

Christ the Lord Episcopal Church Pinole, CA

The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost: September 3, 2023

The Cross

Rev. Dr. Lois Williams

Good morning and welcome to Christ the Lord Church on this fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost. Today I would like to discuss something we are all familiar with. In fact, we are so familiar with the cross that most of us forget the true meaning of it. Crosses as jewelry, crosses at roadside deaths, a cross at the site of 9/11, crosses, crosses, crosses. What is Jesus actually talking about when he himself is not only going to bear a cross, but is also asking us to carry ours as well?

For many people in this world, the function of a cross is to mark a bad and tragic thing. You see fields of crosses at Arlington National Cemetery and in the vast graveyards near Normandy, France. That's what we do: we place the cross at locations of death. We do not generally, however, sink crosses into places of life, liveliness, or anything else that has to do with our everyday business. Have you ever seen a cross at the shopping mall?

Yet in Matthew 16 Jesus presents the cross as something to which we are asked to cling to every day. During my childhood, raised as a Baptist, I can't help but recall the hymn that stated, "I will cling to the old rugged cross, and exchange it someday for a crown." But what exactly does that mean? As a child it was a kind of romantic way of looking at the suffering of Jesus, a soft way of thinking I was saved from evil, even a reassurance of a beautiful afterlife. But is that what Jesus is talking about?

Jesus is telling us to take up our cross and maybe we have been approaching that idea the wrong way. The idea of “taking up a cross” and following Jesus, in this context is actually quite counter-cultural, cutting against the grain of expectations in terms of what people usually associate the symbol of the cross with. We are here to remember not only the cross as suffering, but also as resurrection, and as hope. We are Easter people.

We need to be aware of how at odds this familiar image of the cross is even with what many faithful church members think as well. The cross has in recent times become more of a political statement for some, flaring into people’s consciousness mostly when controversies erupt about the placement of a cross in public places or public schools. Do we in the church understand the daily reality of the cross in our own lives or do we tend to “reserve” the cross for special occasions, political fights, or cemeteries? Are we viewing the cross as death or as hope?

We as a whole seem to have no problem putting the Ten Commandments on our buildings, a set of rules that need to be complied with. Yet we never seem to display the Beatitudes with the same zeal. We tend to look at our faith as logistical and rule setting, rather than hopeful and rule-freeing. Are we doing this when we look at the cross? Are we looking into the suffering past, and not seeing what God has revealed as hope for our future?

Some time ago I became aware of “The Hill of Crosses” in Lithuania. It began in the 19th century. When Lithuanian citizens were murdered by the Russian Czar, the people would memorialize the victims with a cross. Soon many crosses began to go up. The Russians hated them so much they began to tear

them down. But that didn't stop the people who began to visit the site as a pilgrimage. The memorial kept building and today there are thousands upon thousands of crosses piled onto each other, an actual century's worth of crosses. What began as a memorial of death became a defiant symbol of hope. Hope emerged from the crosses; hope emerges from our suffering. People worldwide now come to experience not the dread and death of the crosses on this hill, but the hope of resilience. This is the revelation that Jesus is trying to express.

The cross, and our ability to let our everyday life be shaped by that cross, is what creates the difference. To be shaped not necessarily by the Old Testament and the Commandments, but instead by the resurrection and by hope. Not by living a life of rules and fear, but by living the Beatitudes knowing we are blessed and loved. Living into the way of the cross means living in a way that even Satan and the fear of hell itself cannot touch us. Not through something powerful; Jesus did not wield the sword. But instead, Jesus uses something that changes what the world sees as power. Jesus uses something that appears to be weak; appears on the surface as giving up.

This weakness is actually a power that Satan and evil cannot attack. It is vulnerability and the Gospel's way of living a life of servanthood and gentle love that the evil cannot exploit. The bending branch of tree is much more able to survive tragedy than a stiff piece of timber. Love will go further than hate.

Jesus indicates that just viewing life the way he viewed it will itself lead to a degree of suffering, yet within that suffering will come a peace that surpasses all understanding. If the cross, and faithfulness to the Jesus who died on that

cross, is going to shape our everyday lives, then conflict with the prevailing culture should be expected. There may be certain promotions we shouldn't get or take as Christians, certain business opportunities we should decline, certain things we won't go along with, or do because of Jesus' message of love. And yet, there are things we need to stand up for: like equality and justice that are not the cultural norm.

A person can gain the whole world, Jesus warns, but still lose his soul. And if in the end, when we meet Christ face to face, we discover that our soul has been forfeited by our selfish actions, then not all the riches of this earth will be enough to buy that soul back. Some things come to us only as a gift of grace. Life with God is just such a gift, and it was purchased for us by Jesus on a cross. Carrying your cross should not be viewed as suffering, but like Christ, as way toward hope. Amen