



FIRST
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH
SPARTANBURG

OUR SACRED SPACE: THE CROSS

1 Corinthians 1:18; 1 Peter 2:24; Luke 9:23; 1 Peter 1:3

March 10, 2019

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During the season of Lent, we will be exploring this sacred space of ours, to better understand how it guides our worship. And even though we worship in three different spaces every Sunday, it is the Sanctuary that most fully reflects our theology of worship and that mostly dearly holds the history and tradition of this congregation.

It is my hope, by the end of this series, that through a better understanding of the space and how its design is meant to connect us to God, our history, and our theology of worship, you will more readily access the presence of the Spirit throughout this place and find a deeper, more powerful, experience of the Divine. But First Presbyterian was not built in a vacuum. There were almost two thousand years of tradition that led to its construction. The key moment for our purpose today was 500 years ago.

At the time of the Reformation, the Protestants radically altered the worship space. They whitewashed over icons (sacred paintings), changed the altar of sacrifice into a table of fellowship, melted organs down into roofing material, and generally vastly simplified sanctuaries. Some of the changes remain today. For example, we have no paintings of Saints – unlike St. Paul the Apostle down the street – but others have moved back in time such as the stained-glass windows and the demonstrable cross.

It is the cross we shall take a closer look at today. It is the central symbol of the Christian faith but, even so, its presence is not without controversy in the history of the Protestant church. Any symbol is wrought with the possibility of misinterpretation and, at times, clear abuse. For example, the St. Andrews cross was used to incite war; at other times, the Celtic cross was too closely entwined with superstition. As a result, many churches, including this one, did not have a cross

prominently displayed. And yet, in today's secularized world, we refuse to allow historic abuse to keep us from the proper use of such an important symbol.

In the Sanctuary it is now the most prominent symbol; you cannot enter the space without seeing it. And that is purposeful, for our faith literally hangs on the cross. This cross is meant to set the disposition of our worship. The cross is to center our hearts and our minds. I preach under that cross, metaphorically and literally, it dangles there on a thread hovering, threatening to overwhelm me; to crush me; the burden of it; the requirement of it.

But, if you cannot get past the cross you cannot get to Christ. Cross-less Christianity very quickly devolves into a milquetoast faith, that reduces it down to a live-and-let-live wishy-washy feel-good mentality.

Scripture has extensive thoughts about this symbol, for it very quickly became a symbol for the faith, rather than simply the instrument of Christ's death.

This morning we will explore several scriptural aspects of the cross:

- the foolishness of the cross,
- the sacrificial cross,
- the daily cross,
- and the empty cross.

On the surface, the cross is a ridiculous symbol of faith. As the Apostle Paul would claim,

For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

(1 Corinthians 1:18)

Remember the NCAA football championship a few months ago. Imagine, if right after Clemson finished thrashing Alabama, Alabama claimed

victory, that by some twisted logic Alabama tried to convince the world that their humiliating loss was, in fact, the very proof that they had won! They would be laughed at, ridiculed, and dismissed as lunatics!

This is precisely what Paul meant by foolishness. Crucifixion was a death designed to humiliate, degrade, and underscore how utterly powerless the defeated was. That was why the Romans used it. For the Jewish people its symbol went a step further. Deuteronomy tells us that anyone hanged on a tree was cursed by God. So, for those in Jesus' time, the cross was a sign of impotence, curse, and shame.

Somehow though, like if Alabama claimed utter victory right after the sound thrashing, the followers of this Nazarene claimed Jesus' death was not only a victory sign for them, but the triumph of God for ALL PEOPLE.

He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.
(1 Peter 2:24)

This leads us to the second point. It was not a sign of powerlessness but rather of the greatest power, showing even greater humility. Rather than a sign of weakness, the very death was a sign of power, of true power. It was not a sign of God's curse, but of God's very being taking on our curse.

Far from being a defeat, the cross was a sign of willing sacrifice, to accomplish a victory for the very people who committed this atrocity – namely each and every one of us. Every single one. So, we see the cross for us is foolishness claiming victory in the midst of defeat and it is a victory not over your enemies but for your enemies.

Paul refers to this death and this cross as sacrifice. When you look at that cross it should bring to mind willing sacrifice for the sake of others. For Paul and for others, it is meant to evoke both our own broken and weak nature that led to it, and the shocking, willing love that led Jesus to Calvary.

As a place of sacrifice it has two meanings. Jesus' willingness to let go of his rights as the Divine Son of God and the sacrificial system of historic Judaism.

Paul referred to Jesus' act using the Greek word, hilastērion. It literally signified the mercy seat, the lid on the golden Ark where the blood of the sacrificial animal was spilled, as a symbol of the sins of the people. This was a sign that all of the sins had been cleansed and it happened one day a year – on the Day of Atonement.

The symbol of the cross was an exponential enhancement of the mercy seat symbol. That mercy seat showed the people that all their sins were blotted out, cleansed, forgiven, and forgotten. But Paul convincingly argues that rather than a symbol that took effect once of year, the cross was a symbol that indicated for all time the cleansing of the sin and, thus, of eternal forgiveness.

As we look at the cross, we should remember that this is the path that Jesus took to victory. Not the path of wielding great physical strength, not the path of self, but the path of humility and self-sacrifice, for something greater than the good of self.

This leads us to the next element of the cross Jesus himself teaches us in Luke's gospel. And be forewarned this is not an easy one.

Then he said to them all, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.'
(Luke 9:23)

We must not allow Jesus' words to be watered down; we should remember Jesus' words each time we enter this place. As we lift our heads to the cross, we recall his words, "Take up YOUR cross daily and follow me..." Not the most rousing recruitment speech, I will admit.

The symbol of the cross reminds us how, as Christians, we are to work through our own personal challenges, how we are to live as individuals within society, and how as a religion we

are to seek the transformation of the world into God's kingdom of light and love.

The cross shows us that, as Christians, we are radically unlike the world around us. Our lives are not about the pursuit of our own happiness. We live for God's purposes. Above all else, even to the point of greater personal sacrifice, we are to seek the glory of God and a radical love for our neighbors.

The cross not only shows us purpose for our life, but process as well. Not just the "what" but the "how". We are to seek God's way through Christ's methods. Too often Christians wrongly believe it is okay to use worldly means to achieve heavenly goals. Jesus' path is not through humiliating enemies and not through political power plays. Christ did NONE OF THAT!!!!

And the great irony, and more to the point, God's providence that in taking up our cross daily, far from losing our life, we find it.

No matter what weighs you down or how aimless your life has become, Jesus teaches us that it is in the cross of sacrifice, that is giving your life over daily to God for the sake of others, that you will find it. "Those who seek their life will lose it but those who lost their life for my sake will find it."

And this leads us to the final aspect...the empty cross.

Let us give thanks to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! Because of his great mercy he gave us new life by raising Jesus Christ from death. This fills us with a living hope.
(1 Peter 1:3)

Christianity is a faith
of great paradoxical polarities;
of deep sorrow...and of exuberant infinite joy;
of becoming rich through giving everything away;
of loving not only yourself...but your enemies even more;
of finding your life...by losing it.

It is the cross that encapsulates this duality better than anything else. It is a sign of world-shattering horror and death and of timeless grace. For this cross is empty. As you gaze at the cross, never forget all that God went through. But, also, never forget Christ is no longer there. He is risen. We are on the other side of history. More than anything, this cross must remind us of the triumph of God's love that promises everlasting victory and life and is God's expression of love for the world.