

DYING TO LIVE: THE UNIVERSAL CROSS – A FRESH START

John 12:24, Matthew 16: 24-26, Galatians 5:22-25

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Today we come to the Center of the book we are reading as a congregation—the Center in that it is the middle of the book, and, more pointedly, the Spiritual Center of our lived Reality—our own experience of the cross where our relationship with Christ is deepened, and we are freed from the obstacles that prevent love from unfolding within us. In this portion of The Universal Christ, Richard Rohr asks...

Why Did Jesus Die?

We have woken up this past week to the unfathomable horrors in Israel, and Gaza, stories of whole families murdered, young people gunned down at an outdoor concert, babies beheaded-, survivors with place to go - - and God in God's love and mercy invites us now to pour over this eternal question, **Why Did Jesus Die?** There is a powerful life-changing truth for us here.

In asking why did Jesus die, Rohr is offering a beautiful and liberating response. But for those of you who haven't been following along in the book these past four weeks, I think it would help if I reviewed some of what he has said. It is summed up in what he calls an Incarnational World View.

Everything visible, and invisible, is the outpouring of God.

The Universe is God's body. We are all Incarnations of the Divine.

We all live in Christ, as Christ, as other Christs.

When Rohr quotes Paul saying we are all In Christ, the understanding is that the Cosmic Christ is our word for an **experience**, not a person. Christ is the Christian, biblical experience and includes all people of all religions or no religion. And the major world religions have their words—Buddha Nature, Atman, Krishna consciousness, the Universal Consciousness, Universal Love and more.

From Rohr's many years of counseling and study, he concludes that the CROSS IS NOT JUST A ONE TIME EVENT. IT IS THE PATTERN FOR HUMAN LIFE. HE writes:

The Divine Mind transforms all human suffering by identifying completely with the human predicament and standing in full solidarity with it from beginning to end. This is the real meaning of crucifixion. The cross is not just a singular event. It is a statement from God that
REALITY HAS A CRUCIFORM PATTERN.

(pause)

The cross is a symbol for the pattern of our existence. The cross is our path to fullness of being. The cross is an embodiment of Divine intimacy. Another way of saying it is that as other Christs, we participate in both the life and the death of Jesus—obviously not literally, but I might say, mystically.

Back in the 80s as a fourth year seminarian, I asked my Jesuit Spiritual Director: Why was Jesus crucified? I'll never forget his answer. He looked at me with a sweet tenderness and replied. "Jesus was crucified because we are."

I was mystified. And discouraged. It sounded ominous, scary. I was thinking I didn't sign up for this. Where is the good news? I had no idea what he was pointing to. I was still immersed in our cultural narrative of

personal progress, achievement and success. I grew up in a nation of optimists who didn't talk much about death, weren't inclined to reveal our fears and disillusionments, and didn't want to look weak or admit any brokenness.

In the Presbyterian church of my childhood, no one talked about Jesus' crucifixion, let alone our own. We went straight from Palm Sunday to Easter, with no mention of Good Friday. I remember wondering why that Friday was called "Good."

Now, thirty some years later that question comes back around, (though it never really left me) from Richard Rohr whose wisdom I have sought out and imbibed for most of those years. He asks me and you: **Why did Jesus die?**

I see now that my Jesuit friend was right but not in the way I heard it 30 years ago. He told me that Jesus was crucified because we are. Jesus's cross is our cross. And his resurrection is ours as well. It is a Universal Cross. It must be true because Jesus said very clearly: **If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up the cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.**

Our participation in Christ's way of life as other Christs includes our transformation through his dying. Jesus was pleading with humanity to accept the cross as the way to new life—his means of offering us abundant life now. A counter-intuitive invitation for sure.

Paul concludes his well-known contrast between the fruits of the spirit and those of the flesh by saying "**those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.**" This is what my Jesuit

teacher meant—we have our own crucifixions to live into. They open the door to the Kingdom of Heaven.

Let's imagine a cross to see how that works: our lives occur on a horizontal plane and a vertical plane at the same time. The horizontal plane is our ordinary, daily life, and the vertical plane is our life in God. This is our conditioned self, or Separate Self. This is our True Self, in relationship with Christ. Here we assume our identity as an independent person, dependent upon the mind for survival and thriving. And on the vertical plane, we encounter the indwelling Christ who was always present, but must be received through the heart, as well as the mind.

Here at the axis we are invited to put on the mind and heart of Christ, and that is a lifelong journey. Here the Separate meets the True Self. And each of us is invited to discover our identity as offspring of the Divine, as sons and daughters of Divine Life. To claim our incarnation.

This in a nutshell, is the Way to God, the spiritual journey.

Such participation in the cross is the willingness to look at our own shadow, the aspects of our inculturation and conditioning that blind us to love.

The axis of the cross is where we experience the death of self-delusion, self-deception, self-will. There, at the axis, the place where our hearts are open to Reality, we can let go of our emotional programs for happiness—the fears of not surviving, or being loved, or being in control.

Here is where we recognize the profound short-comings of the atonement theory that was Christendom's answer to the question Why did Jesus die: We were told, Jesus died to save you from sin. Believe and you will be saved. It was a simple transaction, requiring little of us. Rohr writes:

In my opinion, this interpretation has kept us from a deep and truly transformative understanding of both Jesus and Christ. Salvation became a one-time transactional affair between Jesus and his Father, instead of an ongoing, transformational lesson for the human soul and for all of history.

We are seeing blasted all over the media the fruits of refusing this surrender. The dark sides of human beings, instead of recognizing and naming them, cause us to hate or blame or scapegoat others. Hate, revenge, strife, killing is an endless cycle of projecting our pain elsewhere or being trapped inside it.

These scenes of death are graphic descriptions of the necessity to “die before we die,” to be participants in our lifelong transformation from death into life, from fear into love, from struggle into peace. .. Rohr paraphrases Jesus by saying “God is the only one we can surrender to without losing ourselves.”

He writes: It took the 20th century for modern psychology to recognize how human beings project their unconscious shadow material onto other people and groups, but Jesus revealed the pattern 2000 years ago saying *“Indeed, the hour is coming when those who kill you will think that by doing so they are offering worship to God.”* Rohr adds. “We hate our own faults in other people, and often find the best cover for that projection in religion.”

The calamity in Israel and Gaza makes visible the fruits of a such projection writ large.

Jim Finley in his memoir, The Healing Path, tells a dramatic story of one man’s crucifixion and rebirth.

Finley was visiting an addiction recovery unit of the VA when a newcomer was brought into a room of about 40 men sitting around the edges of the room. They sat in silence, looking down, with no eye contact, no smiles, creating a somber atmosphere as serious as death. There were two chairs in the center of the room. The newcomer sat in one, the leader in another. The leader broke the silence by asking, "What do you love the most?" The person said, "My Wife." At which point everyone in the room shouted at the top of their voice (and here I substitute a more polite expression) BALONEY. The person asked again, "What do you love the most?" My Children. BALONEY. After one or two more similar questions, the man answered, "Alcohol." At Which point everyone stood up and gave him a standing ovation. He was asked to stand, and in complete silence in single file, each man lined up to embrace the newcomer.

Finley says, I was able to realize that, as the alcoholic stood there with tears streaming down his face, he was dying before our very eyes. For in this moment the alcoholic in him that, for so many years claimed to have the final say in who he was, was dying. And in this death he was being born before our very eyes as someone newly emerging out of the darkness into the light.

It may not be addiction that imprisons us, but all of us have shadows prevent us from becoming our True Selves, and certainly the man's deliverance was only the beginning of a much longer journey.

For us, the healing may not be so dramatic. Maybe we wake up to a disappointing reality, or suffer a wound to our self-image. It's painful, but it can be a blessed crucifixion if we take in the pain, and revise our reality to accept it, knowing we are accepted by God's love,—often indicated by a relaxed peaceful body. It's a moment of surrendering the Separate Self to the arms of the True Self.

As we practice stilling the mind in Centering Prayer, we are attempting to find our place at the axis of the cross, resting in the life-giving union of our humanness and our divinity. Resting in Christ, as Christ.

Rohr closes the chapter with these extraordinary words. He imagines Jesus speaking from the cross:

I am what you are most afraid of: your deepest, most wounded, naked self. I am what you do to what you could love.

I am your deepest goodness and your deepest beauty which you deny and disfigure.

You run away from and even attack the only thing that will transform you.

Embrace it all in me. I am yourself. I am all of creation. I am everybody and every thing. Amen

Primary source

Richard Rohr, The Universal Christ: How a Forgotten Reality Can Change Everything We See, Hope for, and Believe (Convergent: 2019). Chapters 11-12