

## **The way of the cross**

John 12:20-36

March 25, 2012

How many of you wear a cross? Why? What does it mean?

We give crosses to our confirmands. We hang a cross around each of their necks as a symbol of their profession of faith, a symbol of their choice to identify themselves as followers of Jesus. But what does it mean?

We have crosses all over our church. There are crosses on the purple paraments we hang from the pulpit and lectern during Lent. There is a cross on our Lenten banner, a cross in the center of our large stained glass window, crosses imbedded in the "alpha" and "omega" symbols on either side of the wall at the front of the church. And, of course, there is the single prominent cross mounted in the center of the chancel, the focal point for our worship.

The cross is and has been the preeminent symbol of the Christian church throughout its history. There are other Christian symbols -- dove, font, chalice, bread, fish, manger, star, lamb -- but none occupy the place the cross does at the center of our worship, at the center of everything we do.

Other symbols are used in certain settings or in certain seasons -- the manger at Advent, the dove at Pentecost, the bread and cup at communion. We use these symbols at particular times even if the realities to which they point -- the humanity of Jesus, the presence of the Spirit, the presence of Christ with us and in us -- are not limited to just certain times and places.

But the cross is ever present, always at the center of everything we do. It's not a symbol we bring out once a year during Lent. Even once Easter has come, the cross will remain.

Wherever you find Christian believers -- in Catholic churches, in Protestant churches, in Eastern Orthodox churches -- you will find the symbol of the cross. When a group from our church travels to Scotland this May, we will see the beautiful high crosses carved out of stone that have served Christians for thirteen hundred years as gathering places for worship and prayer and as the definitive sign and symbol of the presence of followers of Jesus. The cross on the cover of this morning's bulletin has stood in front of the Iona Abbey since 700 AD.

The cross is the one symbol that unites all Christians, the one symbol that reminds us that in belonging to Christ we belong to each other, the one symbol that reminds us what it means to be Christian. That makes me wonder about churches that choose not to display crosses in their sanctuaries or anywhere in their buildings. Are they really Christian? If not the cross, what else can serve as a definitive symbol of our Christian identity, an irreplaceable symbol of what it means to be Christian?

The cross is that symbol. We point to the cross when we want to tell people who we are, not to the Ten Commandments, not to a creed, not to a church history, not to a record of good deeds, but to the cross. The cross is our focal point when we gather as a community to worship and the cross defines who we are to those outside our community.

But what does it mean? Do you ever think about that? Do you ever think about what it means to have a cross, this ancient instrument of torture and execution, as the central symbol of our identity?

The first meaning of the cross is as a constant reminder of an event, the historical event that made us who and what we are. The crucifixion of the man Jesus on a Roman cross made us who and what we are. We celebrate Jesus' life, we watch him and listen to him and learn from him, but it is his death that sets us free. It is his death that makes us new.

The cross of Jesus is our exodus, the means of our deliverance from slavery into freedom, from the land of oppression to the land of promise. Jesus' death on a cross changed the course of human history. Jesus' death on a cross changed the destiny of the earth, and that's not overstating it!

When you read the gospels, it is obvious how important it was to the young church to remember this single event in detail. A disproportionately large part of each of the four gospels is devoted to an accounting of last days of Jesus' life -- his betrayal, arrest, trial, condemnation, torture, execution. The gospels make it clear that people made it happen. Regular people like you and me made it happen, because they were jealous, because they were offended, because they had been exposed, because they had been embarrassed. They plotted and manipulated and bribed and flattered and lied and incited. They did whatever they had to do to get it done.

But the gospels make us understand, too -- Jesus makes us understand -- that this was something he chose, not a martyrdom, but a sacrifice, not an unanticipated ambush, but an act of obedience. He told the people gathered around him in Jerusalem: "This is why I came, so that I might go through this hour of suffering."

This is why he came to Jerusalem? Yes, this is why he came ... to suffer. This is why he came from the Father to us? Yes, this is why he came ... to die. "The hour has come," he said, "for the Son of Man to receive great glory." And that glory would be revealed on the cross.

The cross is the culmination of Jesus' mission. We believe, and we come to know by our own experience, that it is here, by this event, by this sacrificial death, that we are saved. We know it, we feel it, we wonder at it, even if we cannot fully explain it.

Somehow, in some way, amazingly, wondrously, Jesus' death is not a tragic defeat, but a great victory. Jesus himself said it, before it happened: "Now is the time for this world to be judged. Now the ruler of this world will be overthrown." It is not Jesus who is judged, it is the world! It is not Jesus who is brought low, it is the purported ruler of this world!

Are you waiting for judgment day? It's already happened! This world, the world as it is as it stands in opposition to God, this world as it stands in rebellion against the will and the way of God, has been judged ... on the cross, by the cross!

Are you waiting for the power of evil to be broken? It's already happened! The ruler of this world has been overthrown. The one, the ones, anyone who would like to believe that they steer the course of history, that they they hold sway over this world and its destiny, they have been dethroned ... on the cross, by the cross!

Darkness in all its forms and all its disguises has met its demise ... on the cross, by the cross! Somehow, in some way, amazingly, wondrously, just when darkness had apparently achieved its greatest triumph -- killing the Son of God, snuffing out the light of heaven, proving hate to be stronger than love, exposing love as a pitiful pretender -- just when darkness thought it had won, the game was over. The cross did not kill love. The cross was love's greatest gift! On the cross, love won. On the cross, love's way won.

That's the second meaning of the cross. The cross reminds us of the event that made us who and what we are, but the cross also reminds us of a way, Jesus' way, the way that becomes our way when we choose to follow him. The cross reminds us that the way to victory is by ... losing. The cross reminds us that the way to life is by ... dying.

*Those who love their own life will lose it; those who hate their own life in this world will keep it.*

That's a hard saying. That's a daunting saying, but the cross makes its meaning clear.

The way of the cross is a different way, God's way and the way of God's people, the way of sacrifice, the way of selflessness, the way of self-giving, the way of self-denial, the way of love.

The way of the cross is a different way, God's way and the way of God's people, the way of obedience, the way of humility, the way of non-violence, the way of love.

Jesus showed us the way by his life, and proved that he meant it, proved that God meant it, by following it all the way to his death.

The way of the cross turns everything upside down: everything we've been told, everything we have believed, all of the ways and means and values and standards and desires and pursuits of this world.

The way of the cross makes us see that our pursuit of wealth leads to poverty, that our pursuit of power leads to tyranny, that our pursuit of happiness leads to grief, that our pursuit of our own self-made identity leads to the forfeiture of our own God-given identity, that our desire to be our own gods leads to the loss of our very humanity.

The way of the cross makes us see that when we give ourselves away, we find ourselves, that when we give up our claim to power, we change the course of the world, that when we pursue the happiness of others, we are filled with joy, that when we answer hate with love, hate is rendered utterly powerless. What does hate gain, in what way does hate win, when it reaps only love in return?

This is the meaning of the cross, the cross that hangs around your neck, the cross that hangs at the front of our church, the cross that has stood for thirteen centuries on the lawn before the Iona Abbey. The cross reminds of who we are and what we are. We are the people who have been set free and made new by the sacrificial death of Jesus for us. We are what we are because of him, not because of anything we have done. The cross is symbol of our humility and our gratitude. And the cross reminds us that we are the people who have said "Yes" to Jesus' invitation to follow him, to follow him in the way of the cross.

So how could we ever stand here before the cross, and then march out to "conquer" the world? It is unthinkable to do what the crusaders did, to raise the image of the cross on a banner to lead them into war! That is not the way of the cross!

How could we ever stand here before the cross, and then set out to win an debate, to prove that we alone are right and the rest of the world is wrong? That is not the way of the cross!

How could we ever stand here before the cross, and then go out seeking first the good life for ourselves and our families? That is not the way of the cross! Seek first the kingdom of God!

Once we have stood here before the cross, the only way we have to go is the way of the cross. The only way we have to go is to follow Jesus. To go any other way would be a make a mockery of the cross and to betray Jesus all over again.

There is a part of this morning's scripture lesson that confuses me. It begins by reporting that some Greeks, foreigners, non-Jews, were looking for Jesus. Apparently they had heard of Jesus and wanted to meet him, so they talked to Philip and Philip talked to Andrew, and Philip and Andrew both talked to Jesus. And this was Jesus' answer:

*The hour has now come for the Son of Man to receive great glory. I am telling you the truth: a grain of wheat remains no more than a single grain unless it is dropped into the ground and dies. If it does die, then it produces many grains. Those who love their own life will lose it; those who hate their own life in this world will keep it for life eternal. Whoever wants to serve me must follow me ...*

But that's no answer to their question! Can the Greeks come see you or not? Jesus simply doesn't acknowledge their request. He doesn't answer their question. Or does he?

*When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to me.*

When Jesus is lifted up from the earth, when he is lifted up from the earth hanging from a wooden cross, he will draw everyone to him. Everyone will see him. Everyone will see the glory of his way. Everyone will be drawn to him. Everyone will come to him ... including these Greeks!

Including us! We, too, are drawn to him, here, at the cross. We come to the foot of the cross and it is there we find him. It is there under the shadow of his dying that we find life, and it is there in the way of the cross that we find our way.