

**On the Second Sunday of Lent, February 28, 2021, Pastor Joel Krueger reflected on the cross. Based on the passage from Mark 8:31-38, he shares his uneasiness and his newfound appreciation for the cross as the primary symbol for our faith. This sermon is entitled: "Growing the Heart of Jesus - Part II: The Cross".**

The cross. A simple enough image. Two beams. One laid across the other. One vertical the other horizontal. A simple enough image.

Enter any Christian church and you will most likely see a cross. It will be displayed in a pulpit, as is ours.

It may be a very plain structure. It may be more elaborate, decorative, ornate, emblematic, with features that represent or symbolize certain ideas or beliefs. It may be made of anything. Wood, various metals, stone, concrete, plastic. It may be cast or sculptured. It may be an empty cross, symbolic of the resurrection. It may be a crucifix, having an image of the suffering Jesus hanging on it. It may have a resurrected and ascending Christ mounted in front of it. Crosses can be of many shapes and sizes and can signify many different things.

Our cross is what is known as a "budded" cross. It may also go by the name of a "bottony" or "trefoil" cross. These names indicate the three lobes at the end of each arm of the cross. The symbolism may represent the Triune God (Creator, Christ and Holy Spirit). It is also known as the "Apostle's cross", as there are a total of 12 lobes on the cross, representing Jesus' 12 closest followers. One reference said the three lobes may symbolize the tripartite of "faith, hope and love" from I Corinthians 13. We don't know when it was made or by whom. One of those mysteries of our history still to be discovered.

Crosses were not initially used as a symbol for the church. Crosses were used

by the Romans to kill those who rebelled and fomented revolution. But as early as the second century there are references to it as such. However, not until the Emperor Constantine, in the 4th century made Christianity the religion of the Roman empire did the cross take on an official place as the symbol of Christianity. It was a symbol that represented the Church's power to conquer and have victory over its foes.

Of course, it also has had the greater meaning of sacrifice, of God's self-giving love for humankind as seen in Jesus' willingness to give his life for the redemption of the world.

But I've never really liked the cross as a symbol of my faith. For me, much like those earliest Christians, I've always seen it as an instrument of torture and execution. I think of how those in Galilee in the year 6 CE, when Jesus would have been just a boy, would have experienced the Roman's purging of 2,000 Galilean insurrectionists by crucifixion, lined up along the roads so that all may see it. As one commentator put it, "*Indeed, the Romans put up crosses like billboards advertising Caesar's supremacy and the fate of any who dared to challenge it.*" (W. Hulitt Gloer, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 2, p. 73*). It was not a symbol of faith but a symbol of subjugation, evil and cruelty.

And then there are all the ways the cross has been used by some Christians to lay guilt and judgment upon others. Or the romanticizing of it as some kind of "friend", without whom Jesus could not have experienced the resurrection. Or the making of it a superstitious, magical icon embedded

with saving powers. Or that it, with the blood of Christ stained upon it, is somehow a token that we should find pleasure in, that should make us happy. Forgive me if I offend any of you, but the cross is the thing that tortured and killed my God! How could I possibly find any joy in that?!

But I must admit, today's scripture passage has me re-thinking my feelings about the cross. To some degree anyway. Here in Mark's gospel, Peter has just announced, the answer to Jesus' question to his disciples, "*Who do you say that I am?*" He says, "*You are the Christ!*" and this is one of the high points in Mark's gospel, as it signifies the first time Jesus' followers recognize him for who he is. However, Peter and the others have their own idea of what Jesus being the Christ, the Messiah, actually means. For them, it means that he is to become their king, to take on the throne of David, to lead them to victory over their oppressors, the Romans. He must become great and powerful and they along with him.

But Jesus has a different understanding of what Messiah, the Christ, is meant to be. He tells them, "*the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.*" That didn't make his disciples very happy. And when Peter tries to explain to Jesus how this is all *supposed* to go, Jesus rebukes him in the sharpest tones, calling him "*Satan*", the *tempter*, one's whose mind is not reflecting God's ways, but humanity's selfish, self-centered, egotistical ways.

Then Jesus teaches the disciples and the crowds around him, "*If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.*" What kind of Messiah was this? What kind of teaching is this? How are we

going to be conquerors, victors over our enemies like this? How are we going to be free, like this? Deny ourselves? Take up our cross?

*"Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their lives for my sake and for the sake of the gospel, will save it."* Even though in Mark's gospel, these closest disciples of Jesus never really seem to understand what he is trying to teach them until the resurrection, history tells us that nearly every single one of them would indeed, give their lives for his sake and for the sake of his gospel. They would become martyrs, dying in the quest for spreading the Way of Christ, teaching the non-violent, inclusive, love of God.

Ours is not a difficult faith to follow. One must simply give up oneself. Now that does not mean emptying yourself of any sense of who you are, of your feelings, passions, hopes and dreams, making yourself devoid of any substance or soul. It does mean, living a life that is focused on serving others, not acquiring more for yourself. It means being willing to sacrifice and suffer, to alleviate the suffering of others. It means growing an empathetic spirit that seeks to know the experience of others, that you might know their pain and their struggles, and thereby find ways to lift them up. It is not closing off your vulnerabilities or hardening your heart into a narcissistic mindset whose only desire is to please yourself and gratify your own needs and desires.

The faith that we are called to work on in this Lenten season, is to be single minded in following the one who gave himself freely. Who devoted his entire life to the way and love of God. Even to death on a cross.

There is a paradox in all of this. As Jesus said, if we are willing to give

ourselves up for his sake, for love's sake, for the good of our neighbor, for the common good, for the gospel's sake, then we actually don't lose ourselves, but we find ourselves. By giving our lives, we save our lives. We find our true identity when we just get out of the way and let the Spirit of God, the God who created us and knows us inside and out, to move us, direct us, and inform us about who and what we are to be. Beverly Lanzetta, in her book, A New Silence, says it this way: *"Recognizing that our beings are microcosms of the divine being means that we always are resonating with the truth within us, and with a spiritual depth of knowing. This depth is conceived in a singleness of heart - a sincere and humble heart - that is a power of the soul focused on a steady intention toward the Divine."* (p. 53).

During Lent we often speak of giving things up or letting things go, things that distract us or consume us, that take our attention off of that which we should be focusing on, take us away from that *singleness of heart* for the love planted within us.

Perhaps the cross can help us re-focus our lives on that which actually gives us life. Rev. Paul C. Shupe, pastor of Lake Edge United Church of Christ in Madison, Wisconsin, asks the question, *"Why is it that every Christian sanctuary has his cross at the focal point, while our own crosses are nowhere symbolized?"* And he then makes this neat suggestion, *"Perhaps what we need is a multitude of crosses, one for each of us, at the back door of our sanctuaries, to be taken up as we return to the world of home and family, work and commerce, service and play - symbols of the call to discipleship that we have heard and accept anew."* (*Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 2, p. 71-72*).

There is something about a cross. A simple enough image. Two beams. One laid across the other. One vertical the other horizontal. A simple enough image. One that perhaps in this season of Lent, we can focus our attention on. A simple enough image that perhaps we can make our own. May we in this season, find ways to take up our own cross and sacrificially live in ways that bring justice and peace, compassion and truth, faith, hope and love to all, that we all might live. Amen.