

Eyes on the Cross

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Hebrews 12:1-2

“...let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith...”

The Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakunin once said, “People go to church for the same reasons they go to a tavern: to stupefy themselves, to forget their misery, to imagine themselves, for a few minutes anyway, free and happy.” There is something about this comment that has caught me. I wondered, “Is this true?” Do we attend church just to feel good for a couple of hours and then return to the grind of life? If it isn’t, then what happens here should affect the rest of your week. If it is true, then the rest of your week should be unaffected. If it is true, then the only reason we gather here is just to feel good, at least for a little while. Whatever happens next will help you know if it is or is not true.

So ask yourself, what are you going to do next, after the service is over? After church, after the praise, after the worship, what happens next? What happens after you have had your mountaintop experience, your revelation, and your moment of spiritual ecstasy? Where are you going after this? What are you going to do for the rest of the day? Imagine that you have just been baptized, or imagine that you have just returned from a spiritual retreat, or imagine that you just heard the most moving and provoking sermon that you have ever heard. Well, what next?

Have you ever found yourself asking these questions? Maybe you have found yourself in your room, at your house, after church, after the spiritual awakening of your life, and wondering in the isolation and the quiet, what next? Is church just a Sunday morning experience, is it just a moment of emotional manipulation, this Christian movement of which we are a part? Or is there more? Is there something that carries us from Sunday to Sunday? Is there something that carries us from retreat to retreat, from song to song, and from prayer to prayer? The early Christian answer, for a while, was the anticipation of Christ’s immediate return. That was next, the return of Christ, and they expected it any day. But Christ didn’t return, and didn’t return, and didn’t return, and the passion, the excitement, and the anticipation began to diminish. So they found themselves asking as well, what next? What was the purpose of this risk they took, the faith they have accepted, and this lifestyle they have chosen to live? It is that moment when a newlywed couple turns around one morning in bed and finally realizes that they are going to spend the rest of their lives together, and they ask, “What next?” Like in Neil Simon’s play, *Barefoot in the Park*, the couple looks for a new understanding of joy, life, and hope with the rest of their lives. So what is going to happen next? Where do we go as Christians between the Sundays? How do we live out our faith in the church? What happens next?

Imagine that as you are surrounded by your questions of doubt and wonder, you take out a cross and look at it. Perhaps it is a smooth, wooden cross, simple and stark. Perhaps you feel the grain of the wood against your fingers; you notice the simplicity of the lines. You begin to think about the many places you see the cross in the world, on books, on buildings, on cars and on people. You think about the ubiquitous nature of the cross, the ever-present aspect of the cross. It is everywhere. It is jewelry, it is design; the cross is a part of our culture. Just as easy as it is for someone to claim on national television that this is a “Christian” nation, it is to find a cross on almost anyone’s possession. But what does it mean? What is its purpose? Is it just a design; is it just a symbol that has become a part of our cultural psyche? We may be concerned about our faith from week to week, but at the same time, shouldn’t we be alarmed about the overuse, the misuse of our symbol by our

society? After all, are we sure what it means. I was watching the movie *Constantine* the other about six months ago. It is a movie that is semi-religious, religious men battling demons, God versus the devil, and so on. In that movie I saw the sign and the symbol of the cross used again and again. It was used in a religious context, so to speak, but I wondered if the meaning of the cross was forgotten, because the cross was used to blow the demons back to hell. Our view of the cross has become misplaced, forgotten and abandoned. Maybe Bakunin was right, and the purpose of Christianity is just to let people feel good for a couple of hours a week. Maybe the constant view of the cross is just a reminder of how we feel good at church. Maybe it is just an empty, and base symbol. Return to look at the cross and wonder, what does it mean? What does it stand for, and how can the cross sustain our faith from week to week. How can the cross answer what is next for our faith?

In looking for an answer, we have to put the cross back into the Bible. This plain, smooth, well-made cross is taken out of context when it is a fashion symbol; it is not the cross of the scripture or the cross of our story. We have to put the cross back in the Bible, like putting a piece back into the puzzle. For in the Bible we are reminded who it is that goes to the cross. In the Bible we are reminded what it was that Jesus sacrificed. In the Bible we see the story that leads up to and away from the cross. The 20th century theologian, Paul Tillich, called Jesus the ultimate revelation of God – assumed at the cross. According to Tillich, all of scripture, history and time leads up to the cross and then moves away from the cross. If we take the cross out of the Bible, if we give it to society, then we forget its meaning, its purpose and its power. We have to remember that the very one who died on the cross more than once fed thousands with very little. Remember that the very one that died on the cross healed people of illnesses and demons. Remember that the very one who died on the cross claimed he was starting a new thing, a God thing. Could not this Jesus have gone a different way – yes but it would not have been the best way. Could not this Jesus had controlled the crowd, the rulers and avoided the suffering and the humiliation of the cross? Yes, but it would not have been the best way. The suffering, the humiliation, and the despair were all a necessary part of the events that occurred at the cross, and we must remember. When we remember the life that Christ lived, when we profess that Jesus is the son of the living God incarnate, then the cross becomes more than a simple design, a fashion accessory. Put the cross back in the Bible and remember it is humiliation, it is suffering, it is pain and degradation. As the scriptures from Hebrews say, the cross, which Jesus endured, was shame. We sit in our room after church wondering what is next. We take out a cross and turn it in our hands, and then we remember who it was that mounted this cross. We remember the life Jesus lived, we remember the words he spoke, the miracles he performed, and we remember the sacrifice he gave. We put the cross in the story of the bible, and it becomes profound and powerful.

Then we look around us at all those who have witnessed before us. We look around at the great cloud of witnesses, a great throng of Christians who have come before us, who have lived their faith just as we have. This cloud of witnesses have sat alone as well, and wondered what next. This cloud of witnesses have held the cross in their hands, and wondered what it means. This cloud of witnesses has heard the story of Christ, they have been moved to understand the cross in the context of the Bible, and have gone to live out their life. These are the apostles who dedicated their lives to following the ministry of Christ. These are the early Christians who have gone to prison, to torture, to the arena of beasts for the name of Christ. These are the founders of our faith who have given sweat, toil, blood and tears for the name of Christ. These aren't Christians who looked for a cause or for a sacrifice. They weren't looking to die. No, the Notre Dame professor, Lawrence Cunningham, reminds us that these martyrs were not looking to lose their lives, but instead to live them. They were looking to be a witness to the hope, to the joy, and to the life they found in Christ and in the cross. That is what the word martyr means: witness, and in the Greek, the passage says we are surrounded by a great cloud of martyrs. As Tertullian said, "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church." Christians who were looking to live and to share the life they felt called to live in Jesus Christ.

These witnesses are not only the ones who have found a place in the history books. They are not only the ones who have lost their lives, or have suffered for the sake of Christ. In our Baptist tradition, they are Henry Dunster, former president of Harvard, who was cast out of Boston because he would not baptize his child. They are John Bunyan, the author of *Pilgrim's Progress*, who was imprisoned for his Baptist beliefs. They are Thomas Helwys, one of the founders of the Baptist movement who also suffered imprisonment. They are Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, and many others who suffered for the sake of Christ. These are the witnesses who run beside us and guide us as a witness.

You know, many people I meet feel that they are spiritual, but find church irreverent. They find church to be bothersome, burdensome, hypercritical and problematic. Perhaps, for we all have our faults, our difficulties, and our shortcomings. But I need the church. For in that time when I find myself alone in my room, wondering what is next, I want to be able to look up and see John Curwen, the first president of this church (what I think is now the moderator) work tirelessly to establish a Baptist church, who worked closely with Charles Thomson in acquiring the land, and in giving so much of his life for the sake of Christ. Who helped to plant the Baptist movement in this area? His witness inspires my faith and tells me what is next. And the history of this specific church is replete of those who are a witness for us all.

I want to be able to look up and see the members of this church who give time, resources, and energy for the sake of its ministry. I want to see the witness and the sacrifice that they have embraced so that I may know what is next. Each person here is a witness for everyone else. That is one reason why we need the church. You may be spiritual, but you cannot live the Christian life without that great cloud of witnesses, without the conviction of courage, hope and perseverance. All those here in the church, all those who have at one time served in this church is a part of our great cloud of witnesses, and we need them to show us, to tell us what is next in our walk of faith.

It is the race that they are all running, and we are called to run that race with them. You have heard the gunshot, your spiritual experience, your epiphany, your moment in worship, and now the crowd is off. This is what the church can be like. Maybe you have watched the beginning of a great race like the Boston Marathon. At the beginning of the race all you see is a mass of people moving in one crowd – that is the church. If one person stops, then many will fall. If one person moves ahead he or she will run into others. If everyone doesn't run at full steam then the crowd won't move. But if all lift up their heads to the prize at the end of the race, then all will move towards that crowd. Those are the witnesses who surround you, those are the family members, the church members, the Christians who have gone before you and lead you to the glory of God. We are called to run the race with them.

We are called to run with our eyes focused on the cross. Not the smooth, gilded, and easy cross of our culture, but that old rugged cross of Christ. The place where Christ died, and from which his resurrection occurred. The scripture calls us to look to Jesus, to look to that cross, and look away from everything else. We look away from worldly distraction, lures and temptations. Temptations to be someone else's church. Temptations to follow someone else's Christianity. Temptations to gain someone else's understanding of success – no we keep our eyes on the cross with focus and with endurance. We look away from the lure of greed, the lure of power, the lure of being the strongest and look to Christ with intense focus and devotion. The great pianist, Horowitz would spend hours playing one note, again and again. He would focus on just that note, the tone, the volume, that attack and the release. That is the kind of focus we are called to have on the cross, turning our eyes away from everything else. Calvin, when discussing the Christian life, said it this way, "The Lord is with them, warning them to hold their heads higher, to direct their eyes farther so as to find in him that blessedness which they do not see in the world."

What's next? Look to the cross, with the witnesses around you and ask yourself that very question. I had a friend who questioned his own life in his faith. He was baptized, he went to church, but he would find himself in his room, empty, and wondering what was next. He felt that he wasn't running the race. So he turned his eyes to the cross. He looked to the cross, he prayed at the cross, and the cross led him to ministry with individuals living with AIDS. He was moved to spend time with AIDS patients, to serve them, and offer them support. But he was not satisfied with just serving, he felt he had to go farther, and began to bring them to his church, and brought his church to them. He brought the AIDS patients into the cloud of witnesses. He started a ministry at the church and through the church; he kept his eyes on the cross. Through his work, the people did not just know healing and compassion, but knew it through the cross, and those witnessing to the cross. And that is what we are called to do, to look to the where the cross is leading us, and staying with the cross. Hold your head high, direct your eyes beyond the horizon to the cross, and there keep your eyes fixed. We are called to run the race with the witnesses and with our eyes focused and fixed on the cross.

Oh let us survey the wondrous cross. As a church, let us keep our eyes on the cross and focus on the blessing, the life, and the gift of Jesus. Let us survey the cross in this next year. We have made it a year with

a new pastor, we have survived, we have worshiped, we have grown, and it has been good. So what is next for this church, as that great cloud of witness, we are all to continue to look to the cross and then to run the race together. That is what is next, to look to and run to the cross. As you look to the cross, you may find you are led to serve in ministry for the homeless and hungry with other churches in the Interfaith Hospitality Network, or through Habitate for Humanity. As you look to the cross, you may find yourself led to a ministry of evangelism that goes into the neighborhood to tell all the people about the community, the connections, the cloud of witness, and the profound life in Christ that can be found in Lower Merion Baptist Church. As you look to the cross, you may be moved to encourage our own through children's education, through youth and young adult ministries, or through Bible study and adult education. As you look to the cross, you may be moved to take part in the Baptist witness overseas with our many foreign missions. When you look to the cross, the Holy Spirit may lead you anywhere. It may call you to give more to Christ through the church. It may call you to give your life for the first time to Christ through the church. This is what I am calling you as a people in this next year. To take part in this basic Christian act, and look to the cross. With your church around you, survey the wondrous cross. With the grace of God leading you, survey the wondrous cross. In all that we do, may we keep our eyes on the cross. In our fellowship, in our worship, in our giving, and in our living, let us keep our eyes on the cross. In our mission work, in our evangelizes let us run the great race, with our eyes on the cross, Jesus before us, the church around us, and the grace of God giving us strength.

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