

Crosses, we see them everywhere. Not just at the front of churches, but even in the panes of our windows, or in the structure of trees. The Cross is perhaps the central symbol of Christianity, to remember both the death of Jesus and his life beyond death, his resurrection.

A symbol, defined, is a thing that represents something else or some deeper meaning. Some simple examples are things of nature: A lion, an eagle, a bull, an elephant, all represent strength and power. A bouquet of flowers represents life and beauty; red roses in particular often represent a statement of Love! Wedding rings are also a symbol of committed love. The circle represents unending love; the gold speaks of purity and strength. Flags are another obvious example of symbols; The American flag represents the 50 states with 50 stars, or 13 stripes for 13 original colonies.

Sometimes the meaning varies depending on the person. The American flag at a cemetery often means that the person was a veteran. My high school football team flew a confederate flag and was called the Walpole "Rebels." The Swastika (a cross with bent arms) used to have a very positive spiritual meaning in many cultures, about well being and new life. Sadly, the German Nazi Party used the symbol for their flag, so most people now see the symbol as meaning cruelty and genocide.

So back to our Cross; Yes, this symbol can have many meanings. It was hijacked in the Middle Ages to mean Christian supremacy and Holy Wars to conquer or convert non-Christians. It was also hijacked by the KKK to mean white supremacy and tyranny. Yet the positive and "glorious" meanings of the cross are what sincere followers of Jesus focus on. Last week we talked about Suffering Love or Compassionate Love... that Jesus gave his very life in total focus on Loving every neighbor. The lyrics of hymns like "When I survey" say things like "'Did ever such love and sorrow meet?, "sorrow and love flow mingled down." For our Catholic

brothers and sisters, that means having Jesus hanging on the cross, in order to meditate on his incredibly giving and suffering love.

For most Protestants or Reformers, the meaning of the Cross shifts more towards the EMPTY CROSS, there is more emphasis or focus on the resurrection of Jesus, the victory of Jesus, of his Love. Our hymns for this morning reflect that emphasis: “In the Cross of Christ I GLORY,” and “Lift High the Cross.” The emphasis is on the VICTORY of Jesus over sin and death... not the victory of war, in order to expel or dominate others But the victory of LOVE. (“Lift High the Cross, the LOVE of Christ proclaim.”) This is a compassionate love, a persuasive love, a transforming love. I recall that Rev. Martin Luther King Jr once had a sermon entitle, “Love, the most durable power.” Again, not a power that wins as others lose, not a power to keep others in their place, but a steadfast, persistent, long lasting power for lasting change, peace that endures.

Let me move on briefly from symbols, and the symbol of the Cross, to the idea of a “sacrament.” A sacrament means a holy act, a “sacred” act, a sacred ritual, that helps us experience the presence of God, the presence of Grace. So Sacraments naturally involve Symbols, things that represent or point to other things, in this case divine things. Most Protestant Reformers decided we can all agree on at least 2 sacraments as divine rituals: Baptism and Eucharist or Communion. The central symbol of baptism is WATER! (Some might also say a dove, but they are hard to catch and bring to a baptismal ceremony!) As a symbol represents a deeper meaning, so the water represents a cleansing, in this case a spiritual cleansing of mind and heart! The Bible teaches that waters of baptism also represent dying to the old ways and being born again to the new. The water, whether lots of water or smaller amounts from a bowl, is a symbol, an outward visible sign, of an inner invisible GRACE of “dying and rising” to new life in the spirit of Christ.

Communion involves outward visible things that are symbols of an inner Grace of Christ. The central symbols for communion are BREAD and WINE. Because the deepest meaning is spiritual, an experience within, we don't really need the actual substances of bread and wine, and they could be eaten in very small amounts, or as a feast. One Baptist writer called communion the Feast of GRACE. The symbols of bread (or wafers) and wine (or purple-red juice) represent the incredible Love of Jesus, the forgiving spirit of Jesus, the Grace of God extended to all God's children. In pandemic times where we are more careful with what we physically share, we can "imagine" sitting at the same table with others, we can imagine that we have "shared" or offered bread to our neighbor, even if we have brought our own food and drink, or have our own food and drink at home! I learned in one of my seminary classes that one leading Reformer in England named Zwingli, made a point in his churches, saying what Jesus said at the Last Supper over a big church feast! When Jesus broke bread and shared wine at that last supper, we can assume that people were eating lots of bread and drinking plenty of wine. Therefore the sacrament does not have to be a "blessed" wafer or cube of bread, nor a tiny cup of juice, but letting all food act as a "symbol" that represents Jesus given his flesh and blood, giving his LIFE, (love and truth etc) to the world. So... ANY food can be this symbol for us, at any time, in any place, every morsel. Next time we have a muffin with coffee or juice, next time we have a feast with fresh bread and wine, Jesus put in our minds these symbols of food to remind us of his giving his very life to love this world.

When we eat and drink of bread and juice, we can think about how they can symbolize Jesus' body which his his life, his "blood sweat and tears," to borrow a common expression, given for the world. We can think of sacrificial giving, giving one's all! When we put on the musical *Man of La Mancha* a couple summers ago, I was so impressed by the idea that Don Quijote, despite being called a fool by

many, is very much a “Christ figure.” He believed in the victory of love and the power of dreams and visions. In the central song, there are so many images that point to the life of the Christ: “To bear with unbearable sorrow, to run where the brave dare not go... to try when your arms are too weary, to reach the unreachable star... And the world will be better for this, that one man, scorned and covered with scars, still strove, with his last ounce of courage, to reach the unreachable stars!” Sounds like Christ to me!

The STAR is symbol over Bethlehem that points to the Christ child. Our SUN we know to be one of the many stars. In the Revelation to John, Jesus is called the “bright morning star” and in John’s vision, Jesus’ face “was like the sun shining with full force.” In Paul’s encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus, Paul says “I saw a light from heaven... brighter than the sun.” In Christian art, there are sometimes stars placed above a cross, combining two great symbols, one of suffering, one of victory.

As we celebrate communion this morning, let’s focus on the power of symbols, especially the symbols here of bread and juice. We welcome the spirit of one who could bear unbearable SORROWS, dream the impossible dreams, and fight the unbeatable foes, all with VICTORIOUS love.

I would like to sing now “The Impossible Dream.” Yes, it’s one of my favorite songs, that can lift me up when I’m feeling low. The song gives new courage and renewed spirit. The “unreachable stars” symbolize holding on to dreams and visions, having a never ending “quest” of far-reaching victorious love. May it be so.
Amen.