that cross:

*He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. (1 Peter 2:24)*

He's saying that God's love is *for us*. It was *for us* in the life and teachings of Jesus. It was *for us* in the suffering and death of Jesus. And suffering love matters so much because it really changes us.

It is the suffering love of Jesus that overcomes the self-centeredness of our sin and frees us for life with God. God's love is a bondage breaker. It loosens the grip of every sinful force that tries to twist the humanity out of us.

It is the suffering love of Jesus that heals the wounds – spiritual, emotional and even physical - that life in this world inflicts. He takes the poison into himself.

I don't want to glorify suffering for sufferings sake. I'm not telling anyone to go out of your way looking for pain. I am saying that the crucified love of God changes us when we allow it have its way with us.

And when it has its way with us we'll make another discovery. There's a bit of the cross of suffering love that must come our way as well. Jesus said:

*If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily, and follow me. (Luke 9:23)*

He didn't mean get up in the morning, stick your chin out, and look for trouble. He didn't mean be an unwilling victim of abuse. He meant accept the pain that will come your way when you choose to love as he loved. Because it too has the power to change things.

If your family is in chaos it will take costly love to heal it. If your marriage is broken, it will take costly love to repair it. It will take costly love to heal the most pressing problems in this community. Come to think of it not much good happens in this world until somebody loves at great cost.

Love when we look at it long enough, is cross-shaped after all.

### **Conclusion**

*We all like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. (Is. 53:6)* To believe in the love of Jesus is to believe that it took a crucifixion to overcome our rejection.

It's tempting to settle for a painless, bloodless sort of faith. Problem is that it doesn't seem to overcome very much – in us or around us.

The story of God's love doesn't end on the cross, any more than our acts of faithful love always end in pain. There is a rising from the dead, and ascending to the Father. There is life. And Jesus has told us to pursue it by following the way of the cross.