

“Foolishness!”
“Rend Your Hearts: Claiming the Promise” Sermon Series
1st Corinthians 1:18-25
March 7, 2021

Because we use symbols as a way to communicate something about ourselves, typically we want to be known by symbols of strength, goodness, even greatness.

For instance, what comes to mind when you see the image of that tall statue of a woman holding a torch up high in the New York harbor?

To say her name gives away the answer: She’s Lady Liberty. Her statue is a universal symbol of important things this country was founded on: Liberty, freedom, democracy and justice.

Other symbols that define us are the red and white schooners, or orange and black cowboys, even blue and gold logos on apparel that you see people wearing wherever you go in town.

By wearing the colors of the Sooners, Cowboys, and Hurricanes; their fans are declaring their allegiance to their team.

One symbol that we’ll celebrate soon is the shamrock, a declaration of Irish identity and Irish “luck.”

Some symbols get permanently repurposed. A symbol found in both Hindu and Navajo traditions was diverted forever by evil intentions, when the swastika became the icon of Nazi power and genocide.

The peace sign is the unmistakable symbol of something, the skull and crossbones of another, and the mythical bird called a phoenix yet another.

Symbols provide such a clear message that words are not necessary.

A little more than 2,000 years ago a new movement began to take shape following Jesus’ ascension as Apostle Paul and the disciples began to spread the good news of the Messiah.

Soon it became important for this new religious way to choose a symbol for people to identify with. They needed a symbol that would reflect the message of hope, love, and redemption that was at the center of the gospel.

The first symbol of the early Christian Church was the ichthus, or fish.

But as the Christian faith began to spread across the European continent in the 4th Century, something more powerful than a fish was needed to communicate the cosmic change that took place in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

A symbol that was more awe-inspiring, more heart-hammering seemed necessary.

That's when the faith symbol of the Christian Church became....

The Cross.

Wait a minute...

The cross represented the Roman science of torture used by the empire for the worst criminals...It was a gruesome death that the Romans used to discourage anyone from even thinking about revolt.

The cross was a symbol of death, torture, and suffering.

And yet this symbol came to be the identifying mark of faith for all who would call themselves "Christian."

You'd think something more victorious would be chosen as the appropriate symbol.

Surely an open tomb, or the triumphant Christ holding high a sword, or maybe a depiction of Jesus and the Father seated side-by-side on the throne would be a better symbol.

No.

It was the Cross.

An instrument of death became the symbol of life for this new faith called Christianity.

In this week's epistle text, Paul makes the case for the cross as the focal point of Christian faith. Paul is speaking to a diverse community of believers.

Corinth was a crossroads city, a center of trade and commerce, home to a wealthy and educated elite, a large population of workers who kept things going, and a variety of ethnic groups. Everyone knew dying on a cross was a bad thing, and a curse symbol, a shameful stain of a sign.

And everyone but Paul believed that.

Paul confronted the Corinthians, especially those who were "wise" and educated, with a shocking message:

"For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing,
but to us who are being saved it is the power of God."
(1 Corinthians 1:18 NRSV)

We read the first part of Psalm 19 earlier. It expresses that everything a person can see when they look up speaks to the power and the glory of God the Creator... The expanse of the sky, the sun, moon and stars don't need words to express God's might, they represent or symbolize it.

Apostle Paul makes no apology for the negative nuances of Jesus' death on the Cross. Instead, he writes that the Cross doesn't need words to express God's might, instead it is a symbol of God's power to create something good out of something bad.

It's the cross itself that reveals God's power and purpose, says Paul. The cross showcases the truth that what appears to be "foolishness" is in fact "the wisdom of God."

The cross speaks to how inadequate human "wisdom" is. The trouble is that we try to use human wisdom to know and understand divine wisdom.

Unfortunately that only creates failure on our part.

We cannot understand God or understand God's mind and heart...

But...we CAN experience them. We experience God's mind and heart through the One who died on the Cross for our sake.

Paul ISN'T focused on the cross as a sign of suffering and death.

Instead, it is the means by which the power of death finally has been broken.

In the cross, the curse of human sinfulness is now erased. The fact that God would deliver his beloved Son from death through the resurrection goes without saying.

The fact that Jesus would deliver all of humanity from death through his obedience and sacrifice....WELL, that is the gift to be cherished, celebrated and remembered.

It's the Good News!

The cross proclaims the story of the Messiah, the divine mission of love in action, the act of banishing the power of death from this world. The cross shows that

“God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom,
and God's weakness is stronger than human strength”
(1 Corinthians 1:25 NRSV)

After Jesus ascended to heaven the religious authorities tried to silence His disciples from preaching and teaching about Jesus as Messiah.

Peter answered back:

“The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus,
whom you had killed by hanging Him on a tree.”
(Acts 5:30 NRSV)

The tree that Jesus died on is God's redemptive answer to the tree that bore the fruit in the Garden of Eden that played a role in the downfall of humankind.

What happened in that garden, under that tree, through eating the forbidden fruit, humankind suffered the curse of separation from God and the release of the specter of death to terrorize human life.

But even as Adam and Eve are being punished for their disobedience and being kicked out of Eden, God proclaims to the serpent:

“I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel.”

(Genesis 3:15)

That is the first glimmer of the gospel.

Even as the first Adam chose separation from God, through his disobedience, God promises that a time will come when the power of the serpent, of Satan, will be crushed by some future offspring.

In Mel Gibson’s film “The Passion of the Christ,” he includes a scene where Jesus is in prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. While he’s praying a serpent slithers toward him. Gathering himself up from his agonizing prayer Jesus stands and stomps upon the serpent’s head, crushing its skull and destroying it.

As the “Second Adam,” or the “Last Adam,” Jesus stands under a second tree, the cross. The fruit from the first tree condemned the first Adam, the fruit of this second tree is nothing less than Christ himself, a sacrifice that breaks the curse of death.

The cross of Christ was a tree that bore “strange fruit,” but unlike the 1939 Billy Holiday song decrying the lynchings of African Americans, the “strange fruit” of the cross was evidence of Christ finally breaking the power of death, of taking back the curse.

The cross, a seeming “tree of death,” becomes instead a “tree of life.”

The fruit from the first tree, The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, had been a tool to aid Adam and Eve’s disobedience while the fruit from the second tree, the cross, became the means of deliverance for all humanity from the consequences of that disobedience.

The story of Apostle Peter’s martyrdom is described a book not in the Bible called “Acts of Peter.”

It was an upside-down crucifixion. Peter declares to his witnesses that his inverted position reflects the position of the first Adam, whose “fall” reversed the proper position between humanity and God. Christ’s death on the “upright tree” urges all

who view it to recognize their own inverted relationship with God and to reverse and realign their existence.

In carpentry when builders need to make sure they are setting corners at the proper angles they use a tool called a “carpenter’s square.” The carpenter’s square assures the builder that their work is properly aligned, “squared up,” so that the structure they are building is properly aligned, true, solid, and secure.

The Cross of Jesus is also a “carpenter’s square.” When we align our lives to the cross, and follow “the way of the cross,” we can find truth, solidity, and security.

In fact, the cross is THE Carpenter’s square, with the Carpenter of Life named Jesus the Christ showing us how to realign our lives so that we may once again stand in a correct relationship with God and receive redemption and life.

In the third century, Cyprian of Carthage wrote a hymn that included these words:

“There is a place, we believe, lying at the center of the world,
which the Jews in their native language call Golgotha.
I recall that a tree was planted here.
Cut from a barren stump, it yet produced health-giving fruit.
Yet, it did not produce for those who lived there;
Rather foreigners picked those lovely fruits.
The tree looked like this: it rose from a single stem,
then extended its two branches like arms,
much like the heavy yardarms that support sails,
or the yoke that harnesses oxen to the plough.”

(“A Hymn on the Lord’s Pasch,” discovered among the writings of Cyprian of Carthage, d.258)

The hymn goes on to note that after three days the two branches of this tree produced a third branch, and then in forty days twelve more branches were added. Eventually the tree grew to spread its branches over the whole world, producing life-giving fruit for all people who washed in the sacred spring the tree grew out over.

The Cross is where we find both the divine and human.

As we receive Communion today we celebrate the the mystery of God's love at its best as it reaches out to humanity at its worst. God's highest desire is that we choose to drink from the cup of forgiveness and renew our relationship with Him.

The Carpenter's Square is the only tool that can align your life and mine in the public square, the market square, Times Square, any square.