

Feast of the Holy Cross
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Symbols

A young man was having enormous trouble in school, particularly in mathematics. His parents decided to enroll him at their local private Catholic school thinking that he would benefit from in person studies, as the parochial school had promised that they would be meeting in person while the County schools would be meeting virtually. They were disappointed to find out that he would be taught virtually at the Catholic school as well. The young man attended Chapel virtually then received instruction in each of his classes virtually, including the dreaded math. The child suddenly excelled. He was enormously attentive. He worked harder than he ever had. His marks improved. The parents were so proud as that first report card arrived.

The parents gushed, “We are so proud of you son, so, so proud. What is it about this school that has you so motivated and energized? Is it the teachers?”

“No,” said the boy.

“Well, is it the way they teach?”

“Not really.”

“Well then, what is it?”

“Well, when I went to Chapel that first day and saw the guy they nailed to the plus sign, I knew they meant business.”

Symbols are funny things. They have their intended meanings. They, nonetheless, are largely what we make of them. Holy Cross Day commemorates the finding of the true cross of Christ and the building of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem in the 4th century. It’s celebrated on September 14th, but the *Book of Common Prayer* tells us

the feast of the dedication of a church, the feast of its patron or title, may be observed on or be transferred to a Sunday. And so here we are.

Holy Cross is our name day. It is our homecoming. It is the beginning of our program year, such as these things can be in coronatide. And so it is that we who glory in the mystery of our redemption, as today's collect says, we contemplate the great symbol of our faith—the cross of Christ. And with it, as Holy Cross, who we are and will be as a parish. What does the Holy Cross stand for, and what does this Holy Cross stand for? Symbols are funny things. Well, they have their intended meanings. They nonetheless are largely what we make of them. The cross, and with it Holy Cross, point us to our savior Jesus Christ who died once and for all for the sins of many. That's our intention, anyway. A Holy Cross without Jesus, it's just the guy on a plus sign, but a Holy Cross *with* Jesus, well that's a vision of the Kingdom and entirely what we make of it. So what is the cross? What does Holy Cross mean, and who are we to be named so? For some, an entire systematic theology is conjured in the image of the cross. We see our salvation and the salvation of the entire world in 2 two by fours.

Paul, in his letter to the Philippians, appears to be quoting an ancient creed about Jesus, who humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Whether it was Jesus' love or Jesus' sacrifice or his victory over death, there are many theories of the atonement. What's going on on the cross, the mechanism of our liberation, seems to matter less than the fact of our liberation, the fact of our salvation. Something about what's going on on the cross means our salvation. And Jesus—by his presence, by his sacrifice—transforms an instrument of torture into an instrument of our liberation. This amazing theology is conjured by that emblem right there—just a few perpendicular lines repeated over and over.

For others, it's symbolic of something much simpler. The vertical love between God and humanity and the horizontal love between neighbors when combined, form a cross and Christianity. Love of God and love of neighbor.

For others, however, even the religious, sometimes the cross isn't terribly meaningful. It's something grandma used to wear. It's something that used to ward off vampires in movies. I used to sell jewelry, and I remember a customer pointing to the small crucifix charm in the case and saying, "I love the crosses, but can I see the one with the little guy on it?"

For still others, the cross has a different meaning. The cross was worn, lifted, and proclaimed by those who waged war and murdered. The cross was known to those who enslaved. The first four Episcopal bishops of Virginia were slave owners, and before the outbreak of the civil war some 82% of the Episcopal clergy in the Diocese of Virginia owned at least one slave. Jesus' name is spoken, his memory invoked, his cross lifted by those who kill, those who discriminate, those who abuse, marginalize, and ridicule. Symbols are what we make of them. Some could be forgiven for not seeing Jesus.

For us, the Holy Cross must be all of these things, and above all, Jesus. It is when we embody Jesus' presence in our own lives, when we take on that self-sacrificial love that he gave to us, when we embody and represent and share this Christ with others, our self-righteous and intellectual theology is grounded in a bodily faith of love for flesh and blood neighbors and their souls at risk. It challenges our simplistic notions of Christianity and calls us into deeper love and affection and sacrifice by putting others' in front of our own needs. It challenges and awakens our dormant souls, our sleeping minds. It challenges our apathy that says this means nothing. This is just perpendicular lines. This is just a plus sign. It calls us into an enduring mystery of love between God and neighbor, and it challenges us to carry this cross to take responsibility for what the crosses meant for too many centuries. And help make it mean what it should have meant all along—God's intervention in our lives and in the history and future of the world.

Paul tells us, "let the same mind be in you that was in Christ who though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as

something to be exploited but emptied himself taking the form of a servant being born in human likeness and being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death even death on a cross.” Similarly, we are called not to take advantage, not to exploit others, but rather emptying ourselves of our gifts freely given from God to share the love that we were given freely, freely with others. We take on the form of a servant in the form of our truest humanity where divinity, that spark that Jesus showed us, can be found. And in that true humanity, in that spark of divinity we humble ourselves and become obedient even to the point of putting others’ needs before our own. Martyrdom is a lot to ask on a Sunday morning, but it's there on that cross when we see Jesus.

Do we see Jesus when we look at Holy Cross? Will others see Jesus when they look at this Holy Cross? Today we celebrate around a symbol—the cross. We give thanks to Jesus to whom this cross points and for this parish with whom we carry this cross into the world. What is it about Holy Cross that makes us different? What will motivate our parishioners so? What causes us to work and change and be a light to others?

“What is it that they do differently?” says mom and dad, “Is it the building?”

“No, I couldn't go in.”

“Is it that people?”

“Kind of, yeah.”

“Well is it what they do? What is it?”

“Well, when I see them, I see the cross . And when I see the cross, I know they mean Jesus.”

May it be so. Amen.