

Proper 18A Holy Cross
Peace, Seattle
September 14, 2014
John 3:13-17, 1 Cor 1:18-24

WHICH CROSS?

We trace its sign on our foreheads and hearts; we wear it as jewelry around our necks; we hang it on our rearview mirrors; we sing to it and of it in hymns ancient and modern.

It was the ultimate tool of Roman domination; and the ultimate sign of Christ's self-emptying love; it is that which bridges the gap between heaven and earth; and the central symbol of this gathering place week after week...I'm talking about, of course, THE CROSS.

The Cross: one symbol and yet it's been used to convey so many different things to so many people through so many generations.

- torture and abusive power
- devotion and self sacrifice
- hubris and imperial tendencies.
- intolerant bigotry and suspicion of the "other"

And the question, on this Holy Cross Day is, what will it mean FOR US?

The Arch of Constantine, which stands next to the Colosseum in Rome, depicts the pivotal battle between Constantine and Maxentius for control of the Empire's Western region.

Early sources suggest that on the eve of the battle, Maxentius consulted seers who predicted that the "enemies of Rome" would fall in the ensuing conflict.

But Constantine received a sign, too. While marching south toward Rome, a vision of a flaming cross appeared in the sky with the words "with this sign conquer," and Constantine had his troops scratch the symbol onto their shields.

The day of the battle Constantine and his troops, though undermanned, defeated the forces of Maxentius, who, having been pushed into the Tiber River, drown under the weight of his own armor.

Constantine immortalized his victory in the triumphal arch he erected three years later in 315, and within a few short years the status of the Christian faith had shifted from being an illegal and persecuted movement, to being a tolerated sect, and finally, becoming an institution and the official religion of the Empire.

With that shift, Christians were transformed from persecuted minority to powerful majority; from underdog to the overlord. And the cross? The cross, which had been at the time Jesus was nailed to it the empire's ultimate weapon of intimidation and control, became the symbol of the new Rome—and the sign by which that Rome would seal its spiritual as well as military victories.

What followed as church structures, doctrines, and hierarchy developed over ensuing centuries was a church that more and more mirrored the Empire. The fingerprints of ancient Rome are all over the Western Church as it developed institutionally, and that heritage is still present with us today. But that church is dying.

One of the most meaningful stops we made on our sabbatical journey was in the small town of Le Chambon in the Vivarais Plateau region of south central France. The people of this largely protestant region have provided safe haven to outsiders a number of times during their history. The most recent example is the most celebrated: under the leadership of Pastors Andre Trocmé, Edward Theis and others, the people of the region sheltered Jewish men, women, and children from German occupation forces for the duration of the war.

At the protestant church in Le Chambon where Andre Trocmé served there is no cross.

The reformed tradition of which it is part divested itself of all symbols in the worship space except the Word itself. And that word was powerfully and eloquently and practically embodied in the lives and actions of the people who—without going public, and often without the knowledge of some of their closest neighbors—offered sanctuary to people whom they did not know. They did so because their own Huguenot history taught them what it was like to be persecuted; they did so because they understood God expected them to.

Our church does have a cross. In fact, we have many. One rises outside above the roofline on Thistle Street to identify this place as a Christian house of worship. Another dominates this eastern wall. The cross as symbol is all over the place. **What does it mean for us?**

Martin Luther called the cross the ultimate revelation of a merciful God. But it was a revelation that contradicted everything we would expect of God. Luther sometimes referred to Christ crucified as “God’s backside”—that is, the point at which God appeared to be the very contradiction of all one might reasonably have anticipated God to be.¹

“Theologians of glory,” said Luther, build their theology in the light of what they expect God to be like—and, surprise, surprise, they make God to look something like themselves. But “theologians of the cross,” build their theology in the light of God’s own revelation of himself in Christ hanging on the tree.

Writing to a Corinthian community that considered itself a cut above, St. Paul focuses on the irony and incomprehensibility of the cross of Christ. The cross is pure foolishness to those who can’t comprehend how God could possibly be present there, says Paul, “but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.”

Who would have thought up the foolish idea of God taking human flesh in order to die a horrendous death on behalf of sinners who had deliberately defied him, or God making sinners pure by himself becoming sin for them, or God raising up a people to newness of life by himself submitting to death?²

The cross of Christ—what it stands for, what it means—doesn’t pencil out in any human way of reckoning. Clever formulas will never capture the essence of what took place on Calvary; and a church which takes up the sword or other marks of the human penchant for power will only prove their misunderstanding.

Yet, for those who trust the gospel’s claim that it was for LOVE for our world—this world, this messed up, violent, greedy, self-centered world—that God gave his only son, the cross becomes the ground

¹ The language here is borrowed from Carl Trueman, professor of church history and historical theology at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. He is the author of *Luther’s Legacy: Salvation and English Reformers 1525–1556*. Reprinted from [New Horizons](#), October 2005.

http://www.opc.org/new_horizons/NH05/10b.html

² *ibid.*

zero that shapes who we are as we rise from baptismal waters and gather at the Table; as we do our level best to show the world what it means to conform our lives to a crucified and risen Savior.

God so loved the world that God gave. And God keeps on giving. And the cross keeps on calling us to embrace it, not as a sign of triumph or a weapon of just war, but as a mystery that, in spite of its deeply flawed history, keeps calling us to be bearers of good news, and agents of safety and wholeness in a world that is in desperate need of both.

Amen.