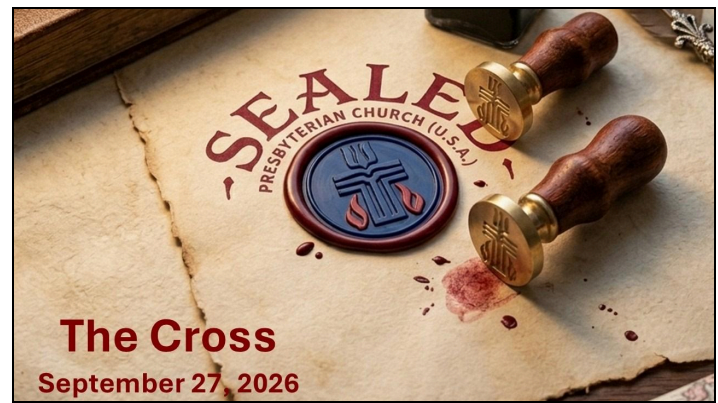


Yesterday's Sermon Summary

1. We finished our short series on the PCUSA seal and all the embedded meaning in it with a consideration of the cross. One of the PCUSA's creed, The Confession of 1967, reminds us that the cross is "a mystery" that is "a truth that lies beyond our reach" to explain or fully take in. Scripture uses a variety of analogies for the cross - a shepherd laying down His life for His flock, a ransom paid to free a slave, the victory of good over evil, etc. - and no one analogy describes the cross fully.



2. We honed in on just one way that the New Testament talks about the cross: in the words of biblical scholar N. T. Wright, "The cross is not just the means by which we are rescued; it is the pattern for the life to which we are called."

3. The Apostle Paul describes this pattern in his own spiritual experience in two well-known verses - [Galatians 2.19-20](#). He writes, "I have been crucified with Christ." Galatians is the oldest of Paul's letters, written about 12 years after his conversion to Christianity on the Damascus road ([Acts 9](#)). And there was something so cataclysmic and jarring about his initial encounter with Christ and then his first dozen years with Him that it felt like a part of Paul had died, or to use his word, was "crucified."

4. This ties back to something Jesus taught, as recorded in Matthew, Mark, and Luke: "Jesus said, If anyone wishes to come after Me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow Me" ([Luke 9.23](#)). To follow Jesus is an offer open to all, but to do it we'll be asked to "deny" (refuse or abstain) from parts of ourselves and seek their demise day after day after day. This is why German pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer describes a key facet of the gospel as follows: "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die..."

5. In church history, this "denying" or "crucifying" oneself has been summarized with several terms: a) "mortification," which literally means to mortify or cause the death of something, b) "purgation," built off the root word "purge," which means to declutter or prune in order to make room for something new, and c) "renunciation" which refers to the need to renounce or set aside parts of ourselves along the way in our spiritual lives.

6. The really good news is that whatever we might lose in this denying of or dying to self is far outweighed by what we gain - as the second half of Galatians 2.20 says it, it is no longer we who live, but Christ will live in and through us. Biblical scholar N. T. Wright puts it this way, "Paul's declaration 'It is no longer I who live' is not the erasure of human personality, but its redemption. When Christ lives in you, you do not become less human—you finally become the truly human person God created you to be."

7. So now let's stand back and reflect on a few questions - first, recognize that we can tell our own spiritual autobiographies by way of this twofold sequence, that is, parts of ourselves that we've needed to jettison along the way, coupled with how that made room for Christ to live in and through us all the more. To use another turn of phrase by the apostle Paul, this is the process of laying aside "the old self" and putting on "the new self" ([Ephesians 4.21-24](#)).

8. A second, necessary question is just this - what parts of our lives today need to be crucified so that room can be freed up for Christ to live in us even more? Perhaps, as Henri Nouwen puts it, it's our need for security or control, or our need to be the center of our own universes, or our insistence upon keeping our personal boundaries too restrictive? More fundamentally, Thomas Merton would say that we'll find the parts of ourselves that need to be denied by looking for the places in our lives that we want to keep "outside the reach of God's will and love." In any case, rest assured, a big part of our own continued growth and vitality is identifying what needs to die or be cast off next.

9. And a third question is just this - do we trust Christ enough to do this in us? If you refer back to Galatians 2.20, trust in Christ is Paul's major motivation to pursue this in his own life, and suggest that other Christians do the same. However hard dying to parts of ourselves might be, Christ can be trusted to make that worth it in the end. Ultimately, Evelyn Underhill's assurance can be ours: "Dying to self is not a dreary obligation; it is the path of release. It is the shedding of the heavy, defensive armor of the ego so that the soul, liberated from self-interest, may move freely in the atmosphere of divine love."

10. St. Athanasius in the 300s CE, followed by St. Teresa of Avila in the 1500s CE, describe this twofold process in Galatians 2.19-20 as if it were like cleaning a dirty mirror: a dirty mirror cannot reflect anything (not yourself, not God) and through the denial of self we're wiping the mirror so that we see everything more clearly. Using a different metaphor, a historic piece of African-American liturgy reads, "Lord, I come to You today like an empty pitcher before a flowing fountain, waiting to be filled." Parts of who we are and have been needed to be poured out before God can refill us with His presence and capacity.

Carrying Your Cross this Week

- Read and pray over Luke 9.21-27 every day this week: [Luke 9.21-27 NRSVUE](#)
- Spend some time journaling or reflecting on your own spiritual autobiography, and specifically try to identify parts of yourself that you need to let die along the way and how that made room for Christ to live in and through you more. This would make for a good small group conversation too.
- Spend time each day this week asking God what part of yourself might need to be crucified during this current season of your life. You might find the answer by considering these quotes from Henri Nouwen and Thomas Merton referenced in the sermon summary: "To die to self means to let go of the illusion that we are the center of the universe. It means abandoning our desperate attempts to secure our own lives, control our reputation, and protect our boundaries, so that God can become our true security" and "My false and private self is the one who wants to exist outside the reach of God's will and God's love—outside of reality and outside of life. And such a self cannot help but be an illusion."
- Check out this practical article from a Christian therapist on what "dying to self" means and doesn't mean, and questions that help you understand what that might mean in your own life: [Are You Really Supposed to Die to Yourself? | Dr. Alison Cook](#)
- And here are three short reflections that work through some of the particulars of "self-denial," such as how it's not the same thing as "self-hatred" and how "self-forgetfulness" is a really good thing: [The Freedom of Self-Forgetfulness](#) and [Self-Denial Without Self-Hatred](#) and [Desire and Self-Denial](#)