

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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IRONIES OF THE CROSS

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Do you know what irony is? The dictionary defines it as “a combination of circumstances or a result that is the opposite of what might be expected or considered appropriate.” When there is an incongruity – a disconnect – between what we might expect and what actually occurs, we say it is “ironic.”

Here are a few examples of irony:

- Jonathan Edwards, considered by many to be America’s greatest theologian and one of the most influential leaders in the First Great Awakening that took place in colonial America, was fired from his position as pastor of the Congregational Church in Northampton, Massachusetts, after serving there nearly 25 years. Ironic.
- Consider an individual who hates to travel but makes his living as a travel writer, or a time-management guru who makes his living telling others how to get their lives and schedules in order, but whose personal life is an out-of-control mess. There is a certain irony in that, don’t you think?
- Or, think of the politician or church leader who promotes generosity and even sacrificial giving for the benefit of others, but is selfish and stingy in his or her own financial affairs. We would call that ironic – or perhaps hypocritical.
- On the other side, there is the example of the 1st century believers in Macedonia who were commanded by Paul in 2 Corinthians 8 for their rich generosity in the midst of extreme poverty. To help others in need, even though they were going through hard times themselves, they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability, as they pled for the privilege of sharing with the struggling believers in Jerusalem (2 Corinthians 8:1-5). That kind of irony is inspiring.

This evening I want you to consider with me three ironies of the cross as we recall what Jesus went through, what He experienced and endured in His suffering and death for us.

1. HIS EARTHLY MOTHER AND HIS HEAVENLY FATHER

The first irony involves Jesus’ relationships with His earthly mother and His heavenly Father. Just as He was about to experience the horror of being abandoned by God the Father as He bore our sin on the cross, Jesus made sure His mother would not be abandoned. He made sure that Mary, by this time a widow, would be cared for after His death.

Listen to what the Bible says in John 19:25-27:

“Near the cross of Jesus stood His mother, His mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw His mother there, and the disciple whom He loved (John) standing nearby, He said to His mother, ‘Dear woman, here is your son,’ and to the disciple, ‘Here is your mother.’ From that time on, the disciple took her into his home.”

Picture the scene at the cross. One of the remarkable things about it is that Mary, along with a few other women, was there. Just about all the disciples of Jesus had fled. They had run for their lives. They were hiding out somewhere. There is irony in that, too, isn’t there?

As far as we know, John (“the disciple whom Jesus loved”) was the only one of the twelve who was there at the cross. But Mary and the other women were there, too. They stood by Jesus in His hour of desolation. They did not abandon Him. They did not leave Him alone. They did not want Him to be alone when He died. They were there, grieving for Him and for themselves.

Even more remarkable than the fact that they were there is the fact that Jesus expressed His loving concern for His mother even as He bore the weight of the world’s sin in His body. In an act of tender love, somehow looking beyond His own suffering, Jesus entrusted His mother to the care of His friend and disciple, John. He did not commit her to the care of His brothers (the sons of Mary and Joseph), because they did not yet believe in Him. But He made sure there was someone who could and would take care of her.

All of this, even as He was about to be abandoned by His heavenly Father as He hung there on the cross. All of this, even as He was being cut off from God. All of this, even as the Father was about to turn away from His beloved Son. All of this, even as Jesus was about to cry out, in the prophetic words of David in Psalm 22:1: “My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34). All of this, in its unimaginable horror.

As great as the physical agony of the cross must have been – and I don’t think we can begin to imagine how awful it was – I believe the spiritual agony for Jesus was even greater. Because nothing can be more awful than being completely cut off from God, as Jesus was in that hour. Nothing is more terrible than the full fury of God’s righteous wrath, which Jesus endured in our place.

The first irony is that just as Jesus, in order to fulfill the plan of God, had to be abandoned by the Father, He made sure that His mother would not be abandoned.

2. THIRST AND LIVING WATER

The second irony is that, on the cross, the One who offered living water to anyone who was thirsty for eternal life (John 4:10; 7:38) cried out: “I am thirsty” (John 19:28).

The account of His crucifixion in John 19 continues in verses 28-30:

“Later, knowing that all was now completed, and so that the Scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said, ‘I am thirsty.’ A jar of wine vinegar was there, so they soaked a sponge in it, put the sponge on a stalk of the hyssop plant, and lifted it to Jesus’ lips. When He had received the drink, Jesus said, ‘It is finished.’ With that, He bowed His head and gave up His spirit.”

The cross, as I hope you know, was no accident. It was part of God’s plan for our redemption. Even Jesus’ thirst was predicted in the Bible. Psalm 69:21 says: “They put gall in my food and gave me vinegar for my thirst.”

Earlier, in Mark 15:23, Jesus had refused to drink wine mixed with a drug to dull His senses and ease the pain. He was determined to die with a clear mind. But this drink of sour wine He accepted. Most likely it was from a supply of cheap wine the Roman soldiers had with them while they waited for those being crucified to die.

That Jesus was thirsty may not seem like a big deal, but it is, because it is an indication that His suffering on the cross was real. Intense. Excruciating. And it is an evidence of His real humanity.

Throughout history some have promoted the heresy (false teaching) that Jesus did not really suffer on the cross because He was not really a man. He didn’t have a real human body. He only appeared to be a man. He only appeared to have a body.

But here is the truth: In order to redeem us, Jesus had to become one of us. He had to become fully human in order to accomplish our salvation. The thirst of Jesus on the cross is an evidence of His real humanity.

The irony is that the eternal source and fountain of life had to become parched and dry on the cross so that we could receive the living water. He became thirsty so that we might never be thirsty again.

To the woman at the well, Jesus said: “Whoever drinks the water I give you will never thirst. Indeed the water I give you will become in you a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (John 4:14).

To the crowds in Jerusalem, Jesus said: “If anyone is thirsty, come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within you” (John 7:37-38).

This living water Jesus offers – the water that quenches the thirst of our souls – is eternal life in Him. The irony of the cross is that Jesus had to become thirsty so that our thirst could be satisfied.

3. SAVING OTHERS BUT NOT HIMSELF

The third irony is that while Jesus saved others, He couldn't save Himself. That was one of the taunts, one of the jabs, one of the jeers Jesus had to endure on the cross (Mark 15:31). "He can't save Himself," said the religious leaders of Jerusalem as they taunted Him and gave each other high-fives. They were doing their victory dance and chest-bumping one another as they celebrated Jesus' defeat. At least that is what they thought.

The truth is that Jesus *could* save Himself. The truth is that He could have saved Himself. He did have the power to do so. He could have come down from the cross in response to their taunts. He could have. And don't you think the temptation to do just that was awfully strong?

Jesus could have saved Himself. But if He were to fulfill His messianic mission, if He were to accomplish the redemptive purpose for which He came, He could not save Himself. His death was necessary for our salvation. It was the only way.

Jesus could have come down from the cross and given those who blasphemed and mocked Him exactly what they deserved. He could have. But, as William Booth, founder of the Salvation Army, once said: "It is because Jesus did not come down from the cross – it is because He endured the cross and scorned its shame (Hebrews 12:2) – that we look to Him as our Savior and Lord."

The irony of the cross is that in order to save us, Jesus couldn't save Himself. He didn't have to do it, but I for one am eternally thankful He did.

Several years ago, there was a big Vietnam Veterans parade in Chicago, which included a mobile version of the Vietnam Wall from the National Mall here in Washington. A reporter asked a veteran from out of state why he had come all the way to Chicago to visit this memorial and to take part in the parade. The soldier looked straight into the face of the reporter and, with tears flowing down his face, said: "Because of this man right here." As he talked, the soldier was pointing to the name of a friend which was etched in the wall. He traced the letters of his friend's name in the wall. Then he said to the reporter: "This man right here gave his life for me. He gave his life for me."

Jesus gave His life for me. Jesus gave His life for you. He did it for us. And for a world of sinners who are lost without Him. As it says in 1 Peter 2:24: "He Himself (Christ) bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live for righteousness; by His wounds you have been healed."

And Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:21: "God made Him who had no sin to be sin (or, to be a sin offering) for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God."

Do you see the irony, the blessed irony, in that?

My friends, put your trust in Him tonight. In His death on the cross, He gives the gift of eternal life to all who will receive it through faith in Him. It is a gift of God's grace which can never be earned. But Jesus has done for us what we can never do for ourselves. And His grace abounds to us. Open your heart to Him tonight and receive the benefits of His saving love.

For the irony, and the glory, and the power of the cross, let us give thanks to the Lord. Amen.