

A Sermon by the Rev. Jeffrey A. Packard	Prepared for the congregation of Christ Episcopal Church, Spotsylvania, VA
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The Standard of Love

In the ancient world there were many gods. Each one seemed to represent some universal truth, some eternal concept or ideal. People would pray or sacrifice to different gods depending on what they wanted. Each nation had their own set of gods. Not that they saw it as different religions, but more like each nation or people was in service to their own gods. What made Israel unique among ancient peoples was their insistence on the existence of one God, a God who was responsible for everything from creation itself to the finest detail of everyday life. The other thing that made Israel different was the fact that their God had these very particular interactions with his people. He was not the god who made it rain on my crops every spring. He was the God who had led my people out of bondage in Egypt and into the land that had been promised to my ancestor Abraham. There was a very particular and specific historical relationship that the God of Israel had with his people, not just disembodied concepts or ideals. He was much more about being relational—entering into a covenant with his people, demanding their loyalty, and promising to be with them whenever they needed him. This very specificity is what made Israel and their God stand out in the ancient world. It is also what led to the expectation of a Messiah, one who was anointed by God to do some great task, to lead God’s people out of slavery just as Moses had done, or to bring them back from their exile into a closer more intimate relationship with God. This was how God had acted in the past, and it was exactly what the people were expecting to happen again.

God, this eternal and universal being, fulfilled their expectation, but he did so in a way that was new and unprecedented. God took the idea of historic specificity to the extreme and

entered into human history himself. This God with whom the people had had an intimate and exclusive relationship suddenly was in their midst, speaking with them and teaching them about his commandments first hand. Behind all of the commandments that God had given his people was the universal and eternal concept of love. Love is indeed a powerful and meaningful concept. It is the very heart of the covenant that God had established with his people. It is the very foundation upon which God had set all human relations. But there is a limitation with universal and eternal concepts or ideals. Human beings, by nature, have trouble relating to them and translating them into everyday actions. We find it easy to argue with the commandment to love God and our neighbor as ourselves. We become lawyers, parsing out exactly how that love is to be given, or withheld. We rationalize and we create complex systems that in the end let us off the hook with regards to our responsibility to love. What is lacking is content in this vague admonition to love. What is needed is a specific example.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is really just one big specific example of what God has been talking about all along. In the center of that story stands the cross. The cross of Christ removes any rationalization or excuse from our religious system. It gives content to the commandment to love one another as Jesus loved us. We continue to parse. We continue to argue. But the cross confronts us any time we step onto that shaking ground. It stands as a reminder, an anchor to our faithless wanderings. It constantly calls us back to a love that is not centered on self, a love that is self-giving, self-emptying, self-sacrificing. Jesus gives us the example while at the same time giving us the ability to follow his example. His obedient submission to death on the cross gave us the freedom to be God's people in the world, because we no longer have to fear Sin, or the effects of Sin: death.

The beauty of having such a powerful and provocative story, such as the passion of Jesus, at the center of our faith is that we are invited to become part of the story. We remember this story tonight, not just because we are thankful for the gifts that the cross of Christ has given us. We remember the story, and we make our devotions to the cross, because we are drawn into the story, invited to become part of it. We find ourselves in the passion story perhaps as members of the fickle crowds, or part of the Sanhedrin. Maybe we identify with Judas, or Peter, or Pilate. We discover again and again that we are part of the story that led Jesus to the cross, but we must also remember that we are part of the continuing story of the People of the Cross. If we only wallow in guilt and shame, then we've missed the point of the story. Jesus died, once for all, so we don't have to do that. The larger story here is about how God continues to work through the specificity of our lives. We are called daily to take up our cross and follow Jesus. We have many opportunities to lay down our lives in service to God. That may not mean literally dying, as the martyrs did and still do, but we lay down our lives any time we put others before ourselves.

God continues to work in human history. God continues to relate to his people in intimate ways. God continues to tell the story of love, that universal and eternal concept, in specific and finite ways. To follow Jesus we must continually seek in our own lives the messy and imperfect ways that we can live the truth of the cross. If we ever wander, if we ever find ourselves at odds with the beauty and the horror of the cross of Christ, we must return again to the story, and remind ourselves of the content of Jesus' commandment to love.

We hold up the cross. We gather around it. We draw strength and inspiration from it. The cross of Christ is our standard of love.

Amen.