

Holy Cross Day
Numbers 21:4b-9; I Corinthians 1:18-24; John 3:13-17
Peace, Grass Valley, - 9/14/14
Pastor David Baker

“THE CENTRALITY OF THE CROSS”

*On a hill far away stood an old rugged cross,
the emblem of suffering and shame;
and I love that old cross, where the dearest and best
for a world of lost sinners was slain.*

*So I'll cherish the old rugged cross,
till my trophies at last I lay down;
I will cling to the old rugged cross,
and exchange it some day for a crown.*

*Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.
Amen*

What is the first thing you think of when you see a cross?

Is it the suffering and death of Jesus Christ? Is it the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ for you and all humanity? Is it the power of life over death? What is it that you think of when you see a cross?

As you think of the crosses you have seen, and of the places you have seen them, what comes to your mind?

Was it in a church somewhere where you first saw or first became aware of the shape of the cross? Was it in your home, or in the home of someone else, a relative or friend, as you were growing up? Was it a plain wooden cross hung on a wall? Or was it a bejeweled, gold or silver cross that you saw someone wearing on a chain around his or her neck, or maybe fastened to a blouse or shirt or jacket of some kind?

All these and more are types of crosses and examples of the places where they're seen, from the days of the early church, down through the years, until today. The cross of Jesus Christ is central to our Christian faith.

Indeed, of all the symbols and the icons of religious faith and practice in the world, there probably is not another one in the entire world that can come close to the broad recognition and the wide acceptance of its origin and meaning than the cross of Jesus Christ.

From the beginnings of the Christian church, down through the centuries to our own day, both the plain and simple, as well as the fancy and sometimes ornate and jewel-encrusted crosses worn by rich or famous people or religious leaders have been held in reverence and awe, not only as a piece of jewelry or fashion, but, much more importantly, as a symbol of the Christian faith and as a recognition or remembrance of the death of Jesus Christ upon a cross of rugged timbers between two robbers on a barren hill above the garbage dump outside the city of Jerusalem on the 26th of Nissan in the year of our Lord that we now call 30 A.D.

“THE CENTRALITY OF THE CROSS”

“How could this be?” we might well ask. How could the crucifixion, the most agonizing, painful death devised by human beings up until that time, of the son of a carpenter, of all things, from a non-important town in a non-important province of a non-important country in a non-important section of the world become so central and important in the total scheme of things throughout the whole wide world? It just does not make any sense at all.

But then we stop, and we begin to think and to remember and we either, gradually or suddenly, recall the meaning of that death and its significance, not just for us, but for all people everywhere, and we begin to bow in reverence and awe before that symbol and we are drawn close to the One who died there for us, as well as for all people everywhere.

It is, at once, a plain and yet a central symbol of the Christian faith and we do well, not just to recognize it, but to honor it and reverence it . . . not worship it, but reverence it . . . wherever we may be.

And yet, it was not always thus. As St. Paul, in the first of his two letters to the church of God in Corinth wrote, *“The message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.”*

“For it is written, ‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.’

“Where is the one who is wise?” Paul asks. “Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.”

As we reflect on this insightful and incisive section of St. Paul’s first letter to the church of God in Corinth, we become aware of how, both to the cultured Greek and to the pious Jew, the story that Christianity had to tell sounded like sheer folly.

Paul begins by making use of two quotations from Isaiah to show how mere human wisdom is always bound to fail. He cites the fact that, undeniably, the world, for all its wisdom, never, by itself, had “found” God and was still, to that day, gropingly and blindly seeking Him.

Indeed, that very search, according to more than one commentator, was designed by God to show human beings their own helplessness and, thus, prepare the way for their acceptance of Christ Jesus as the one true way to God. But what exactly was this Christian message?

If we study the key sermons in the Book of Acts, we find that there were certain constant elements in Christian preaching: 1) the claim that the promised time of God had finally come; 2) a summary of the life and death and resurrection of Jesus; 3) a claim that all of that was the fulfillment of long-standing prophecy; 4) the assertion that Jesus will come again; and 5) an urgent invitation for people to repent and to receive, thereby, the promised gift of the Holy Spirit.

To the Jews, however, that message was a stumbling-block. Why? There were two reasons: #1. To them it was incredible that someone who had ended his life on a cross could possibly be God’s

Chosen One, and to substantiate the basis for their incredulity they pointed to their own law which said, unmistakably, “*He that is hanged is accursed of God.*”

In other words, the fact of the crucifixion, so far from proving that Jesus was the Son of God, disproved it completely, they thought. Indeed, even with the words of their own prophet, Isaiah, in front of them, speaking of a suffering servant, they had never dreamed of a suffering Messiah, and so the cross, to a faithful Jewish man or woman, was, and still remains, as someone else has said, “an insuperable barrier to belief in Jesus.”

The second reason that the message of the early church was a stumbling-block for Jews was that they were looking for *signs*. When the “golden age” of God would come, they thought that it would be preceded by some shattering or startling happenings. But all they saw in Jesus was one who was meek and lowly, one who had deliberately avoided the spectacular, one who was among the people as one who served, and one who ended on a cross . . . and that seemed to them an impossible picture of the Chosen One of God.

To the Greeks, on the other hand, the message of what came to be called “Christianity” was not a “stumbling-block,” as it was for the Jews. It was, instead, “plain foolishness”; and again there were two reasons: #1. To the Greek, the first characteristic of God was *apatheia*, a word that means more than *apathy*; it means *total inability to feel*.

In other words, they argued that God cannot *feel*. If God can feel joy or sorrow, grief or anger, they contended, it means that someone has, for that moment, moved and affected God and, if that is so, it means that, for the moment, anyway, that person has influenced God and is, therefore, greater than God.

So, the Greeks went on to argue, it follows that God must, of necessity, be incapable of all feeling so that no one may ever affect Him. A God who suffered was, to the Greek, a contradiction in terms. In fact, Plutarch, the first century Greek biographer and moralist, went even further and declared that it would be an insult to God to involve Him in human affairs. God, Plutarch said, needed to be utterly detached and utterly remote.

Moreover, the very idea of *incarnation* . . . that is, God becoming a human being . . . was revolting to the Greek mind. Saint Augustine, in fact, who was a great scholar long before he became a Christian, could say that in the Greek philosophers he found a parallel to almost all the teachings of Christianity, except for one, namely, “*The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.*”

To the thinking Greek, in other words, the incarnation was a total impossibility. There was no way, they thought, that someone who had loved and sorrowed as Jesus had done, and who had suffered as he had suffered, could possibly be the Son of God.

The second reason that the Greeks thought that the cross was foolishness was that they were forever seeking *wisdom*. Originally, the Greek word for wisdom, *sophist*, meant *a wise man*, in the good sense of that term. As time went on, however, the word came to mean, quote, “a man with a clever mind and cunning tongue, a mental acrobat, a man who, with glittering and persuasive rhetoric, could make the worse appear the better reason,” unquote. It meant, quote, “a man who would spend endless hours discussing hair-splitting trifles, a man who had no real interest in solutions but who simply gloried in the stimulus of *the mental hike*. It meant a man who gloried in a nimble and a cunning brain and in a silver tongue and an admiring audience,” unquote.

In other words, the Greeks were intoxicated with fine words, and to them the Christian preacher, with his blunt message, seemed to be, as William Barclay, the great Scottish theologian, put it, “a crude and uncultured figure to be laughed at and ridiculed, rather than listened to & respected.”

In summary, against the background of both Jewish and Greek life, it looked as if the Christian message had virtually no chance of success.

As St. Paul said, however, “*What looks like God’s foolishness is wiser than men’s wisdom; and what looks like God’s weakness is stronger than men’s strength.*” The cross would remain central to the Christian faith.

A year ago this past week, while Gloria and I were in New York to visit with my son for a few days on our way to Sweden, we spent some time one morning at the National September 11 Memorial and Museum at Ground Zero. It had been several years since the last time that we were at that spot, and we were interested in seeing what had been erected there and what was being placed in the Museum.

Imagine our surprise, therefore, when almost the first thing we saw this time was the most striking piece that we had seen the very first time we had been at that location, shortly after the collapse of the twin trade towers. Maybe you have seen it, too, or . . . if you haven’t seen it there on site . . . perhaps you’ve seen or read about it in the papers or your favorite news magazine.

It is a large steel cross-shaped beam discovered by some of the rescue workers two days after the collapse of the twin towers and is now one of the more impressive and substantial pieces among the 1,000 artifacts in the 100,000-square-foot underground museum.

It is striking and impressive for two reasons: 1).its very size, (although it’s resting on its side, it is still probably the largest artifact in the entire place); and 2) its symbolism.

Recently, of course, the cross was in the news again because of the dismissal by a three-judge panel of the 2nd U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals of a lawsuit that had been brought by a group of atheists claiming that the 17-foot display at the museum was unconstitutional.

All of which just “shows to go you,” as I sometimes like to say, that the cross, no matter what its size or what its setting, still evokes a sense of awe and mystery, if not of reverence and gratitude.

Truly, no other symbol in the world, at least as far as I can tell, has had that power or continues to elicit that kind of response.

And we? What about us? What kind of crosses do we have . . . at home, at church, or on our persons?

Take a look around you, right now. Notice all the crosses that are visible, see how many you can count, and then allow me to point out or show you four that are important or of value to me personally.

First of all, of course, there is the cross we see the moment we walk in the door of this beautiful sanctuary . . . here on the front wall. As I recall, when we first came to worship here at Peace some 15 years ago, that cross did not have the wings that surround it now. Those were added later and

serve to enhance its beauty and its sense of our being lifted up before God's throne of grace each time we walk in that front door.

Secondly, there is the processional cross that is carried forward at the start of every Service at which there is a procession and, at its conclusion, carried out. In the meantime, during our worship services, the cross remains here near the pulpit from which God's word is proclaimed.

The third cross that means much to me is the one that I wear when I'm presiding at a worship service or officiating at some other church event. I purchased it on my first visit to the ELCA Churchwide Office in Chicago after I became Assistant to the Bishop of our Synod 20 years ago this month and had to go there for what turned out to be just the first of many meetings across the remaining 10 years that I served in that capacity. It's very plain, but that's the way I like it, and it reminds me, each time that I wear it, not just of the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ, but also of the church of Jesus Christ of which I am a part.

The fourth cross that I want to show you and to say a word about is this one that I hold here in my hand. It was sent to Gloria and me recently by Lutheran World Relief, the agency which we as Lutherans around the world support with our monetary gifts to assist people in need, wherever they may be. Begun in the days following the Second World War as a vehicle to provide help to those who suffered from that war, Lutheran World Relief has now become the largest non-governmental relief agency in the entire world.

Recently, as Gloria and I were reviewing our end-of-life decisions, we designated Lutheran World Relief as one of the three beneficiaries of one of our financial investments, and when we sent that information to them they responded by sending us this cross. It's called a Petite Wall Art Cross and it is made by hand by some of the poor artisans in Haiti who create, the letter that accompanied the cross said, "beautiful works of art from recycled metal drums which have become hallmarks of Haitian craftsmanship. In Haiti," the acknowledging letter continued, "one of the poorest countries in the western hemisphere, jobs are scarce and the money earned from craft-making is not just supplemental, it is often the sole source of income for most artisans and their families."

Our monetary gift to Lutheran World Relief establishes a legacy enabling us to have an impact beyond our lifetimes to help people we have never met, in places we may never visit, and the cross is both a symbol and a visible reminder of God's love through us for others.

May the crosses in your life be equally as meaningful and equally as central as the four that I have pointed out and shared with you today.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen