

A Sermon Preached by Gregory Hall at Clarence Presbyterian Church on November 6, 2022

LEARNING FROM THE EAST

If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people to be the most pitied. But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died.
I Corinthians 15:19-20

On July 16, 1054AD, two Cardinals from Rome walked in to Hagia Sophie in Constantinople. They went up to the high altar which was prepared for the Eucharist and placed on it a sentence of excommunication of the Patriarch and his supporters. They proceeded to the door of the Cathedral and shook the dust from their feet and departed. This is the start of what is called the Great Schism.

This was a seminal event in the eventual complete rupture between the Western and Eastern parts of the Christian church. There were many factors that caused this breach. One was language. The Church in the East was shaped by the Greek language. Greek was the language of philosophy and mystery. The west spoke Latin which was the language of law and organization. Historical experience also influenced differences in approach. The Roman Empire in the West was overthrown in 476 AD. This left the Pope as a lone remaining power. In the East, the Roman Empire lasted another 1000 years. These different realities led to very different understandings of the relationship between church and state in the culture.

These two different traditions grew apart to such an extent they created two very different cultures. In his 1996 book "Clash of Civilizations," Samuel Huntington predicted that following the Cold War, the world would be shaped by conflicts between civilizations. He believed that Western Christians and Eastern Christians are competing civilizations. We see this playing out in Ukraine today.

Both East and West seek to follow Jesus, but they are as different as Mary and Martha in our Gospel lesson. They each have strength and weakness. Just as the sisters complement each other in this story, so East and West need each other. In the context of the Church universal, the loss of unity in the church led to each side losing contact with viewpoints they needed to be whole. Pope John Paul II wrote over twenty years ago that "**The Church must breathe with her two lungs**". He meant East and West.

There are many lessons that we Western Christians can learn from our Eastern brothers and sisters. One of the most important lessons is for us to put more emphasis on the resurrection of Jesus. The focal point of the faith for the West is the cross, for the East it is the resurrection.

You can clearly see the difference between the east and west in architecture. If you enter any church in the west where will your eye be drawn? Almost without question your eye will focus on a cross. This is true of Roman Catholic, Episcopal, Lutheran, Methodist, Baptist and well as Presbyterian Churches. There are all kinds of different possibilities concerning the type of cross. You may find a plain Latin cross, a Jerusalem cross, or a Celtic cross. The

cross might have the body of Jesus on it or not. Many more liturgical churches will have Stations of the Cross on their walls. Most of the large Cathedrals in the west are built themselves as a cross, with a long nave and a shorter transept. Indeed, when you enter our sanctuary your eye is drawn up to the Celtic cross. Each and every time we enter worship in a western Christian church we are reminded that Christ died for us.

While that is not a bad thing to be reminded of, this does not happen in Eastern Christianity. When you enter an Orthodox Church, your eye is drawn to the center doors of the iconostasis. This wall separates the altar area from the nave. On this wall are icons. The icon in the privileged place is called Christ Pantocrator. The word **Pantocrator** is of Greek origin meaning "ruler of all". **Christ Pantocrator** is an icon of Christ represented full or half-length and full-faced. He holds the book of the Gospels in his left hand and blesses with his right hand.

This icon portrays the Risen Christ as the Righteous Judge and the Lover of Humankind, both at the same time. The Gospel is the book by which we are judged, and the blessing proclaims God's loving kindness toward us, showing us that he is giving us his forgiveness.

On the other side of what are called the royal doors is always an icon of Mary and the infant Jesus. On top of the doors there is often an icon of the Last Supper. This does not mean one cannot find a depiction of Jesus' death or the image of a cross. They are usually found somewhere in the Church, but you sometimes have to hunt for it.

Another interesting fact is that there is a church in Jerusalem that has two different names. The western tradition calls it the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, which is the place where Jesus was buried on the final act of Good Friday. The east calls it the Church of the Resurrection the place where Jesus conquered death.

In western Christianity we tend to talk about Good Friday all year long. We can often focus on the cross of Christ and Jesus' sacrifice for us. This is true for all of us from Roman Catholics to Southern Baptists. We speak about Jesus dying for our sins all through the year. Almost every sermon Billy Graham ever gave focused on the cross of Christ.

I am not saying this is completely wrong or untrue. But is it not interesting that we only tend to talk about the resurrection on one Sunday of the year.

There is more balance in Eastern Orthodoxy. They tend to focus more evenly on the two great events of Holy Week. Sunday is the day of resurrection and in a very real sense the Orthodox remember that fact more fully.

What would it change if we prayed, thought, sang more about Christ's victory over death?

I believe the first change would be to bring more joy into our experience of God. All too often the stereotype of Christians is true. There is much truth to the picture of Christians as

being people who want to snuff out any fun. Think about it for a moment, if our only focus is on the suffering of Jesus how could we feel joy filled.

The Risen Christ sends us out into the world to share the good news of his victory over death. Father Alexander Schmemmann writes:

From its very beginning Christianity has been the proclamation of joy, of the only possible joy on earth... Without the proclamation of this joy Christianity is incomprehensible. It is only as joy that the Church was victorious in the world, and it lost the world when it lost the joy, when it ceased to be a credible witness to it. Of all the accusations against Christians, the most terrible one was uttered by Nietzsche when he said that Christianity had no joy.

What would it mean for us to rebalance our focus from Good Friday to Easter? On a theoretical level this would mean for us to interpret the events of the Passion in light of the resurrection. In the Orthodox tradition the cross of Jesus is the way he defeats evil. One of the great Latin Hymns is called the Stabat Mater. It seeks to share the suffering that Mary endured during the crucifixion. One Orthodox Bishop tells us that his tradition does not like this kind of reflection about the cross. Kallistos Ware writes:

It is significant that Stabat Mater, in the course of its sixty lines, makes not a single reference to the Resurrection.

Where Orthodoxy sees chiefly Christ the Victor, the late medieval and post-medieval west see chiefly Christ the Victim. While Orthodoxy interprets the Crucifixion primarily as an act of triumphant victory over the powers of evil, the west – particularly since the time of Anselm of Canterbury has tended to think of the cross in penal and juridical terms, as an act of satisfaction or substitution designed to propitiate the wrath of an angry Father.

When we focus solely on the cross of Christ we tend to highlight our sin and unworthiness which hardly leads to a lightness of spirit. Even the forgiveness made possible by the cross can lead more to a sense of relief rather than joy. If we focus more on Jesus' victory over death this can inform much of our Christian experience. The resurrection of Jesus should not be relegated to one Sunday a year.

A focus on the resurrection can shape our experiences of many things. One example is the Lord's Supper. All too often in my experience communion has been performed in a very heavy spirit. The leaders behind the table use their sonorous voices with somewhat dark timber. The servers have very somber looks carrying the trays like they are pall bearers at a funeral. The people in the pews keep the heads down in ponderous silence. The whole focus would seem to be on remembering Jesus' sacrifice. For some the sole meaning is recalling how Jesus gave his body to be broken for us.

Now it must be said that is one meaning of the Lord's Supper, but it is not the only one. Another purpose of Communion is to give thanks for all Jesus did for us. That is why another

name for the Lord's Supper is Eucharist which is the Greek word for giving thanks. When we come to the table we come to give thanks for all that was accomplished by Jesus in his life, death and resurrection. This means we do not need to be dour and focus on our own failings to live up to God's expectations of us. Rather we can smile because of all God has done for us in Christ.

An even more joyous approach comes when we look at the Lord's Supper in light of the hope of the resurrection. A third meaning of the Lord's Supper is as an anticipation of heaven. We often hear in the words of invitation "They will come from east and west and north and south and sit at table in the Kingdom of God." Heaven is sometimes pictured as being a great banquet where all are gathered in the presence of God. The resurrection of Jesus has given us the promise that we too shall defeat death. We have an invitation to that eternal meal. When we come to the table we come to experience a foretaste of heaven.

A focus on the resurrection should also shape our prayers. I suspect that much of our prayer life is shaped by a focus on the cross. We spend time admitting our failures and brokenness that made the cross necessary in prayers of confession. We pray for others who are suffering in this broken world. But in my experience in worship and private prayers, western Christians do not as often take time to give thanks to God for the hope that Christ has made available to us in overcoming the powers of evil and death. These prayers can inspire us for living out our day to day lives.

Our Book of Common Worship has some prayers to be said at funerals that I have often used. One prayer says this:

O God of grace, you have given us new and living hope in Jesus Christ. We thank you that by dying Christ destroyed the power of death, and by rising from the grave opened the way to eternal life. Help us to know that because he lives, we shall live also; and that neither death nor life, nor things present nor things to come shall be able to separate us from your love in Christ Jesus our Lord.

This prayer is shaped by a focus on the resurrection. We could pray these words every day to give us courage and hope for living.

So, this is the primary lesson from the East that I hope we will wrestle with in the coming years. How can we allow the resurrection of Jesus to shape our individual and common life more fully? Yes, we will continue to value the cross, but I hope we can develop a renewed focus on our living hope given by the Risen Christ. All our hope for this world and the next comes from a trust in the resurrection of Jesus.

On this All Saints Sunday we learn from the East that the resurrection of Jesus changes the face of death for all His people. Death is no longer a prison, but a passage into God's presence.