

In the name of Jesus, who demonstrated His love for us in this, that He shed His precious blood that we might live with Him forever. Amen.

In this 11:00 Lenten sermon series this year we are meditating on the size of God's love and mercy for us in Christ.

- How do you measure someone's love for someone else?
- How deep is it, how broad, how high?
- The gifts given? The sacrifices made?
- Even responding in joy when called on to do the "tough stuff" to and for the person?

Recall our Epistle reading for today.

- It was not perishable things such as silver or gold that God ransomed sinners,.....
- But with something far more dear: the precious blood of Christ, slain, like a lamb of sacrifice on the cross.

Why is the main symbol for the Christian religion a cross?

- It could have been a fish.
- That was used as a symbol for Christianity from the early days of the church, and you still see it quite a bit today.

You know, the fish symbol drawn with 2 curved lines.

- Most early Christians understood Greek, and the Greek word for fish, ichthus, was an acronym for the Greek words that said.....
- "Jesus-Christ-God's-Son-Savior"
- So the fish symbol was a visual reminder of that short little confession, the heart of Christian faith, that Jesus is the Messiah, the very Son of God, who saved us.
- It's a good symbol that fish.

Or, how about an image of the empty tomb?

- I'm not exactly sure how you would draw that in a simple way, so maybe that's why it isn't used.
- But for a faith that confesses the triumph, and the present reign of the living Jesus, raised to life again.....
- For a faith that rejoices in the promise that because He lives, we too will rise again and live forever.....
- For the Christian faith, it seems like Jesus' empty tomb might be a great symbol.
- And it would be.

But for Christians throughout the ages, the central symbol has always been the cross.

- Have you ever thought about how strange that is?
- The cross was a Roman instrument of public torture and execution.

When we wear a cross around our neck, it's like decorating ourselves with a shiny little image of an electric chair.

- When we hang our cross so prominent above the altar, which is proper and good that we do, but it is like displaying a gallows or a hangman's noose.
- When architects design a church steeple with a cross at the top, it's like lifting up before all the world a guillotine.

So why do Christians keep *this* symbol, the executioner's cross, so prominent among us?

- Well, for one thing, that is where Jesus accomplished our salvation.
- That's where by His blood and death, He won for us the forgiveness of all our sins, and He makes peace between God and man.

But another reason why the cross is such a precious symbol to Christians is that, in the cross of Jesus, we see most clearly just how much our God loves us.

- The cross, like no other symbol, should cry out to us every time we see it.....**BEHOLD HOW MUCH GOD LOVES YOU.**

It's been many years now since Mel Gibson produced the movie, *The Passion of the Christ*."

- Many of you I'm sure remember it. It was a movie focusing on the last week of Jesus' life, and especially His trial and execution.

Gibson's film was controversial for a number of reasons, and it sparked a lot of public debate and conversation.

- And it has its strengths and weaknesses.
- It was intensely violent and graphic and bloody.

Some objected to the extended scenes of the torture of Jesus as gratuitous violence.....

- The product of a director who was in love with violence, produced for an audience that had a thirst for violence.
- Others warned that the film portrayed the Jews as Christ-killers, and that it might result in violence against Jews.

- Some lamented that across the entire, long film, there was nothing of the purest, highest aspect of true religion, which is love.
- But for many Christians who saw the film, although they may have found it hard to watch, they also found it a powerful display of *just how much* Jesus loves us.....
- That He would endure for us such hatred and scorn and abuse and pain.

How large is God's love for you?

- How can you measure how much He values you?
- Well, one way to understand that is to ask *what He would pay* to have you?
- What would He be willing to give for your good, for your welfare and safety?

How much do you value a really good cup of coffee? Go by Starbucks and see the line of cars.

- Enough to pay 4 or 5 dollars?

How much do you value your dog or cat?

- Enough to pay for all of the food and grooming and medicines and check ups?

How much do people value having the latest phone?

- Enough to pay.....whatever it is they're asking these days?
- To some extent, the cost you are willing to pay for something shows how much you value it.

At the cross of Jesus, a price was paid.....

- There was a cost that cannot begin to be measured in money.
- At the cross, we were ransomed, we were purchased, and obtained for God.....
- "Not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ."
- A staggering cost. A staggering love.

The Bible marvels at this staggering cost from 2 perspectives, that of the Father and that of the Son.

- The first perspective is that of God the Father offering up His only, beloved Son for sinners.

When the Bible speaks of Jesus as God's only Son and as God's beloved Son.....

- It evokes the heart-wrenching story of Abraham and the near-sacrifice of Isaac.
- "Abraham! Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you." Genesis chapter 22 verses 1 and 2.

Can you imagine?

- In the end, God sent His angel to stop Abraham, knife in hand and God instead provided a ram for the sacrifice.

In the fullness of time, God would again provide a sacrifice, a more perfect sacrifice, a sacrifice for the sin of all humanity.....

- Not Isaac, the only and beloved son of Abraham, but rather Jesus.
- God's only and beloved Son from all eternity, now in human flesh.

This time no animal would appear in a thicket to spare the Son—and the Father—the cost.

- The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world is not a lamb, but a Son.
- In His love and mercy towards sinners, God the Father gave His only beloved Son up to the pain and shame of crucifixion.....
- And even to divine judgment and abandonment.

“My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me? Jesus cried from the cross.

- Please don't ever take that for granted.
- Oh, what His mercy toward us sinners cost the Father!

The Bible doesn't dwell on the emotional sorrow and misery of the Father sacrificing His Son.....

- But it does derive great comfort from the fact that the Father spent so much.
- Saint Paul writes, “*If God is for us, who can be against us. He who did not spare His own Son but gave Him up for us all, how will He not also with Him graciously give us all things?*” Romans chapter 8 verses 31 and 32.
- Our salvation has come at a staggering cost to the Father.

The Bible also speaks of this cost from a second perspective, the perspective of the Son, who goes willingly to the cross.

- From our Gospel reading today Jesus said, “I lay down My life for the sheep. No one takes it from Me, I lay it down of My own accord.” John chapter 10 verses 15 and 18.
- Jesus was determined, He was resolute, in walking His path toward the cross, even though He knew that the cost would be dreadful.

Facing the hour of His betrayal and suffering, Jesus deliberated, “How My soul is troubled. And what shall I say? Father save Me from this hour? But for this purpose I have come to this hour.” John chapter 12 verse 27.

- In Gethsemane, Jesus said, “My soul is very sorrowful, even unto death.”
- Yet He still prayed, “My Father Your will be done.” Matthew chapter 26.

The cost was so unthinkable that Jesus sweated drops of blood while He prayed.

- An angel appeared, not to prevent the sacrifice, but to comfort Him.....
- And Jesus refused to summon the 12 legions of angels who could have rescued Him.

Jesus’ mercy was so rich and His love was so abounding that He paid the staggering cost for sinners.

- Do you remember the opening hymn we sang to this service?
- “Glory be to Jesus, who in bitter pains, poured for me the lifeblood, from His sacred veins.”

How great is God’s love for you?

- What are its dimension and depths?
- Behold the cost to the Father, the cost to the Son, willingly paid, willingly suffered, willingly offered.

To give one’s life up for another is a great sacrifice.

- We sometimes call it “the ultimate sacrifice.”
- A life is an enormous payment, an enormous cost.

But the cost at the cross of Jesus was something of even greater worth.

- It was the lifeblood of the very Son of God.
- The holy and eternal Son, now in our flesh, heaves and gasps on the cross.

The all-glorious Son of God, before whom the angels of heaven cry aloud in joy and praise and awe, the only-begotten Son of the Father from eternity—God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God.....

- His blood runs out. His breath expires.
- God dies, for the life of men who killed Him.
- One drop of His blood is more precious than heaven and earth.
- The cost of all this.....Behold the love of God, how deep, how broad, how high.

This great cost proves God’s love for you.

- But it also reveals how desperately we need forgiveness.

- This precious, infinite cost reveals how serious and damnable our sin was without Jesus' saving death.

In the garden Jesus had prayed, "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will." Matthew chapter 26.

- If it had been possible, if there was some other way, if there were some lesser cost, some lesser price that would have restored us, would the Father have denied the Son's prayer?
- But our sin is so wicked, such an offense against God and against one another, that it required the blood of the only, beloved Son of God.
- A cost that He has willingly paid.

With all these thoughts in mind, listen to the words of verse 3 of the hymn, "Stricken, Smitten, and Afflicted." We will be singing this hymn during Holy Week.

- Ye who think of sin but lightly.....nor suppose the evil great.
- Here may view its nature rightly, Here its guilt may estimate.
- Mark the sacrifice appointed, See who bears the awful load.
- Tis the Word, the Lord's anointed, Son of Man and Son of God.

He has redeemed me a *lost and condemned person*, purchased and won me from all sins, from death and from the power of the devil; not with gold or silver, but with His holy precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death, that I may be His own and live under Him in His kingdom and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness.

Yes, the cross is the most cherished symbol of our religion.

- It reminds us again and again and again of the saving death of Jesus for sinners.
- It reminds us again and again and again of just how much our God loves us.
- Amen.

(Please stand) And now, may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

We now continue with our prayers as read responsively on page 265 in your hymnal. Our prayer response as printed in your bulletin will be, "Lord have mercy." (MOVE TO ALTAR)