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St. John's Episcopal Church
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It is never easy to face the cross. And yet, when we ask ourselves why this is so, we struggle. We struggle to articulate an answer that truly captures what we see...what we believe...and what we feel when we gaze upon the cross.

Why does the cross of Jesus affect us in this way? Is it the starkness, the coarse ugliness of the wood? Is it the imagined weight of the nails and the amount of force that must have been required from the hammer's blow? Is it the fact that we have stripped the cross of its ornate decorations and are now trying to imagine the crucified Jesus hanging upon it? Or is it because our 21st century minds have difficulty understanding what this 1st century event means?

Why does the cross affect us so? And why do we struggle when trying to answer that question?

While praying about my own response to my own question, a certain childhood memory surfaced in my mind. It was a memory of the place where I first learned how to swim. The name of that place was "Aquarena Springs". It was a theme park of sorts. It had shops; it had glass-bottomed boats through which you could see all kinds of fish, mostly oversized goldfish. There was even a chicken that would play a toy piano for 25 cents!

Aquarena Springs also had two pools; a big pool and a small wading pool. I did, eventually, learn how to swim in the large pool; but it took awhile. And the reason why

was because I had become very comfortable in the smaller pool. In the beginning, there had been a couple of scary moments; moments when my mother had to rush into the wading pool and put me back on my feet because I had lost my footing and panicked. So I knew what it felt like to struggle! I knew, even at a young age, what it was like not to be in control! And I learned that I didn't like that feeling. I didn't like that feeling at all. So I mastered the small pool and pretended that the larger one didn't even exist. For I knew that once I stepped into that big pool, I would be stepping into waters far beyond my ability to control.

Likewise, some people who look at Jesus' cross are much more comfortable viewing it from the wading pool. And why? Because we're safe. We know that when we stay in the wading pool, we're safe. We remain in control of our situation, our thoughts, and our emotions. And best of all, being in control means that we won't need to be rescued because we have absolutely no intention in going into waters that are over our heads. We remain in control.

So as we stand in the wading pool, we hear the question, "What does the cross mean?" And, being in control, we answer: "Well, the cross means that Jesus died for us; it means that he died for our sins." All right; and what does that mean? "Well, that means that God loves us ~ and that God sent Jesus to die for us ~ to die for our sins on the cross." But what does that mean? "Well, it's too sad to talk about, really. It's so sad to talk of Jesus dying...that way...dying for me...dying for us...dying for our sins...dying because he loves us."

We've therefore done it. We answered the question and we remained in control.

However, I want to submit to you that viewing the cross from a wading pool is not a vantage point which serves us well. It is not a vantage point which serves the Christian understanding of the cross well. In fact, if we feel at all comfortable with whatever vantage point from which we view the cross; if we indeed feel as if we are in control of our situation, our thoughts, and our emotions; then we are most certainly not where God wants us to be this day. Because Good Friday is not a day in which God wants us to have control. This is not a day in which God wants us to feel as if we are in control! If anything, this is a day in which God wants us to relinquish control. This is a day in which God wants us to struggle, to flounder and to believe that we are in certain danger of sinking to the bottom! Good Friday is a day in which God wants us to relinquish complete control so that finally, perhaps for the very first time in our lives, we can know what it is like to rely fully upon God.

The Germans, I recently learned, have a saying: "Trust is good, but control is better." Although the phrase sounds cynical, it communicates a profound truth. It communicates the nature of humankind's rebellious relationship with God. We trust God ~ but, at the same time, we want to control God. We trust that God will save us ~ but we want to be able to control our situation to make sure that happens. Human sin, therefore, has been defined as humanity's constant attempt to bring under control that which humanity is not qualified to control.

In the story of creation, God put humankind within certain boundaries. And those boundaries defined for us our special place in God's creation! We were so near to God as his beloved creatures ~ yet, because of our desire for control, we were not content to act as God's privileged creatures. Being created in the image of God, being created in communication with God, being created as dependent upon God was not seen as humanity's treasure. Instead, it was seen as a deficiency. As our deficiency! As our deficiency that must be overcome! As a result, humankind has forever been seeking powers which are reserved only for God. Humankind has been continually trying to reduce God to its level of control.

The theologian Karl Barth once wrote that the hidden sinful desire of every human heart is the desire to use God to serve one's own purposes. The prophets of the Old Testament, when preaching to the people, pointed to this sin, over and over and over. During the time of the prophets, the people of God did not just desire God, they desired to possess God! They desired to have God for their own use and to be at their constant disposal. The rites and rituals of atonement and forgiveness, for example, were shaped by those in power into a large and very complicated system. It was a system that dispensed God's favor and God's love through the mechanisms of religious management and religious control.

This very same sin manifested itself in the Gospel accounts as well! "Jesus! Give us what we ask! Let one of us sit on your right hand and the other on your left when you come into your kingdom. Let us share your throne with you!" "Jesus! Tell us what we

want to know! Are you restoring the kingdom of Israel now and, if not now, when?"

"Jesus! Stop this talking about death and dying! This will never happen to you! I won't let it happen to you!" Control: the need of control; the desire of control; the sin of control.

This brings us back, then, to my original question: Why does the cross affect us? And why do we struggle when trying to answer that question?

The cross affects us because it convicts us. The cross convicts us of our heart's hidden desire to control God. It fully exposes that desire, that sin of wanting to maintain or keep just a modicum of control. The cross affects us because it demands our acknowledgement that we need God's forgiveness in order to live. And we know, do we not, that when we acknowledge that need ~ and when we do, in fact, ask God for His forgiveness ~ we are, at that very moment, renouncing all control of our life. At that moment, when we ask God for His mercy ~ we are relinquishing complete control of our fate. We are placing the entirety of our eternal lives squarely into the hands of God; a God whom we cannot control.

Some people find that prospect rather terrifying. And that's why they stay in the wading pool. If they can keep their understanding of the cross in water that comes up only to their knees, the cross remains in their control. And remember, being in control means that they don't need to be rescued.

That is why I believe that struggling is a good thing. If we find ourselves struggling when trying to answer the question of what the cross means to us, that's a very, very

good thing! Because it's a sign! It's a sign that we are moving from away a wading pool understanding of the cross and are beginning to enter the bigger pool; the much larger pool that contains the waters of our baptism.

For as we know, baptismal waters are not waters in which we stick our toes. Baptismal waters are way, way over our heads! We do not stand in baptismal waters and survey the world. We are immersed in baptismal waters ~ and in those waters, we survey the cross. In baptismal waters, we are baptized into the death of Jesus Christ! We die with him! And we do so, because God in His mercy, through those very same waters, wants to raise us up so that we may share in Christ's resurrection.

When we confess our dependence upon the cross, we confess our dependence upon God. When we confess our dependence upon God, we relinquish our need to control God. And when we relinquish our need to control God, our lives become fully open so that God can take full control of us.

Don't be afraid, therefore, to struggle with the cross today. Don't be afraid of struggling with your thoughts, your emotions, and your individual situations as you meditate upon the cross's meaning in your life. For it is precisely through that struggle that the Holy Spirit is trying to wrestle away from us the control that we are trying to hold onto.

Let the baptismal waters rise above your head; completely surrender yourself this day to the tender mercy of God's love; and come Easter morning, let God's love raise your heart to heights which you have never before experienced.

We glory in your cross, O Lord, and praise and glorify your holy resurrection; for by virtue of your cross, joy has indeed come to us...and to the whole world. Amen.