

There it is—front and center. It's the dominant symbol in this room. The cross.

If you go outside and look at the top of our steeple, you'll see another cross, at the apex of the highest point of our building, proclaiming to the world that we are people of the cross.

Many of us wear crosses as jewelry, proclaiming that we follow Jesus Christ, crucified on a cross, and raised from death.

But what does it really mean to be people of the cross? What does it mean to follow a Crucified Lord? What is the meaning of the cross for Christians in the 21st century?

That's the question I want to deal with this morning: what exactly is the meaning of the cross for us?

At one level, that question is far too broad to ever answer. The totality of the mystery and meaning of the cross far transcends our limited human understanding. However, we can make some general stabs at understanding.

This morning, I want to start with two of the grand themes of the cross as found in scripture.

While scripture uses many images to describe the importance of the cross, most of them can be gathered into two broad, overarching categories. And both of those categories appear in our epistle lesson today from Colossians ch2.

Paul is writing about the proper way to remain rooted in the Christian life. He cautions against the dangers of following merely human thinking. Instead of following our own devices, Paul urges us to follow Christ. And as part of what it means to follow Christ, he makes the following comment:

"When you were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive together with (Jesus), when he forgave us all our trespasses, erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands. He set this aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in (the cross)."¹

Two classic understandings of the cross come from these 3 verses.

The first one is very popular here in the Bible belt. We hear it a lot from the religious culture around us, so I'm only going to touch on it briefly.

¹ Col. 2:13-15

For many Christians, especially in our part of the world, the most important meaning of the cross is that it takes care of the problem of sin. We find forgiveness through the cross. As Paul says today, God sets aside our sin, forgiving our trespasses, by nailing them to the cross.

Finding forgiveness through the cross is important. After all, even non-religious folks know that there are problems in the world.

We say things like, "That's just wrong. Someone should pay. There ought to be a law." We experience righteous indignation at times. We have that sense of moral order. We want things to be made right.

And for Christians, the cross is the source of forgiveness. The cross is God's way of making things right. Jesus Christ crucified is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. The cross is God's answer to our bad behavior, our bad choices. In the cross, God offers forgiveness and new life. And that's an important aspect to the cross.

But at times, especially in this part of the world, it seems that forgiveness of sins becomes the primary meaning of the cross, or even the only meaning of the cross. And that's unfortunate. If we only see the crucifixion as Jesus' sacrifice for sin, then we've missed other meanings.

It's like the old parable from India about the blind men and the elephant. Several blind men simultaneously touch an elephant, but each touches a different part. The one touching the trunk thinks an elephant is like a snake. The one touching its leg says, no, it's like a tree. The one touching the tail says, no, it's like a rope. Each is partially correct. But they all miss the big picture.

Thus if we JUST focus on the cross as a source of forgiveness of sins, we've missed the big picture. There are many other aspects to the cross.

One of the oldest meanings is also mentioned by Paul in Colossians this morning. Paul says that in the cross, "(God) disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in (the cross)."²

When Paul says rulers and authorities, he's not talking about Caesar or Pontius Pilate. He's talking in much larger terms. He's talking about the forces we renounce in our baptism service: all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God.

Paul is saying, God disarmed these cosmic evil powers. He rendered them helpless. How? He made a public example of them, triumphing over them in the cross. The irony is tremendous. The forces of evil and darkness thought they were making a public example of Jesus. In their clutches they had Jesus stripped naked, forsaken by his followers, and hung out to die a humiliating death. They thought they had won. But God pulls the great reversal on them. Death claims the Son of God. But Death cannot hold him. Through the death of the Son, God

² Col. 2:13-15

conquers the power of Death. The cross is God's cosmic victory over all the forces of evil and death. This is a vital and important aspect of the meaning of the cross in scripture. And it is certainly good news.

And yet again, there is more to the cross than just this. Yes, the cross brings forgiveness of sin. Yes, the cross brings new life. This is wonderful. This is good news. But there's a spiritual danger here as well.

The problem is that we can all too easily view the cross only in terms of its benefits to us. Forgiveness of MY sins. Eternal life for ME. Yes, forgiveness and life are part of the mystery of the cross. But they're not the total meaning of the cross.

Jesus also challenges us to walk in the way of the cross. Jesus calls us to live a new way, a way shaped by the cross. A cross shaped life. A cruciform life.

The cross isn't just about getting our ticket-to-paradise punched or having some kind of eternal-life-insurance policy. The cross is also about living in a new way, a way different from the world's ways.

Our posture in life is often this [hands up defensively]. Shields up. Walls and barriers up.

Or it's this [hands in boxing stance]. I'm ready to fight.

But living a cruciform life, living a cross shaped life is about this [arms open in crucified position]. Loving others. Serving others. Being vulnerable to others.

Our gut reaction may be attack or avoidance, fight or flight. But Jesus calls us to live differently.

Jesus doesn't fight the fight by throwing punches [hands in boxing stance]. Jesus wins his victory by taking the very worst that the forces of evil can throw at him. The great warrior fights for his people by taking the worst that the forces of death and darkness can dish out. He absorbs evil and death. He transforms evil into good. He transforms death into life. He does it through the cross.

So how do we follow a crucified Lord? If we're going to have that cross up on the wall, if we're going to wear the cross as jewelry, then how do we live as people of the cross?

It has been famously observed that the shape of the cross is a wonderful model and metaphor for the Christian life, the cruciform life.

The cross is one shape. And yet it has both a vertical component and a horizontal component. Both are essential. Both are connected.

Living a cruciform life implies a vertical dimension and a horizontal dimension.

Jesus summarizes the entire Old Testament with two verses, two short statements. One is vertical. One is horizontal.

Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength.
AND
Love your neighbor as yourself.

The vertical dimension of the cross-shaped life is about our relationship to God. God is our creator, our beloved parent, the one who desires a loving relationship with us.

We grow in the vertical dimensions of our faith through worship, prayer, scripture reading, and quiet time spent enjoying God's presence.

This is of vital importance. Jesus himself went away for times of quiet and times of prayer, times simply basking in God's presence.

Growing in the cross-shaped life involves seeking to be more deeply connected to God.

But there is the other direction as well, the horizontal direction. The Christian life is not just about "me and God" or "me and Jesus." It is also about "us and God", "us and Jesus." It is also about me and you, and you and you, and us and the world.

The cross-shaped life involves being more deeply connected to other people. Being more loving to your family and friends. Being a servant to others. Helping those in need.

Jesus stretched out his arms of love on the hard wood of the cross. He did so out of loving obedience to his father. And he did so out of love for us.

Loving God with all your heart. Loving your neighbor as yourself. It's not either/or. It's both/and.

That's how we live a cross-shaped life. That's how we follow a crucified Lord.