

Thirteenth Weekend After Pentecost (RCL/A)
Jeremiah 15:15-21; Romans 12:9-21; Matthew 16:21-28
August 29-30, 2020
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

As a Christian chaplain in the United States Army, Pastor Mark wore a cross on the collar of his uniform. Rabbis in the U.S. military wear the 2 tablets of the Ten Commandments, topped by the star of David. Muslim imams wear a crescent. The symbol for Hindu chaplains is a wheel: the wheel of dharma, the wheel of the law. At one time there was a suggestion that chaplains of all faiths wear the same symbol: a shepherd's crook. ♥ We Christians do love and cling to the cross, though, so not surprisingly the universal shepherd's crook option did not win out. (Interestingly, though, the shepherd's crook is still part of the design of the Chaplain Corps regimental insignia).

Why do we so love the cross? Simple. It's the beautiful reminder that:

"...God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." (John 3:16)

The cross is where the depth of our sin and the height of God's love meet. The cross is our safe place, our refuge from all that threatens to destroy us: sin, death and the devil. The cross is the lifesaving ring thrown to us as we were spiritually drowning. The cross is what 17th century English poet, Anglican pastor Thomas Traherne has called "the Jacob's ladder by which we ascend into the highest heavens."¹

In today's Gospel Jesus says, *"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."* (Matthew 16:24) Is this, deep down, why we adorn ourselves with cross necklaces, hang crosses on the walls of our homes, attach them as decals to cars, embroider them on clothing? Is it to remind ourselves that if we

really and truly are following our Lord Jesus, we should be walking the Way of the cross each day? Luther spoke and wrote often about the goodness and truth of a **theology of the cross**, over and against a theology of glory that trumpets false victories and hawk self-serving values. The theology of the cross rejects the illusion that spiritual faithfulness leads to material prosperity. Reflecting on Jesus' words and life, Luther cautioned the faithful not to bask in the false triumphalism that the world loves, but to live in humility before God and in loving service to our neighbor – working against the unnecessary and unjust suffering of the last, the lost and the least, but accepting the suffering and rejection that come to us as a consequence of following Christ, as a result of vocally speaking and firmly standing against any value, any loyalty that would supplant love of God and love of neighbor.

I have some show-and-tell today, to share examples in my world of the cross that Traherne also called “the root of happiness, and the gate of Heaven.”² They remind me of Jesus and they remind me of human loved ones, too.

- I'm wearing a miniature version of the crosses many of our choir members have. Bill Yarnall, Helga's husband, carved it for me on the occasion of their daughter Christel's wedding to Bill Sutton, 22 years ago this past week. It is intricate and wonderful, and reminds me of Bill: a gifted storyteller, a man who always wore a smile and offered a warm welcome. Illness slowed him down eventually but never dimmed the twinkle in his eye.
- Here I have another cross given to me by a church friend who's also now part of the church triumphant. Ethel Niecke Brunkhardt was a little spitfire of a woman, small but mighty, fortified by unwavering faith, lifelong. Like Bill Yarnall, she was an amazing storyteller, a font of information about an era that ended before I was even born. During World War II Ethel lived in Florida. I seem to remember she hadn't yet started work as a telephone operator, her main career, but at the time was working in a family bakery. In any case, on her time off, she volunteered with the local Civil Defense and took shifts on the beach scanning the ocean for German U-boats. (I can't help but think

if enemy submariners had come to shore during Ethel's shift, they would have met their match in her!) During her time in Florida, Ethel collected seashells. She gave me the precious gift of this cross she created from shells she collected. We don't see Christ on this cross, but those of us who knew her definitely see Christ in our memories of Ethel's witness of faith, even and especially in the midst of adversity.

- This is what is called a Jerusalem cross, also called "cross and crosslets," a distinctive design of a central Greek cross (meaning all 4 arms are the same length, unlike a Latin cross with a shorter crossbar) embellished with 4 smaller crosses, representing the 5 wounds of Christ: both hands, both feet and His side. Cynthia and Maggie brought me this from their trip to Israel years ago.
- This is a cross from the village of Copan in Honduras. I bought it when Kristiane and I visited the Mayan ruins there with my parents and cousin Sandra a long time ago. Again, I don't see Christ on this cross, but the flowers remind me of the legend that the cross on which our Lord was crucified was made from the wood of the Tree of Life in Eden. It reminds me that the cross **is** the Tree of Life for us.
- This is the cross I use to lead the children on the Way of the Cross on Good Friday. I received it from a parishioner at St. Andrew's Lutheran Church in Mundelein, IL, the first church I served. He presented it to me, saying, "I saw this and thought of you." I wasn't sure what to think, because it's a bit beat up and it's plenty obvious that Jesus' hands are broken off. Then the person explained that it seemed perfect to illustrate St. Teresa of Avila's prayer that says, "Christ has no body now but yours: no hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the feet on which He walks compassion in this world, yours are the hands through which He works to do good. Yours are the hands through which He blesses all the world...."

For us to follow Christ isn't just to hold a certain set of beliefs. It's to lead a certain kind of life. To quote *The Message* paraphrase of this weekend's lesson from Romans, it's to:

- *Love from the center of who you are; don't fake it.*
- *Run for dear life from evil;*
- *hold on for dear life to good;*
- *Be good friends who love deeply; practice playing second fiddle.*
- *Don't burn out;*
- *Keep yourselves fueled and aflame.*
- *Be alert servants of the Master, cheerfully expectant.*
- *Don't quit in hard times; pray all the harder.*
- *Help needy Christians;*
- *be inventive in hospitality. (Romans 12:9-13)*

- *Don't let evil get the best of you; get the best of evil by doing good.* (Romans 12:21)

I hope you have a cross of some kind in your home, where you can see it every day. Let it remind you Whose you are and who you are called to be. Along with some anonymous preacher of the 3rd century, let's recognize the cross, whatever its design, whatever its location, whatever its history, as:

- "... my nourishment when I am hungry,
- my fountain when I am thirsty,
- my covering when I am stripped,
- my support when I falter...
- my trophy when I triumph.

This is my narrow path, my steep way. This is the ladder of Jacob, the way of angels, the pillar of the universe, the support of the whole world."³ In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

¹Thomas Traherne, *Centuries* (Intro. by John Farrar, NY: Harper, 1960, 28-30) in Philip H. Pfatteicher, *New Book of Festivals and Commemorations: A Proposed Calendar of Saints* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008), 447.

²Ibid, 446.

³Gail Ramshaw, *More Days for Praise: Festivals and Commemorations in Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2016), 214-215.

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