

Good Friday message: "The Crucified God"

John 19:15-18

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The Gospel of John begins with this:

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."

John's Gospel equates this philosophical theological representation of Jesus as the creative force behind the world and life and light. The Word is with God in the beginning and is God. This prologue contrasts what has existence (anything created by the Word) against everything that does not exist and lacks the support and power of the Word (like darkness). And John's prologue says that the Word (Christ) overcomes all that threatens to extinguish the light of the world.

This makes Jesus out to be the ultimate in powerful forces. Jesus is God. Jesus serves as the animator of all creative, life-giving, illuminating force of this world. Without Jesus there is no world or life or light.

So how does this beginning make any sense when turning a few pages ahead, John 19 describes Jesus (the Word) being put to death on a cross? Doesn't the *death of Jesus contradict* any description that identifies him as being powerful or unique or the sustainer of all life?

This evening as we remember the cross of Christ, we're challenged to see in this symbol something that makes sense.

Before getting to the cross, I want to think about what symbols do. For example, a stop sign is a symbol of the law. It represents the law and reminds drivers that the law is upheld by those who participate in its restraints. A stop sign stands for something greater than itself even as it participates in the law.

Another treasured symbol in St. Louis is the Birds on the Bat symbol for the St. Louis Cardinals. When we see that symbol we begin to dream of a new baseball season, we're reminded of past successes, and we're led to hope of future victories.

The Golden Arches point any two-year-old in the direction of delicious fries and loads of fun. A child doesn't need to be able to read or talk in order to know what this symbol means to them.

A symbol points to something real and helps us identify with that which it represents. A symbol connects to our emotions, intellect, and memory, bringing into focus past experiences in light of current realities. Symbols are a power way of expressing who we are, what we desire, and how we choose to live in the world.

How, then, does it make sense that the Christian church (or for that matter our church) takes the cross as the symbol of our faith? The empty tomb isn't the symbol for our faith. A star or a Christmas tree or

a baby in a manger doesn't come close to being the symbol for Christian faith. Why is that?

After all, a cross is meant to be a grotesque, humiliating implement of ultimate punishment utilized by the powerful to bring a vile offender to justice, all the while warning the rest of us to avoid whatever mistakes the crucified has committed. Only the worst criminals who have threatened the integrity of an empire or proclaimed themselves to be like God suffer death on a tree. How did we Christians end up interpreting the cross as the ultimate reminder of Christ and what faith in him means?

Maybe even more surprising than that the Christian church has chosen the cross as the paramount symbol of our faith is the choice so many Christians make to take this symbol and ornament their lives with it. Crosses hang on chains around Christians' necks, dangle as earrings from the earlobes of the faithful, and adorn walls in living rooms. My office walls have hanging on them two crosses and a photograph of a crucifix in an Irish cathedral.

We Christians love our crosses. We can't get enough of them. Why do we love crosses so much?

Maybe Christians love crosses because they remind us of Christ's sacrifice for us. One Christian writer (Douglas Ottati, *Hopeful Realism*) writes of Christ, "The innocent one who was crucified on Calvary suffered the consequences of the sins of others." So the cross reminds us that Christ's love for each of us is so great that he willingly sacrificed himself for our sins. Christ, who is innocent, allows himself to be tried, convicted and executed as one who threatens Rome's power and the

Jewish faith's image of God. Through Christ's sacrifice, we find forgiveness. Christ's cross allows us to receive God's gracious pardon.

But I want to think more about this idea. What does it mean when we say "[Christ], the innocent who was crucified on Calvary suffered the consequences of the sins of others"? Does that mean that Christ suffers for the sins you and I committed last year? What about the sins we committed yesterday? Did Christ suffer for the sins we will commit tomorrow or next week or next year? I think the answer is "yes." As a result, we understand the connections between the sins individuals commit, the sins of humanity corporately, and Christ's offering of himself to forgive all of us.

The cross calls us to realize that we continue to make mistakes that separate us from God. We're convicted of our wrongheadedness as we view the cross. Darkness influences our decisions, drawing us from the divine light. And there is sin in our culture, our nation, our world of human societies, for which Christ dies. The cross is a symbol that calls us to see the individual and corporate sins of humanity.

Christ's cross challenges us to own up to our sins, to confess our mistakenness, and to repent, to change our ways. The cross is meant to be a gateway that connects our frail and fallen humanity to the power of the Word become flesh, the power of God in Christ who creates, sustains, and redeems. As we believe in this cross we are both challenged and empowered to stop committing sins for which Jesus must die.

The cross also helps us to see that Jesus can change us eternally because he never gave in to the powers of sin. One Christian wrote (Jurgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God*), "Jesus is the one who remains

unconquered by the forces of sin and destruction in human life. He is unconquered in his heart by pride, or the way of aggression, and by sloth, or the way of withdrawal, because in his heart he remains loyal to God and to others. This is a way of expressing the victory of the cross.”

So let me get back to the first question I asked this evening. How did the cross become ***the*** symbol of Christians? Sure, it reminds us that Christ died for our sins. Certainly, the cross helps us to see in ourselves and the world the corrupting power of sin. Absolutely, the cross challenges and empowers us to turn away from sin so that we stop adding to the offenses heaped on Christ’s shoulders as he hangs on his crucifix. But the symbol of the Cross also calls us to see in the crucified Christ the ultimate example of faith in God and faith toward others. Christ remains innocent even as we participate in his crucifixion through our sinfulness. Christ shows us how we are to live by remaining victorious over sin even as he dies as a result of our sins. Christ dedicates himself to God’s gracious, loving, eternal causes by paying the ultimate price and allowing his life to be ended.

Maybe most importantly, the cross becomes a symbol for the attitude that motivates Christ’s faithful life. The cross is a humiliating punishment. The one who is crucified is hung above others, humiliated with a lack of clothes, the life being drained from him in the most undignified of manners, and everyone around him can see that he is despised, having been convicted of crimes against God and humanity. What does Christ say as he dies on his cross? Does he protest? Does he proclaim his innocence? No, he willingly gives up his life, in the most humble of ways.

The cross calls Christians to a life of intentional humility. This may be the most scandalous quality of the cross-as-symbol. When a Christian wears a cross around their neck or has a cross tattooed on their ankle or hangs a cross up in their office, does it remind the Christian to live humbly? Or do Christians take pride in their crosses? Do they argue about how many crosses one should have in their lives?

As I prepared for this message, I was struck by the idea that the cross is a symbol of privilege for so many Christians. It becomes an adornment of those who see themselves as elevated above the masses, able to pass judgment on those who are not Christians or not the right kind of Christians. For many, humility is the last thing a cross represents. This grievous and disgusting twisting of the cross' meaning causes the believer to misunderstand the very nature of Christian pardon. The cross offers no privileges other than the right to see ourselves as responsible for Christ's death.

The cross is meant to represent the sins we have committed, are committing and will commit. Each cross you or I embrace as a symbol of our faith convicts us of our responsibility for Christ's necessary death. The cross should convict us to live with shame, humility and gratitude for Christ's way of life. "Love your neighbor as yourself" should be second nature to the cross-loving Christian because of the humble example the Crucified sets for those who embrace the cross.

In the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus is quoted as saying to all who will follow him to take up a cross daily and follow him. The implication is that the cross should become the way of envisioning the responsibility, the burden borne by Christians who humbly pattern their lives after Christ.

Why doesn't John's Gospel have the "take up your cross daily" quote in it? I think it's because John's Gospel emphasizes that Christ is our humble servant and friend who shows us how to embody eternal faith in God through the cross. In John's Gospel Jesus says to us that he gives us a new commandment that we should love each other just as Christ has loved us. Christ lays his life down for us. In the same way, we should sacrifice ourselves in love for the other.

"In the beginning was the Word." What kind of Word is Christ? He is the Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer of all who will follow him. He is our friend who suffers and dies so that we can be liberated from sin and eternal death. Christ is the Word of Life who brings eternal light to our lives. And through his cross Christ shows us that our lives are meant to be a humble embodiment of all he taught and did.

So look at Christ on the cross tonight! See Jesus Christ, the crucified God who wants to save you from your sins. Will you allow his humility to become the source of your life? Will you stop fighting against Christ's humble ways and give up your pride in order to be a servant of all?

Will you let the cross be your sign of faith?