

LOOKING TO THE CROSS

We can look almost anywhere today and see a cross – around someone’s neck, a tattoo, a decal in a car window or on a bumper sticker. It appears to be a “fashionable” piece of jewelry whether one knows its meaning or doesn’t have a clue. Sadly on the news we have been reminded anew the horror of its use as a means to torture and execute by terrorists.

As disciples and followers of Christ what does the cross mean for us? During lent many of the bulletin covers have a cross on them in solemn depiction or with Easter in triumphant glory. We have marked our foreheads with ashes in the sign of the cross. There is a cross atop our steeple, in front us behind the altar. In the Methodist logo sits a cross and a descending two part flame. The logo's birth followed the union of two denominations in 1968: the Methodist church and the Evangelical United Brethren Church. A traditional symbol—the cross—was linked with a single flame with dual tongues of fire. It relates the United Methodist Church to God through Christ (cross) and the Holy Spirit (flame).

The flame is a reminder of Pentecost when witnesses were unified by the power of the Holy Spirit and saw "tongues, as of fire" (acts 2:3). The elements of the logo also remind us of a transforming moment in the life of Methodism's founder, John Wesley, when he sensed God's presence and felt his heart "strangely warmed. " The two tongues of a single flame may also be understood to represent the union of two denominations.

We can likely say that at some time, somewhere, in some form **we will see** a cross during our day. Despite attempts by various people in the public area to remove the symbol; the cross persists in being in view in many forms and place.

When you “look” to the cross, what do you see, what meaning does it carry for you, if any? Do you think about the “work” that has been done on the cross? Is there a personal attachment for you?

Unless there is a relationship with Jesus the cross really is foolishness as is written in First Corinthians. A cartoon has been found in the ruins of ancient Rome showing how crazy the Christian message seemed to the people of that time. It’s a caricature of Jesus’ Crucifixion, showing a man’s body hanging on a cross – but the body has a head of a donkey. Standing to left of this cross is a man with his hands raised in worship. Underneath is the inscription, “he worships his god!” The people of the day certainly thought the cross and its message was foolish!

For us though, there should be purpose in our journey through Lent to Easter. If it has become meaningless because of not enough time, it is then time to take inventory of exactly what we are spending **time on** that we do not have **time for** a relationship with God and His Son Jesus.

In today's Gospel reading there is a cautionary note for us, words with crystal clear intent. In Verse 38 Jesus speaks *"every one, however, who has been ashamed of me and of my teachings in this faithless and sinful age, of him the Son of Man also will be ashamed when He comes in His Father's glory with the holy angels."*

Have we slowly let the things that really matter in our lives and our faith become meaningless to a point where we "just go through the motions"? Have we not passed on to the next generation the wealth of knowledge and experienced passed on to us from our parents, grandparents, and fellow believers? After all we are instructed in both the Old and New Testaments to be the ones as parents, grandparents, and teachers to pass such knowledge along.

What the cross means to us personally, and will to those yet to hear its message is key to our life of living as a disciple of Jesus Christ.

It is important to have planted in our heads and more so in our hearts the meaning of the cross to **our life**. In order to relate its meaning to another person we cannot just repeat words. The meaning for you must come from the heart, and people will recognize quickly if your heart is not in it! This may be the problem with the church today – we cannot convey to people the personal meaning of what Jesus Christ did on the cross. The problem is not limited to the church, but we can all recall that teacher, that friend who was passionate about a subject and you could sense it when they talked about the subject or taught it. Why? Because you knew they had a genuine love or passion for it. That is the way we as disciples must tell our story! We sing a hymn from time to time "O how I love Jesus". Is that the way we talk about Him or the traits He told us we should possess if we really love Him?

Now many will be thinking "I can't witness that way, I am not good with words" I say to you **the best** witness is not with words, but by example! On Sunday morning when we can "practice" here with fellow believers, can we be ourselves and be accepted and accept others as they are, flaws and all? Jesus did, and it is the very reason Jesus went to the cross and did what He did so God would accept us as we are, can't we do the same?

Jesus loved them all from taxpayer to prostitute and everything in between without a harsh word. We think we have a “right” to deliver an unkind word, or strike back in whatever way we see fit. One frequently gathers others to their side to prove themselves right. It has been this way too long in our churches.

A thought here, I don't really like to see us “lose” anyone here at Centennial, but if they are seeking something that is not here at Centennial and find “it” elsewhere that's okay. We will never appeal to everyone, but it saddens me if we “lose” someone because of what someone has said. Words are sharper than any sword or knife, those wounds heal and we can see it, but words can be an open wound for a long time. I propose to you this morning that all this I have just talked about relates back to the cross, what Jesus did on that cross, and the meaning to us personally.

When one looks at the cross what do you see? As humans we of course see the physical side. The cross was a **historic fact** used by many cultures on those conquered. Even today it is being used in the middle east by terrorists groups. Its shape evolved to an “X”, “+” or a “t”. Archaeologists have found remains of crosses. The cross was **horrific**. It signified betrayal by Judas, a name that carries to this day that stigma of betrayal. The process and tools used were inhumane. Beatings and floggings with whips that had spiked balls attached to its end. Of course in Jesus' case a crown of thorns. The nails, the means used to attach one to the cross. Horrific was the method of death on the cross with breathing, lack of circulation, and the fact it could take days until death took one on the cross. The cross and crucifixion is one of the inhumane and difficult ways to die that has ever been devised by man. I have a complete description of what takes place during a Crucifixion, it is gut wrenching, something that will make you weep inside and out. This is place, the cross, where Jesus did what He did for us – and for those yet to hear its message. Meaning, for us as disciples, it must be at the very core of our being, deep within our spirits and never lack for meaning in our lives.

Now for all the meaning we have just “seen” with our eyes, there is a powerful and very personal meaning for the cross. Margaret and I were given a beautiful cross at Christmas; it sits on my desk on the lamp base. Every day as the sun catches and reflects off the colored glass its beauty is enhanced. When we look at the cross we too should see the beauty that radiates from it is the Son, **S-O-N**, who turned the darkness of Good Friday into the glorious light of the Easter Resurrection!

Above all the **cross is holy**. It was upon the cross that Jesus for each and every one of us took sin, the sin of the world, upon Himself so that we may be holy and blameless before God. There is a word used in some translations of the Bible that are said to be very close to the original Greek. The word used is *propitiation*, essentially meaning a replacement for to please. 1 John 2:2 – *“and he is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world.”* The cross represents the most holy action ever done.

Because the cross means *holiness*, the **cross is powerful**. Just think for a moment, what Jesus did almost 2000 years ago covers us today!!! Sin is not partially forgiven, not merely covered up, but forgiven completely. A sin we have not even committed will be forgiven.

Now do our sins have consequences, sure, but we are forgiven! I had a pastor once tell me, “if someone tells you that the reason they don’t come to church is because it is full of hypocrites, tell them sure, but they are forgiven hypocrites”. The cross means the power of forgiveness is a fact, and with that “power” we can live a life in a way god desires for us.

Here is a meaning of the cross maybe we have never considered. **The cross is a symbol of friendship**. Be reminded of John 15:13 *“greater love has no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends”*. Numerous stories have been told in current wars and past wars of men lying on grenades or fighting against all odds to save others. It is a powerful story of friendship and “having one’s back”. Jesus did this by going to the cross; He “had our backs”.

The cross, despite the death that occurred upon it, **really is about life**. A story about how baby chicks are picked for shipping by size, gender and appearance, while the rest go to the end of the conveyer belt to die. God isn’t like that, we are not chosen because we fit into His “box” He chooses us all because He loves us no matter appearance, size or shape! In 1 John 4:10 *“this is love: not that we have loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins”*.

God chose each of us and by doing so has given us life. Much of our life is full of opposites and that is so true of the Bible, which tells us to lose your life to gain it. The meaning of the cross is by the work Jesus Christ did for us is to have life more abundantly.

The cross means that as Christ died and rose again that the life we now have we live as our teacher Christ lived and taught - *“love one another as i loved you’*. Jesus sacrificed and gave His life for us, and if the cross carries any mean whatsoever for us we will live as He

desires us to, but will never force it upon us. For if we are living as Christ people will notice and ask. You can tell them your personal story and the meaning of the cross to you.

In closing, a thought - the cross the Son sets us free by becoming a curse for us and thereby removing the curse from us, by taking all our guilt on Himself thereby clearing us of guilt, and by "binding the strongman" through His death, thereby setting us free from Satan's kingdom. **Oh, what a cross!**

It is the picture of violence, *yet the key to peace.*

It is a picture of suffering, *yet the key to healing.*

It is a picture of utter weakness, *yet the key to power.*

It is a picture of capital punishment, *yet the key to mercy and forgiveness.*

It is a picture of supreme shame, *yet the Christian's supreme boast.*

It is a picture of death, *yet the key to life.*

It is a picture of vicious hatred, *yet the key to love.*

What irresistible love.

Amen.

