

Second Weekend in Lent (RCL/A): The Gift of the Cross

John 3:1-17

March 4-5, 2023

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

Question: do you have a cross of any kind on display in your home? If so, what does it look like?

I've brought some show-and-tell. Here I have:

- The oldest in my collection: given to me by Ethel Brunkhardt, one of our church friends who is now in the Church Triumphant. Ethel was a Civil Defense volunteer during WW II. She was living in FL and working in a bakery, but in her free time she took shifts scanning the water and the horizon for German U-boats. I don't remember if she was keeping an eye on the Gulf of Mexico or the Atlantic Ocean; either could have sheltered an enemy sub. She collected these shells on the beach and used them to decorate this very thin plywood cross covered with paisley shelf paper (?). It's one of my treasures, and I wouldn't be surprised if some of these shells are now rare! It hangs in the hall outside the parsonage TV room.
- This is the painted cross that hangs over the parsonage kitchen door. It's Guatemalan, is made of wood, and depicts an adobe village, complete with laundry hanging on a line outside open windows, and peasant women going about their day. Apparently they're returning from the market, because they have baskets over their arms. I love this one because it reminds me that our whole lives are lived in the shadow of the cross....
- This ceramic cross is also from Central America. It is from Honduras, my stepmom's Mimi country of origin, and I purchased it when Kristiane and I traveled and visited the Mayan ruins in Copan with my parents. It is painted with calla lilies, reminding me of the resurrection and also of one of our church friends who carried calla lilies instead of a bouquet at her wedding at which I officiated.

- This silver cross hangs behind the desk in my study. It's another gift from a church friend and has a big heart super-imposed on it. This one reminds me that, as Julian of Norwich reminds us, "Love was His meaning."
- This standing cross is made of olive wood and is a gift that church friends brought me from the Holy Land. It is called a Jerusalem cross. There is one large cross and 4 smaller crosses, one in each of the 4 quadrants created by the big cross. Usually the total of 5 crosses is said to symbolize the 5 wounds of Christ: a nail wound in each wrist and each ankle, a sword gash in His side. It reminds me of my first Scripture class as a freshman in college, with a prof, Joseph Blenkinsopp, who had helped to translate the Jerusalem Bible!

My **favorite** cross? This crucifix that stands every Lent behind our altar, and the rest of the year lives on that pedestal in a place of honor. Greta Gifford, a cradle Lutheran, gave it in memory of her husband Charlie. (Greta and then her sister, Joyce Newman, served as treasurers for our Lutheran women's circles, for nearly forever!) It's a bit unusual to find a crucifix, the cross with Christ's dying or dead body on it, in a Lutheran sanctuary, where one would expect to find either an empty, post-resurrection cross or a cross on which the risen Lord wears His high priestly robes and from which He extends His arms in blessing. I don't know the back story, other than Greta giving the crucifix in memory of her husband, but I'm very grateful for her gift. I look at this image and am reminded that, as St. Paul said, I have been bought with a price, and therefore it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me, my Savior who loves me and gave Himself for me.

In today's Gospel we have "Nic at night," Nicodemus, Jewish teacher and probable member of the Sanhedrin, the powerful Jewish governing Council, sneaking to see Jesus under cover of darkness. He wants to meet and question Jesus, but he doesn't want anyone to know he's doing it. He's a smart guy and realizes he'll come under **a lot** of criticism for communicating with, having **any** contact with, this upstart rabbi from the backwaters of Galilee, who's getting big press because of His miracles (like changing water into wine, healing the chronically ill, making the crippled whole) and who had just created a ruckus by

overturning the money changers' tables in the Temple and evicting the doves-for-sale! Not the kind of radical fellow with whom an Establishment type like Nicodemus wants to be associated.

So Nicodemus approaches Jesus secretly. Their conversation includes what Martin Luther called "the Gospel in miniature," and what others have called "the Hope diamond of the Bible,"¹ John 3:16:

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

It's the 2 verses **preceding** that one which point us toward the cross without using those exact words.

Jesus says to Nicodemus:

¹⁴"And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life."

Sometimes the first lesson yoked to this Gospel is the story from Hebrew Scripture (Numbers 29) about the Israelites, recently freed from slavery in Egypt, complaining in the desert about being sick of eating manna. They shouldn't have whined.... God sends poisonous serpents that bite them and kill many. They cry for mercy and God tells Moses to create a serpent of brass, place it on a pole and hold it up for all the people to see. The promise is that those who look upon it will be healed. And they are. It's an example of sympathetic magic: an image of the problem becomes the solution to the problem -- except that it's obviously **God** who heals, not the inanimate snake-on-a-pole.

¹⁴"And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life."

The word for "lift up" is the same as the word for "crucify": "*...so must the Son of Man be lifted up [crucified], that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.*" The word for "lift up" is the same as the word "crucify" is the same as the word "enthroned": "*...so must the Son of Man be lifted up [crucified, enthroned], that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.*" Jesus' death on the cross isn't His destruction: it's His glorification. In the Fourth Gospel, Jesus says:

¹⁷"For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. ¹⁸No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again."

The bottom line? **Our crucified and risen Lord has power to save.** One Bible scholar puts it like this:

...those who look upon the Son of Man... lifted up will be cured of spiritual poison.²

As surely as whining, snake-bitten Israelites writhing in pain and close to death were saved by God, so are we sinners saved, not by a statue, but by the loving Lord who died that we might live. By God's grace, when we gaze upon this or any image of Him enthroned on the cross, the Holy Spirit can transport us to a place of greater awareness of and sorrow for our sin, bring a prayer of true contrition to our heart, and grant us assurance of the forgiveness that flows from the cross of our Christ. Amen

¹Max Lucado, *Cast of Characters: Common People in the Hands of an Uncommon God* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2008), p. 165.

²Robert Kysar, *John* (Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament, Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986), p. 54.