

# The Cross at the Heart of Life

—*Samuel P. Rose sermon, June 10, 1925, as found in* The New Outlook*, vol. 1, no. 2 (June 17, 1925*

*(Note: We have bolded some sections of this sermon that we felt were particularly pertinent as we reflect on God’s call to The United Church of Canada at this time in our life as a church.)*

Wisely to suggest the significance of the present celebration of the Lord’s Supper, in light of the dramatic and epochal event which has brought us together, is a task so difficult and delicate that even an apostle might be pardoned for hesitancy in undertaking it. And yet, to this serious responsibility, I am committed this morning. It is only in the hope that the request to which I now respond interprets for me the will of the Master Himself that I find courage thus to stand before you. Pray for me, that I may speak in His spirit, and interpret his mind, in whose holy name we are now assembled.

The Scripture just read has for some time seemed to me the most satisfactory statement of what one might call the philosophy of the Cross, which even the New Testament itself contains. In this passage, our Lord declares two tremendously important truths. First, that the way of the Cross was for him the only way of true self-realization and self-expression, that to refuse it would be to lose his life.

Second, that apart from the Cross, he could not fulfill the high purpose of His advent.

The first of these doctrines is taught in verses 24-25. “Except a grain of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth by itself alone; but if it die, it beareth much fruit. He that loveth his life loseth it; and he that hateth his life in this world shall keep it unto eternal life.” Let us be daring enough to ask the question, If Jesus had refused the Cross, what would have followed? This, surely, amongst other things: He would never have arrived at the full measure of his own self-development, His name would not have descended to us as the name above all names to be held in everlasting remembrance, no gathering like the present would ever have occurred in the history of the race. It was because he chose the Cross—meaning by that phrase not simply nor chiefly a way of dying, but more emphatically a spirit, a purpose, a way of living—it was because he chose the Cross as His own highest, nay rather His only good, that He lives and reigns in heaven and upon earth today.

**Jesus did not discover the law of the Cross, nor was he the first to practice it, though never before nor since has it been obeyed so perfectly and with such glorious consequences. The law is universal. The grain of wheat that does not die perishes. The life governed by the maxim “safety first” is a lost life. He who is willing to accept salvation selfishly for himself alone has already become a castaway. You and I find ourselves as we seek not our own but the good of others. And this law is binding upon the Christian community as certainly as upon the individual believer. Only insofar as The United Church of Canada owes her birth to obedience to this law, only to that extent that she is loyal to it in the future, may she vindicate her right to live and grow. There is no prayer so fitting to this hour as the humble petition for pardon for whatever of vanity, or self-love, or self-will has mingled with loftier motives in bringing us together as denominations into this new fellowship. There is no sacramental oath so appropriate as the promise by divine grace, as individuals and as a Church, to follow Christ all the way, for, believe me, thus and thus alone shall we find the way of life.**

And let no one suppose that such a choice necessarily involves a life of gloom and anguish. Jesus made this choice for Himself, and though in doing so He became the Man of Sorrows, we are to remember that that title falls far short of the whole truth. With inspired instinct, the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews applies the words of the fortieth Psalm to the Master: “Thy God hath anointed thee with the oil of *gladness* above Thy fellows.” This gladness was not in spite of Calvary, it grew out of it. The rich ruler who kept his wealth and saved his life went away sorrowful, reminding us of the words George Eliot puts into the mouth of Savonarola: “You may choose to forsake your duties, and to choose not to have the sorrows they bring. But you will go forth, and what will you find? Sorrow without duty, bitter herbs and no bread to eat with them.” On the other hand, loss for Christ’s sake is immeasurable gain. The path of sorrow chosen for His cause is brightened and glorified by the light of His fellowship—the fellowship of the Man of Sorrows who was *anointed above his fellows* with the oil of gladness. Death for Him is life indeed. That is a strange paradox surely, “Sorrowful, yet always rejoicing,” and yet it is true to Christian experience. Few men of our own time have sincerely followed the Master than Professor Schweitzer—theologian, philosopher, physician, and musician—who a few years ago turned his back upon a career in which service to the Kingdom seemed consistent with much ease and earthly comfort, that he might become a medical missionary in equatorial Africa.[[1]](#footnote-2) He chose a path of almost indescribable discomfort and of many forms of privation. But note how he writes of this choice made in preference to the easier way: “Yet what do all these disagreeable count for compared with the *joy of being here*, working and helping.” You may remember that in one of Francis Thompson’s briefer poems he represents himself as urgently but ineffectively pursuing “The gain that lurks ungained in all gain.” At length “a voice in him that voiceless was “thus chideth him:

“Whom seekest thou through the unmarged arcane  
And not discernest, to thine own bosom prest?”  
I looked. My clasped arms athwart my breast  
Framed the august embraces of the Cross.

Nothing but the briefest reference to the second doctrine of our Scripture is possible. Jesus tells us that it must be by the way of the Cross that He shall become the Redeemer of all mankind. “And I, if I be lifted up, shall draw all people unto Me.” It is undeniable that it was what Christ brought to his Cross that gave it distinction and value. The other crosses on Calvary wrought no lasting benediction. It was by reason of what He was in Himself that His Cross stands for what it does. But if He had refused that last step, He could never have become the object of adoration He is to-day. Dr. Fosdick tells of a Jewish student who said of Jesus: “I do not think He is the Messiah, but I do love Him.” It was the spirit of self-renunciation, finding its fin[al?] expression at the Cross which won that tribute from somewhat unwilling lips. Resisting recurring temptations to the short cut, our Lord pursued His wa[y?] unfalteringly to the end, conscious that to save others He must not care to save Himself.

**What was true of Him is, in its measure and place, true of the individual Christian and of the Church which is His Body. We shall share in His redemptive work in exactly the same proportion that we possess His spirit and are seized with His holy passion for humanity.** An eminent transatlantic journalist and educationist charges institutional Christianity with a fault, which so far as it is capable of proof, is perhaps the most serious that can be brought against it. First urging that “the ideal type of institution for a religion like Christianity would be one which was entirely indifferent to its own fortunes, and prepared at any moment to die in order to live,” he adds, “so far as I am aware, no such type of Christian institution is at present to be found anywhere upon the earth,” a sweeping generalization immediately qualified by the admission that “some approach to it is found in the methods of the Salvation Army , and the methods of the Quakers.” Whether we are prepared to go the whole length with Principal Jacks in this judgment or not, **we must admit that institutionalism runs too readily into selfishness, and comes too easily to think of itself as essential. Against this tendency, fatal to the realization of the highest good, may God preserve us! What an ideal for the United Church of Canada to set before herself, willing as a grain of wheat to die, if thus she may enter into a larger life; ready to be “lifted up,” that she may draw men [sic], not to herself, but to the Christ, who, loving the world, gave Himself for our salvation! Such was the Master’s free, unforced choice for Himself; and if to be a Christian is to be Christlike, there is no alternative choice for ourselves as individuals, or for the Church as a whole, if we are truly to bear His name.** Herein, as I see it, lies the significance of the present celebration of the Lord’s Supper.

1. Albert Schweitzer founded a hospital in Lambaréné, French Equatorial Africa—now the country of Gabon. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)