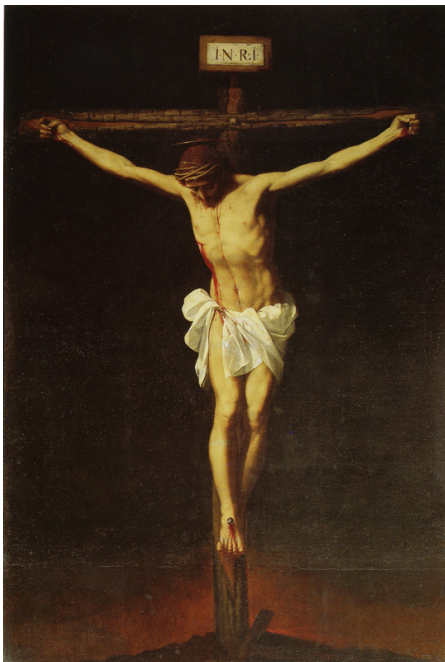


Week 7: “Why hast thou forsaken me?” (Mt. 27:46)

The cross is central to Lutheran theology because it points to the grace and love of God. Martin Luther stated it this way, “The cross alone is our theology” (*Crux sola est nostra theologia*, WA 5.176.32-3). As we continue on the way of the cross, we also realize that the theology of the cross keeps us honest about what God has done for us in Christ Jesus. The cross prevents us from glorying in our own works; rather, we embrace the work that Christ is doing in us, always liberating us from the false self and false narratives that the world continues to attempt to tell us about ourselves.

In response to the furor that his *Ninety-five Theses* had caused, Luther was requested by Rome to defend himself at the annual Augustinian assembly held at Heidelberg in May 1518. For this he wrote what is known today as the *Heidelberg Disputation*. In this work Luther



contrasted the “theology of glory” with the “theology of the cross,” a contrast between works and grace.

Luther wrote, “The person who believes that they can obtain grace by doing what is in them adds sin to sin so that they become doubly guilty” (*HD*, Thesis 16). Medieval theology taught that one had “to do what is in one oneself” (*facere quod in se est*), which forever made salvation a human work rather than God’s work of grace in us. Grace is “grace” solely because it is given freely by God and grasped by faith. The purpose of the law, of course, is to teach that it is impossible to fulfill the law. The law teaches the need for grace. Luther described it in this way: “It is certain that people must utterly despair of their own ability before they are prepared to receive the grace of Christ” (*HD*, Thesis 18). Doing what is in oneself is never enough, yet what God does in Christ is always enough. Luther described this with Galatians 3:13, “*Christ redeemed us from the curse*

*of the law*” (*HD*, Thesis 23). Jesus’ words, “*My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?*” are spoken for all of us in our despair before our own sinful helplessness and human pride.

Once the necessity of grace was established, Luther described how and where we most clearly see grace, “This is clear: He who does not know Christ does not know God hidden in suffering. Therefore he prefers, works to suffering, glory to the cross, strength to weakness, wisdom to folly, and, in general, good to evil” (*HD*, Thesis 21). The theology of the cross is about God both hidden and revealed in Christ’s suffering on the cross.

When we work by serving others, using our gifts in the world as the outcome of God’s grace, we properly use this grace. Luther wrote, “Actually one should call the work of Christ an acting work (*operans*) and our work an accomplished work (*operatum*), and thus an accomplished work pleasing to God by the grace of the acting work” (*HD*, Thesis 27).

Luther called the love of God, “the love of the cross.” He wrote, “The love of God which lives in humans loves sinners, evil persons, fools, and weaklings in order to make them

righteous, good, wise, and strong” (*HD*, Thesis 28). This love restores God’s image in us.

October 31<sup>st</sup> is Reformation Day, a day on which we give thanks for grace that frees us from sin and the law, liberating us to love and serve our neighbor, yet not much has changed in the five centuries since Luther. Human beings still seek to justify themselves by their own efforts. Our world tells us that “only the strong survive” and that we are to use our strength for our own advancement. We advertise our identities as “Democrat or Republican,” “Capitalist or Socialist.” We often pay more attention to our citizenship in this world than our “citizenship in heaven” (Phil 3:20). We spend more time bowing down before news outlets and social media than before the Word of God as revealed in the suffering love of Christ’s cross. It makes one wonder what Christ will say to us when he comes in glory to separate the nations as sheep and goats (Mt. 25).

Luther wrote, “the cross alone is our theology” because it reveals the one who calls each of us to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow him (Mt. 16:24). Lutherans continue to make the cross a central part of their daily lives, not just during Lent, *but daily*, because it reminds us that we too are to imitate our Lord by suffering in love for others.

This week’s images of Christ are both titled, *Crucifixion*, one by Spanish painter, Francisco



de Zurbarán (1650, The Hermitage, St. Petersburg) and the other by Japanese artist, Sadao Watanabe (1980, private collection). Though it is not known if Zurbarán ever saw paintings by Caravaggio, he is called a “Caravaggisti” for his realism and use of tenebrism, highlighting Christ in the darkness. When considering Luther’s theology, one must always remember that for Luther the cross was always a crucifix, one that revealed the suffering God in Christ. In the darkness of the world, only the grace and love of the God who suffers for humanity frees humanity to no longer be afraid of darkness, instead liberating us with grace to act with boldness in love and service for others.

The stencil cut print by Watanabe portrays Christ with a golden crown of thorns, illuminating his kingship through which he overcomes the world with suffering love. For me, Watanabe’s print also evokes the words, “Let me hide myself in Thee” and “Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to Thy cross I cling” from the hymn “Rock of Ages.” This hymn by Rev. A. M. Toplady evokes Psalm 94:22 “*But the Lord has become my stronghold, and my God the rock of my refuge.*”

For Luther, the story of Moses hidden in the cleft of the rock (Ex. 33:18ff) was instructive in pointing to the hiddenness of God. God hides glory from us, yet reveals suffering love. We could do nothing with glory even if we saw it, but God reveals suffering love because humans can grasp the transformative power of grace. The theology of the cross is, therefore, a theology of revelation. God reveals grace, thereby making it also a theology of justification and faith. The cross teaches us that suffering love is redemptive, because we will suffer when we follow Christ, faithfully proclaiming the gospel in loving service to others.

Isaiah (45:15) writes, “*Truly, thou art a God who hidest thyself, O God of Israel, the Savior.*” The cross both hides and reveals. The love of God is hidden in suffering, and through grace, we are freed to behold and participate in following Christ in loving service to others. Amen.