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**The Rev. Deborah Woolsey**

**Where God and Self Meet in the Cross**

**Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, Ohio**

Perhaps you have heard of a philosopher named Ken Wilber who described religion as two lines: one line is horizontal and the other is vertical. According to Ken Wilber, the horizontal line represents the self, the individual, and how the individual finds meaning and purpose in life. In other words, the philosopher says one role of religion is to provide myths and stories that help translate our experiences into an understandable pattern.

The vertical line, on the other hand, represents vertical movement, which is the movement of transformation. The vertical movement of transformation, the philosopher says, “does not fortify the self but utterly shatters it.” In other words, religion is not just about oneself, it is about how a person discovers their purpose not in what they think is best for themselves, but about the person they become in relationship with God who can and sometimes does challenge and even destroys the way we see ourselves.

We can easily imagine these two lines - the horizontal and vertical – come together, or intersect to form a cross. The very symbol of our Christian faith.

How often do we consider what the cross means and why it is the symbol of our faith? Is it, like I have seen with many people, a symbol of fashion to wear as a necklace or bracelet, or have tattooed on a body part? Most of the time we don't talk much about the cross or highlight it unless it's Good Friday, when the cross is front and center for Jesus' crucifixion. Maybe we have heard sermons on Good Friday about how crucifixion on a cross was not a heroic death by the strong, but was a gruesome, excruciatingly painful, and humiliating death reserved by the Roman government for the most offensive, dangerous criminals. The Romans used crucifixion to remind the people they had conquered of the terrible price anyone who stood against or was perceived as challenging the might and power of Rome would pay. It proved to be an effective way for Roman authorities to keep people in line.

If the cross is such a gruesome symbol of death, we might wonder, then why do Christians embrace it as a symbol of our Christian faith?

Perhaps the answer can be found in Jesus' harsh sounding words in our Gospel today; where we heard Jesus pretty much demand that anyone who wants to follow him must first hate.

Wait, this is Jesus, right? Did Jesus, the same Jesus who has been recorded as saying we have to love God and our neighbors as ourselves just say we have to hate parents, spouses, children, and even ourselves? That doesn't sound much like Jesus. How can we hate and love all at the same time? It doesn't make any sense.

And it won't if we only look at our Gospel along the horizontal line from philosopher Ken Wilber's description of religion that focuses on self. If we only think of these words through the lens of what we like or what we want for ourselves or even for the people we love then those words can sound pretty disturbing and disconcerting.

That is why we need that other line, the vertical line, the one that is about transformation into the person God is calling us to be. Jesus also said in today's Gospel that following him means carrying the cross. The cross that he himself will die on and we know he did die on. But we also know that is not the end of Jesus. We know that he also rose to a mysterious amazing transforming new life we call resurrection life.

That is why the cross is the symbol of Christianity: not because Jesus died on the cross, but because even the worst imaginable death was not more powerful than God, and God's love. That is why Jesus did not stay dead. For Christians the cross is not the symbol of death: it is the symbol of Resurrection, and through Jesus' resurrection the cross lost its shame and its fear. Now it is a symbol of life and hope for all of us, that there is nothing that can keep us from God's tremendously powerful love for us.

When we look at Jesus' words today through that intersecting place on the cross, then we can perhaps understand that when Jesus says hate, he may not be talking about the intense emotion we have come to see the word hate embodied as, especially in recent times. Jesus is not calling on his followers to direct intense negative emotion toward family or even self. Jesus is not condoning acts of violence that are crimes of hate towards someone who is different. To see it that way is to see it only through the lens of self and what self might want. For what purpose does hate like that have except to make a person feel better about themselves and justify their own fears and prejudices?

Instead, Jesus is challenging us to look at our lives and relationships, even our intimate relationships through the lens of both self and God's transforming love. In the time of Jesus, the word hate was often used as way of talking about choice, not emotions. To hate was to talk about the path not chosen. In the context of the cross, to follow Jesus is to let parts of self that need to, die. Not to punish or cause suffering, but so that a person's life can be transformed into living God's dream of love for God and all people.

Here is a quick example: a man learned to be prejudiced against immigrants, especially illegal immigrants. He learned this from his family and his friends. They influenced his ideas of laws and rules and American jobs and the economy of not enough for everyone. Then one summer, he met a woman named Marta, who he learned had walked across the Mexican border. He learned she had left a job as accountant in Mexico. He learned in America she could be with her 4 children and in America she worked as a house keeper. As he got to know Marta, the man saw a parent who loved her children like all parents, like himself. He saw a person full of hope and fear and faith like himself.

And something happened. All the things he thought he knew about illegal immigrants suddenly seemed self-righteous in his eyes and that judgmentalism and self-righteousness of his on the horizontal line of his self being met with the vertical transformation of God's love and in that meeting those parts of himself died on the cross and a more compassionate person was born as he learned to see Marta through God's eyes.

That is the power of the cross.

That is what Jesus is calling is followers to, to see the world, the people we work with and work for, our families and friends, the people who seem different from us, through this powerful lens and let God transform us, by letting old prejudices and fears and certainties and judgments die so that resurrection life can happen to us and in us.

This might sound more like a message for Good Friday and might not be what we wanted to hear in the middle of a holiday weekend, but that's Jesus for you. Following Jesus isn't always about what we want. That's okay, in fact, it's good, because that is salvation. Today we have the powerful reminder that following Jesus is about the salvation of the cross, whether we choose to wear it as a symbol or not. The cross is still a powerful symbol of hope, a means by which our self: our hearts, our minds, our souls, and our strength meets with the transforming love of God and in such a holy encounter something may die, and something quite Christ-like may be born in us, maybe even today.