

Sermon

March 22, 2009

Texts: Numbers 21:4-9; John 3:14-21

A bronze serpent on a pole. That's an image we have all seen frequently, perhaps without thinking much about it—it's an image associated with the medical profession. If you go on the web page of the American Medical Association, for example, that's what you'll find: an image of a serpent wrapped around a pole. While that image may have its origin in ancient Greece, it is also traditionally associated with our first reading for today, when the people of Israel were being bitten by snakes, and Moses made a bronze serpent and put it in a pole. Then, whoever was bit by a snake and looked at it was healed.

Jesus alludes to this story in our Gospel lesson. He says, "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life." The allusion is clearly to the way that he would be lifted up on the cross. That's an image we're more accustomed to as Christians, one that we have at the center of our church. Jesus then continues, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

In a sense, we can compare the way in which those who were bitten by snakes were healed when they looked at the bronze serpent on a pole to what happens to us when we look at the cross. Of course, it's not that something magical or miraculous happens when we see an image of the cross or Jesus' crucifixion. But when Christians have looked at the cross, they have seen what St. John says in our text: God's great love for us: "For God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son."

Why is the cross a symbol of God's love? To answer that question, we need to see Jesus' death against the background of his life: a life dedicated to reaching out to others to heal them, not only physically but on every level of their existence. Throughout his ministry, he sought to make people whole by sharing God's love with them in many different ways, by his words and actions. He taught that God accepts sinners and loves them—as our Gospel text says, he did not come to condemn people but to save people and give them life. But that life depends on people responding to Jesus' love, listening to his words and following him as his disciples. Unfortunately, as our Gospel reading says, "the light came into the world, but people loved darkness rather than light." And for that reason, many were opposed to Jesus and the God of unconditional love that he proclaimed. In spite of that, however, Jesus would not back down. In obedience to his heavenly Father, he would not stop reaching out to sinners, accepting them as they were and seeking to give them life, no matter what the cost. And ultimately, that commitment to loving others cost him his life. For that reason, the cross is a symbol of love, a love that will not quit, a love that never gives up on us, no matter what.

And when we look upon that cross and understand that, what we see is God's unconditional love for us who do not deserve that love. We see a love that accepts us just as we are, with all of our sin and our faults and our imperfections. And when we come to see that, what happens to us is the same thing that happened to those who gazed upon the bronze serpent on a pole: we experience healing. Why? Because the only thing that can make people whole and give people real life is that kind of unconditional love. You know, you can have all kinds of things in life, but if you are not loved, truly loved without conditions, no matter what you do and how often you fall, you cannot be truly whole and know real life. But when you experience that kind of love, the love of God that never quites and never gives up, that is there for you always, it is

like a medicine or a balm that brings healing for all the pain and the hurt and the guilt and the wounds you have, for everything that is broken and needs fixing in your life.

But, you know, we can only be healed when we see in the cross, not just God's love for each of us individually, but God's love for all people: "For God so loved *the world*..." We come to see that God loves everyone else unconditionally as well, with the same immense love with which he loves us. When we see that, the only way we can respond is by loving others as God loves them, in spite of all their faults and imperfections and sinfulness. And in that way, whatever anger or resentment or hatred toward others that is in our hearts is melted away and disappears. We are able to forgive others and care for them rather than rejecting them. Instead of condemning others, we seek to understand them, knowing that like us they are sinners who need help, forgiveness, and compassion, as Jesus taught. To see others as objects of God's unconditional love means that they must be objects of our unconditional love as well.

And when we are able to love and forgive others in that way, and all of our anger and resentment toward others is taken away, we are healed. We stop hurting inside. We can never be whole when we are full of bitterness and negative feelings. But when we look at the cross and see that God's unconditional love is for all people, we see our relationships with others in a new light. They too are persons for whom Jesus lived and died. And once we are enabled to love them by seeing them in that way, we can be healed. Because what heals us is not only *receiving* love, but *giving* love. Only when you are able to love others can you be whole.

During this Lenten season, as we continue to look upon the cross, let us always see there God's love for us and for all people, a love that accepts all of us as we are, no matter what. And as we become aware of that love and are filled with it, we will be changed in the way God wants us to be changed. Because the only thing that can ever change people is love. Condemnation, rejection, censure—that can change people's behavior, but it cannot change their hearts. Only love can change hearts. As we gaze upon the cross this Lent, like the Israelites gazed upon the bronze serpent on a pole, may you and I be truly healed and transformed by recalling and experiencing the love of God and Christ for us and the world of which that cross is the greatest symbol. Amen.