

Symbols are powerful images; they help to create feelings and actions. For those who follow Jesus, one important image is fishing, for Jesus did say, I will make you “fishers of men.” For Jesus knew that the harvest is great, and laborers few. Another symbol is a shepherd carrying a lamb, for Jesus did say, “I am the good shepherd.” Jesus knew that people need comfort and rest. And as we come to the second Sunday in Lent, we already are looking at the symbol of the *cross*, as Jesus says, “If anyone would be my disciple, take up your cross and follow me.” Jesus knows that promoting the good, or change for the good, brings persecution, and often murder.

As we ponder what Jesus meant by take up your cross, let’s admit that meanings of a cross have been varied over the ages. For some, there is no particular meaning, the cross is just jewelry. For others, wearing a cross is making a statement to others, like Hey, I’m a Christian... or perhaps a statement to oneself: Come on, self, live up to your calling, and endure a cross if necessary. We all know that the image of a cross was tragically misused, as in the Crusades: Christian monarchs banished or killed off whole groups of people in the name of making their kingdom exclusively Christian. Christian nationalism is actually against the spirit of Christ, and we need to guard against it in *this* country! It’s fine to say that the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence promote Christian *principles*, but not fair to say that other cultures and religions know nothing of these principles, nor is it fair to say that *we* have always acted in Christlike ways! We can never forget the horrendous use of a burning cross used by white hooded mobs to terrorize blacks. The dying of Jesus on a cross, being persecuted... has nothing to do with persecuting or killing others! And nothing to do with “Onward Christian Soldiers” if those words are taken literally (remember the second phrase is metaphorical: “marching **as to** war.” The cross is a symbol of **making peace**: a symbol of forgiving love, suffering love, sacrificial love, reconciliation (with God and others).

Meanings and usage of the cross we know vary according to denominations. The most obvious is difference between Roman Catholic and Protestant crosses. We have the empty cross representing more the resurrection aspect of Christ. The Catholics have Jesus hanging on most of their crosses, representing more the suffering of Jesus. Both are true and appropriate. So there is a *paradox* in what the cross means: it means both being persecuted and suffering for taking a stand for goodness, and *also* having persistent courage and victory over persecution, especially by nonviolent resistance.

I want to focus on what I would call the most important meaning of the cross ... LOVE. "For God so *loved* the world that he gave his only begotten son." I greatly appreciate the Hymns about the cross that mention Love: "two wonders I confess: the wonders of Christ's glorious Love, and my unworthiness." Another one that points well to the paradox is "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross," which says, "Sorrow and love flow mingled down, "did ever such love and sorrow meet?"

Let's be clear that we do not glorify suffering itself! There is no glory in being nailed to a cross nor in being lynched. There is no prize or heavenly reward for who is the greatest martyr, who suffered the most, who was most unjustly persecuted. But on occasion, suffering *can* be redemptive, as was Jesus' suffering; we can sacrifice some of our own time or well-being for the sake of another, for the sake of a good cause, for the sake of Love. Jesus states the paradox very clearly: "If you lose your life "for my sake" you will gain it. And if you should gain the whole world, you may lose your life. Jesus says we must "deny ourselves" ... The opposite is Narcissism, extreme self-centeredness, which is a disease (and childish way) of always thinking me first, me first! To put oneself at the center of the world is a disease that ultimately hurts all those around you. And Paul expressed the antidote: "Look to the interests of others... count others as better than yourself." Putting the interests of others first is a form of sacrificial love, the way of the cross, that not only helps them, but comes back to us... The laws of Karma are

very real: as Jesus said, “with what measure you give, you also will receive.” Or in a common saying: “What goes around, comes around!” Again, with Jesus’ words this morning: When you lose your life (for sake of others), you actually save your life, you find your life.

With all the wars in the world, it seems so limited to reduce Jesus’ message to an interpersonal one. But that is where love and peace start; “Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me!” We can hope and pray that *world leaders* have enough healthy personal relationships to have learned and grown in the ways of getting along with others, the ways of interpersonal love and peace and fair play, looking to the interested of *others*, so they can put *some* of it into practice in international relations!

The way of the cross, starting interpersonally, is tough work, a commitment. I like the idea that we can see crosses everywhere, *everyday*! First of all the image of a tree. Most trees have some horizontal limbs that can appear somewhat like a cross. Secondly, most architecture in our buildings have uprights and pieces across... just look at windows, or door frames. And here’s one that means a lot to me personally. Every community pool I’ve swum in has usually long lines for the lanes, then at the end of each lane, either on the bottom or on the wall, the line ends in a T or a Cross! For me, that’s the aspect of encouragement: “you can do it, you can keep going, keep moving!” The Cross is emblematic, symbolic, of Jesus’ courage and determination to keep putting out his message of Love, friendship, reconciliation, peace.

So we can see crosses everyday, in nature, in architecture, even in our posture as we stretch! As you know, I love to hear reminders in music; the words, especially the choruses, do sink in. Here’s a song by Ken Medema, based on this morning’s gospel reading. It is called “The Riddle,” or “Finding leads to losing.” It shows the paradox of the cross.

So we are bound away on a long, long journey. God only knows where the road will end. We're bound away on a long, long journey. Surprises are waiting just around the bend. Will you take my hand and

*walk beside me? The road will be long, but sweet will be our rest. Won't you take my hand and walk beside me? And the answer to the riddle will be our quest. **CHORUS: And the riddle says, finding leads to losing. Losing lets you find. Living leads to dying, and life leaves death behind. Losing leads to finding. That's all that I can say. No one will find life in any other way.** So we're bound away on a long, long journey. Walking through the darkness of the night. We are bound away on a long, long journey. We are seeking the bright clear morning light. So take my hand and walk beside me. Help me find my way when the path is unclear. Take my hand and walk beside me, cause I think that I can make it if you are near. **CHORUS***

The way of the cross is indeed a long journey, and it is a paradox. The suffering or sacrificial aspect also needs the comfort aspect, which is the accompaniment of the Good Shepherd, and other friends or angels. We are not all called to be Nelson Mandela or Martin Luther King or Dietrich Bonhoeffer, or Alexei Navalny, all fighting oppression. We are not all called to be martyrs, to be imprisoned or killed, to give our very life for the cause. But we are called to know that to make even our small world around us better, doing a hard thing is usually required. We can ask ourselves... To follow Jesus, what “hard thing” might God be asking of me? What is some work that must be done, something that I may have to lose or give up, or even some risk I might take to better love family, friends, and neighbors? If we follow Jesus and the way of the cross, he also promises that he walks with us, that he will be near, to help us bear any burden, and to help us find the victory of hope over despair, even life over death. Amen. Let's pray.