

Seventeenth Weekend After Pentecost (RCL/B): “My Cross to Wear and to Bear”

Mark 8:27-38

September 14-15, 2024

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

Do you have a cross in your home? What does it look like? What does it mean to you?

Not surprisingly, I have a lot of crosses.

- I'm wearing one of them: a **gold cross**, called a Latin or Roman cross, which means the crossbar is on the upper half of the upright. My sister Sally and I found this in our mother Georgia's jewelry box. It's inscribed May 16, 1912, and there are toothmarks on it. Our Mom wasn't born till 1916, and she had died years before we found the necklace, so we couldn't ask her the story behind it. Our guess is that it belonged to one of our mother's older sisters, and was a gift for First Holy Communion or Confirmation. I love wearing it because it's a touch point with my Mom, and because it reminds me that my faith is rooted deeply in my **family's** faith, from a time before I was born, passed down through people I've known and loved and also through those I never knew.
- I brought along a few other crosses, too. Some of you have seen them before, since they're favorites for show-and-tell ☺. This **shell cross** hangs in the parsonage. Ethel Brunkhardt, one of our HT friends who is now part of the Church Triumphant, made it from shells she collected on the beach in Florida. She lived there during World War II, worked in a bakery and was a Civil Defense volunteer, scanning the ocean for German U-boats. Ethel was small in stature and great in faith. This shell cross reminds me of her and how the faith of the people among whom I serve deepens **my** faith.
- This handpainted **Guatemalan cross** hangs over the door in the parsonage kitchen. It's decorated with people going about their everyday lives and reminds me that everywhere we go, whatever we do, we live and move in the saving shadow of the cross.
- This **crystal cross** stands among my houseplants in the parsonage greenhouse window. It casts beautiful rainbows all over the kitchen counters and floor, and occasionally on our pets, when the sun is shining through it at just the right angle. It reminds me of the beauty of our Lord's resurrection and of the natural world.
- This **cross of St. Brigid** hangs over the door of my study. It is there as a visual prayer that those who enter will both bring and receive a blessing. It also reminds me of my quarter-Irish heritage. Traditionally a Brigid cross is made of rushes and hung from the rafters and by the door of a home to ask God's protection and ward off evil. On February 1, Brigid's Day, a new cross is created, and the old one is either burned as a prayer for protection from fire, or ploughed into the newly sown fields to ask God's blessing on the growing season.
- This olivewood **Jerusalem cross** stands in my study as a reminder of our Lord's Passion. There is the central cross and four smaller ones, representing the 5 wounds of Christ: both wrists, both ankles, and the spear wound in His side. It's also said that the 4 small crosses represent the 4 evangelists and the Good News sent to the 4 corners of the earth.

- This miniature of a **Celtic high cross** in County Donegal has a circle around the intersection of the crossbar and the upright. The circle symbolizes the love of God, without beginning and without end.

We wear cross jewelry, we display crosses in our homes, maybe in our cars, classrooms or offices, to identify ourselves as Christians, to remind ourselves and others of who and Whose we are. But it hasn't always been so. We can easily forget that in the first, second, third centuries, the cross was an instrument of capital punishment. Making a cross into jewelry would have been unthinkable, as much as wearing an electric chair necklace or a lethal injection charm bracelet. The cross was terrifying. It was an **offensive** symbol.

People also didn't go around openly proclaiming their Christianity in an era when being Christian could get you thrown to the lions. Code language had to be used. The earliest symbol of Christianity wasn't a cross but a **fish**. The letters of the Greek word for fish (IXTHUS) are an acronym for the words, Jesus Christ Son of God Savior. If you were looking for the secret worshiping place of Christians (initially called "followers of the Way"), you weren't on the lookout for an outdoor sign saying CHURCH. You were watching for the outline of a fish traced in the dirt outside a building or lightly etched in charcoal by a door. The earliest image of Jesus, found drawn on the wall of a catacomb, is not Jesus on the cross but Jesus as the Good Shepherd. It wasn't until Constantine became emperor and legalized Christianity through the Edict of Milan in the year 313 AD (CE, Common Era), that the cross became associated with our faith. Initially it was an empty cross, signifying Jesus' resurrection, then the risen Christ was portrayed on the cross alive, with a royal crown and high priestly robes. Only later, in the Middle Ages, was the body of the suffering, nearly naked Christ added to the cross. (The crucifix in our Holy Trinity sanctuary was donated decades ago by our sister in Christ Greta Gifford, in memory of her husband Charlie. Greta was a

lifelong Lutheran, and must have known that Martin Luther was familiar with and appreciative of crucifixes, comfortable with their presence in worship space.)

September 14, this Saturday, is Holy Cross Day on our calendar. We can celebrate the Holy Cross, remembering that in the Fourth Gospel Jesus says, *“When I am lifted up, I will draw all people to myself”* (John 12:32). We’re apt to think of His lifting up as **resurrection**, but the word Jesus uses is the same as **crucifixion**. Jesus’ crucifixion is also His exaltation, for it is the saving act of God’s love for us.

In today’s Gospel, after Peter makes his great statement of faith and identifies Jesus as the Messiah, Jesus makes His first Passion prediction. Peter is horrified that the Messiah is anticipating rejection, suffering and death, instead of acceptance, acclamation, power and glory, and he basically blurts out, “God forbid!” Jesus now further educates His followers by telling them not only will **He** be picking up a cross, but **they’ll** have their own to bear:

“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” (Mark 8:34b)

Our wearing of crosses, our displaying of crosses, then, isn’t just a reminder to the world and to ourselves of who and Whose we are, it’s also a reminder that we are to pick up our cross and follow Him.

Sometimes we’ll say of something silly, “It’s just my cross to bear.” Or we’ll think of a medical malady or some other source of suffering as a cross we hope and pray to bear faithfully by God’s grace. But in this passage Jesus isn’t talking about suffering imposed on us from the outside, but suffering we voluntarily accept as a direct result of following Jesus, trying to be Christ-like, and doing the sometimes hard things He tells us to do, like caring for the last, the lost and the least, being a voice for the voiceless, advocating for the poor and vulnerable, which frequently are not popular positions to take. Jesus is present where people suffer, and calls us to be there, too. A

reminder of that is the current message on the signboard of First Baptist on South Street. It reads, "9-11: amid the rubble stood a metal cross." Most of us can see the photo in our mind's eye, the cross made of re-bar among the ruins of the Towers: reminding us that Emmanuel, God-with-us, was there, with those who died, there, with the first responders who saved those they could, there, in the grieving homes of all who were lost and the broken hearts of those left behind.

The weight of the cross lays on those who suffer in Christ-like ways **with** those who suffer. Last week some of us went to the Underground Railroad Museum in Burlington County. We learned history of the enslaved in the 19th century, and 20th century history, too. We saw powerful photographic images of suffering. One picture is called "The Whipping of Peter" and shows the scarred back of a formerly enslaved man whose back had been torn to shreds by a overseer as cruelly as Jesus' back was by the Roman soldiers. Another photo was of a black man lashed to and immolated on a cross erected by the KKK: reminding us that the cross is a symbol of our **sin** as well as of God's love. This Sunday, September 15, the day after Holy Cross Day, is also the 61st anniversary of the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, which injured more than 20 people in the church and killed 4 children. Their names are Addie Mae, Denise, Carole, and Cynthia. In faith we can say, "Amid the rubble stood a Savior." In faith we can work against **whatever** prejudices cause one human being to harm or kill another.

Our Lord calls us to stand where He stands, including in the midst of suffering. May the crosses we wear, the crosses we make (sign traced on our forehead and the sign of the cross), the crosses we display, remind us and others who and Whose we are. May they call us to greater faithfulness and courage in bearing the crosses He invites us to take up, in freedom, in love of God and neighbor. Amen

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham