

“What Could the Cross Mean?”

I Corinthians 1.18–25

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March 8, 2015

Symbols are important. They are visual representations – like road signs – that point to a reality beyond themselves. So, when you see a road sign that says, “Slow...Curve Ahead,” you may not yet see the curve, but you know something is beyond the sign that requires a change in the way you are driving.

In some religious traditions, symbols, too, point to something beyond themselves...something we may not be able to see, but rather to sense. For some religious adherents, the symbol becomes *more than* a sign that points toward beyond itself: for them, they symbol takes on a bit of the holiness of its object. For example, Muslims regard the Qur’an as a holy book, so to desecrate it (as a whacko Christian minister in Florida did) is anathema. And radical Islam has become a highly iconoclastic faith. I read in Friday’s *Denver Post* about ISIL destroying taking sledge hammers to objects in the Mosul museum and bulldozing ancient statues of mythical creatures from the Assyrian empire in Nimrud, and you probably remember photographs of Taliban members in Afghanistan in 2001 destroying the sixth-century statues of the Buddhas of Bamiyan. What threatening power those ancient objects must have for these ISIL radical iconoclasts...otherwise, why destroy them?

Within Judaism and Christianity, the prohibition against idols is one of the Ten Commandments, so for Jews, drawing an image of God is as unthinkable as, say, creating a golden calf to worship.

During the Reformation, both Calvin and Zwingli objected to iconographic representations of saints, of Jesus on the cross, of things they saw as idolatrous. Though neither Calvin nor Zwingli approved of the wanton destruction of religious art, it certainly happened in Switzerland, the Netherlands, Germany, and France. In St. Andrews, Scotland, where I spent one of my undergraduate years, the congregation at the parish church in town were whipped up into such a frenzy by the preaching of Calvinist reformer John Knox that they proceeded down the street to St. Andrews Cathedral and tore out the “popish” statuary, altars, and crucifixes. This is the literal meaning of the word “iconoclast:” one who breaks icons. (I know that there are quite a few iconoclasts here at Plymouth, but I hope you’ll leave our building alone and stick to dissembling outdated ideas!)

In our own Congregational heritage, the idea of avoiding idolatry went very far indeed. In New England, you can usually tell whether a classic white meetinghouse is Congregational or Episcopal by what appears at the top of the steeple: Congregationalists had weathervanes and Episcopalians had crosses. And inside, crosses were never a part of the meetinghouse in the Colonial Era; in fact, the congregation I was a member of, First Church in Windsor, founded in 1631, didn’t have a cross on the communion table until about 30 years ago. (Though they did install two very ornate Louis Comfort Tiffany stained glass windows in the Victorian era...which are really out of place.)

In our tradition, we typically don’t venerate symbols in the ways that other Christians might. While Roman Catholics venerate the cross on Good Friday and Eastern Orthodox Christians venerate icons of Christ, most Protestants see the cross as a symbol that points to something beyond itself. And sometimes I wonder if we in the UCC have

our own version of iconoclasm about the cross that doesn't involve *destroying* its image, but rather *ignoring* it into obscurity. Why would we want to ignore it?

**The cross is a scandal.**...What you see on the wall behind me is the instrument of torture used by the Roman Empire to inflict a slow death on those it condemned of primarily political crimes. I know that is upsetting, both to kids and to grown-ups. And it is supposed to be upsetting. This can represent capital punishment in its most vile form.

**We avoid anything that smacks of sacrifice.**...I Googled "What does the cross mean?" while preparing for this sermon to see what other Christians think of the cross. And I found some pretty poor theology about God demanding a blood sacrifice of his son to pay for the sins of the world, which had been handed down through the DNA of Adam and Eve (commonly known as "original sin"). Let me say unequivocally, that God did not demand the sacrifice of Jesus. Period. Full stop. I will say more about the more general meaning of sacrifice in a minute.

**The cross is a "stumbling block" and "foolishness"**... Isn't it interesting that even in the first century when Paul was writing that this was the case? It's a stumbling block for us because we don't want to go there, too. We don't want to have to "take up our cross" along with Jesus, because we prefer our Christianity a bit tidier and less taxing. There is a wonderful *New Yorker* cartoon with a cluster of Yuppies standing around at a cocktail party, and one says, "I'm in the market for an easier religion." Don't you sometimes feel that way? Or maybe you think you've found it! But we are called to grapple with our lives in the context of our faith and to make them sacred, following Jesus' model. And the Latin words to make sacred are "sacrum" and "facere" and when you put them together you get the English word, sacrifice. Sacrifice doesn't mean being a doormat or a martyr, it means to offer your life or elements of your life and to intentionally devote them to being sacred. One of the ways we use the word sacrifice in this context is when a person offers their life in the service of others. When a firefighter sacrifices her life while rescuing a child from a building, we understand right away what that means. And this is a good way to remember it. What would you sacrifice your life for?

Sometimes we think the cross is foolishness, because we associate it with bad theology, as I described before, or with some talismanic power, like the ability to avoid bad luck (as if it was a rabbit's foot) or to repel vampires...at least before "True Blood," where the vampires don't mind the cross (daylight and wooden stakes are still bad though).

So, what might the cross mean to us who consider ourselves to be progressive Christians? Why do we have this life-size wooden cross at the front of our sanctuary — a symbol you cannot possibly miss when you walk into the building? If we go back to Paul, the power of the cross — like any potent symbol — lies in what it points toward. And Paul uses one of his typical phrases in today's text: "We proclaim Christ crucified." The power of the cross points directly to Christ.

Here are three ways the cross has meaning for us today:  
**First, Jesus' willingness to risk his life for the kingdom of God**, which he proclaimed. The cross tells us that there are costs associated with standing up for justice, peace, and faith. Gandhi and King knew those costs. And the cross speaks of **love** in this regard: "No one has greater love than this: than to lay down one's life for one's friends."<sup>1</sup> That's what the author of John's gospel tells us.

**Second, the cross is God's "no" to Empire.** Whether it is Caesar's Rome or modern

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<sup>1</sup> John 15.13

colonialism, Empire exists to tap the resources of one people and to channel them unevenly to those in power. Crucifixion does not signify the oppressed or the collaborators in Jesus' day...it is the symbol of Empire.

**Lastly, the cross is God's "yes" to life and to new beginnings.** The reason that you see an empty cross with no corpus in Protestant churches is that the cross emphasizes not crucifixion, but resurrection. The cross says to us that death is never God's final word. So, even when Jesus endures an ignominious death on the cross, he exists beyond death. He exists to those who experience him in the breaking of bread on the road to Emmaus. He exists eating fish with his friends along the lakeshore. He exists within the hearts of Christians around the world, who today are his hands and feet in the world. And he exists in our new beginnings, whether it is a resurrection when one discovers recovery after addiction, or new life after the loss of a loved one, or new beginnings in a new career, the cross is a symbol of hope and it is God's "yes" to life.

So, as you and I walk together through Lent, I invite you to reconsider the cross...or to consider it for the first time. I invite you to imagine how it might become, for you, a symbol of the transformative power of Christ in your life.

May it be so. Amen.

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