

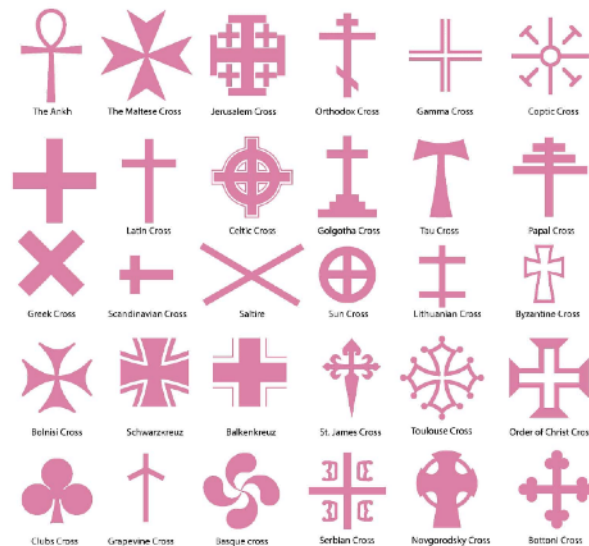
Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ

Sunday, May 15, 2022

The Rev Dr Scott Couper

“The Conversion of a Symbol: The Cross”

Christian Scripture: Matthew 27:32-42



This Good Friday, my friend a colleague at First Congregational Church, UCC in West Brattleboro, The Reverend Audrey Walker, shared with many the following doctor’s medical description of a crucifixion: “The cross is placed on the ground and the exhausted man is quickly thrown backwards with his shoulders against the wood. The legionnaire feels for the depression at the front of the wrist. He drives a heavy, square wrought-iron nail through the wrist and deep into the wood. Quickly he moves to the other side and repeats the action, being careful not to pull the arms too tightly, but to allow some flex and movement. The cross is then lifted into place. The left foot is pressed backward against the right, with

both feet extended, toes down, a nail driven through the arch of each, leaving the knees flexed. The victim is now crucified. As he slowly sags down with more weight on the nails in the wrists, excruciating, fiery pain shoots along the fingers and up the arms to explode in the brain – the nails in the wrist are putting pressure on the median nerves. As he pushes himself upward to avoid this stretching torment, he places the full weight on the nail through the feet. Again, he feels the searing agony of the nail tearing through the nerves between the bones of the feet. As the arms fatigue, cramps sweep through the muscles, knotting them in deep, relentless, throbbing pain. With these cramps comes the inability to push himself upward to breath. Air can be drawn into the lungs but not exhaled. He fights to raise himself in order to get even one small breath [...] Then another agony begins: a deep, crushing pain deep in the chest as the pericardium slowly fills with serum and begins to compress the heart. After several hours, it is almost over [...] Finally, he can allow his body to die. All this the Bible records with the simple words, “...they crucified him” (John 19:18).¹

Friends, I am fully aware of the depressing nature of this description of crucifixion. Yet, without this beginning, the conclusion of this message will fail to have the full impact that it should. I say this because the conclusion of this

¹ *Leadership*, Spring 1983. Adapted from C. Truman Davis, M.D. in the *Expositor's Bible*, Commentary Vol. 8.

message will not be about suffering; it will be about healing. The conclusion of this message will not be about death; it will be about life. In fact, the conclusion of this sermon will go far beyond being about only life; it will proclaim life eternal! And the lynchpin upon which this message is preached is the cross. The cross is the most iconic and quintessential expression of the Christian faith. The cross is as profound as it is simple. The cross is as mysterious as it is clear. The cross is as compressive as it is poignant. The cross that I have in my window sill is the primary source of meaning in my life so much so that when I awake every morning, I ensure this is the first thing I see. This cross reminds, inspires, and guides me. There is nothing that is more meaning-*full*.

The genius of the cross is contained in its transformation from being a symbol of shame, hatred, and death to a symbol of acceptance, love, and eternal life. It is this radical transformation *of meaning* from one extreme to the other that gives the cross its power. Hence, we cannot comprehend the concluding hope-filled extreme of eternal life without comprehending the initial death-dealing extreme of abandonment, torture, and pain.

After Jesus' death, many years passed before Christians used the cross as a symbol because of its prior use and symbol of death. In lands occupied by Roman colonizers during the first century, the cross would be the last symbol of hope for an oppressed people. "Crucifixion or death on a cross was reserved for those

persons who in the eyes of their captors deserved the most shameful death possible”.² That the cross came to symbolize forgiveness, acceptance, and love was so paradoxical that the apostle Paul spoke of it as a “stumbling block” (Galatians 5:11) for potential believers of Jesus’ way.

My friend and mentor, The Reverend Roger Brown, requested that I highlight in this message a key distinction that is often noticed about crosses. Crosses in the Catholic tradition have the body of Jesus on it and crosses in the Protestant tradition do not have the body of Jesus on it. Neither tradition is right or wrong. Rather the two traditions simply proclaim different emphases.

In the Catholic tradition, it is the passion or the suffering of Jesus that is boldly proclaimed. Devotionally, the Catholic tradition emphasizes Jesus’ humanity – so Jesus is present – his actual body (*corpus*) nailed to the cross. The Catholic cross is the beginning of my sermon, the medical description. Hence when one worships at St. Michael’s Catholic church, the Twelve Stations of the Cross, Jesus’ path, is devotionally reenacted by worshipers.

In the Protestant tradition, the cross has no body upon it. This is not because Protestants do not believe in the passion, no! But because Protestants devotionally emphasize the *resurrection* of Jesus Christ there is not body on the cross. Thus within the Protestant tradition, the cross more fully shifts from being a

² Ratha Doyle McGee, *Symbols: Signposts of Devotion* (Nashville, Tennessee: The Upper Room, 1962, 70).

symbol of torture and death to one being of love and life. Now, do Catholics believe in the resurrected Jesus and life eternal? Well, of course they do! Yet, for devotional reasons they emphasize the cross to highlight Jesus' humanity. Protestants emphasize the cross to highlight Jesus' divinity. As it regards the cross, Catholics and Protestants do not so much as 'disagree' as they 'emphasize' differently.

The cross has had as many meanings as it has variety of forms. For many, as is sung in "The Old Rugged Cross", it is an "emblem of suffering and shame". For others, it is a symbol of 'God's love'. For me, and I conclude with this, the primary meaning of the cross is found in its proclamation of **eternal life**. I believe the cross' power is generated by its transformation from it being a symbol of pain death to peace and eternal life.

I have promised you in the series some deconstruction before construction. Today is no different. For hundreds of years, Christians have used the cross to preach a narrative of what is often referred to as 'substitutionary atonement'. Substitutionary atonement says that an innocent something or somebody can pay for the sins of a guilty somebody (in short, a sacrifice is required to make rehabilitate relationship, to appease, the divine). I believe substitutionary atonement is a theological concept from which we need to move away. Substitutionary atonement holds that 'Jesus died for my sins'. It is a belief system that understands that it is not God's love that saves us, but rather what saves is

the spilling of blood for a retributive, transactional, and wrathful God. Suffice it to say, the God that I worship, the God that speaks to my heart and mind, is the God of Abraham who does not require the death of Isaac and the God of the prodigal son whose father does not require humiliation, torture, and death of anything or anyone to love and accept his wayward son. The son is loved before, during, and after the son's sins and his repentance for them. God loves and forgives *without* death. If your god cannot love you without a price to be paid, then something is wrong. If so, God is not Love or God's power is limited. My son is with me today. Can you imagine if I preached a sermon today whereby I said that all of our sins can be forgiven if I murder my son? That would be insidious! It would be abhorrent to all of us. If the sacrifice of my innocent son for the sins of those of us here guilty somehow caused God to love us is repellant and unethical to you, how much more so should such a concept be anathema for an all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-loving God?

There are many orthodox beliefs about Christianity that I oppose. There are some orthodox beliefs of which I am very skeptical. Yet, the promise of eternal life symbolized by the cross is a faith tenet that I do not doubt. We have the promise of eternal life. Why? God Created. God Loves. God Redeems. I believe with all my being that we are a part of God and God is a part of us. How can it be that an all-powerful and all-loving God would ever amputate a beautiful part of Godself?

Friends, *how* exactly the cross transformed as a meaning-making symbol of death to one of eternal life I do not know. How we transform after our earthly death to be perfectly united with the God who created us I also do not know. Yet, I do not need to know how. I have simply have a rock solid faith that we will live eternally.

This was the word of God. And it was preached to the people of God. And the people of God responded, "Amen".