

Westminster Presbyterian Church
533 S. Walnut St.
Springfield, IL 62704

The Reverend Shelly White Wood
March 12, 2006

The Cross Mark 8:34

We were out for a walk a few weeks ago on one of those beautiful afternoons that teased us with the promise of an early spring, and as we walked along, I observed a new trend in home decorations. For many of the houses had decorative crosses hung on their front porches, by their front doors. The assumption one would make in walking by is that a Christian lived there, and then I got to thinking: "It's interesting that the Christian symbol was once an instrument for torture and the death penalty." All religions have symbols, for example, for Jews it is a six pointed star, for Muslims it is a crescent moon and for Buddhists it is a lotus. All of these are symbols of beauty and light. What does it mean that Christianity has chosen a cross, a method of unspeakable pain and suffering as its symbol?

I think we would be easier to just assume that the symbol of the cross is just that and forget how it was originally used. Naturally we would prefer the resurrection to the crucifixion. We prefer Easter to Good Friday. We don't want to hear about it any more than Peter did in the 8th chapter of Mark's Gospel. In this morning's New Testament reading, Jesus predicts his death for the first time and Peter doesn't want to listen to it. It's too painful for him to think that he could lose the best friend he ever had. It feels better to live in denial. And so Peter suggests that there may be a way out, a way to avoid this pain and he tells Jesus to walk the other way. Away from Jerusalem and the cross.

Jesus responds to these suggestions by rebuking him. He says, angrily, "Get behind me Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things". Why does he do that? Perhaps because Jesus is thinking to himself, "You don't think I have already *thought* of that." Of course it would be easier for me to skip out of this and go in the opposite direction of Jerusalem. Of course it would be safer for me to hide away with you. I am at the top of my game, I have a great following, I could ride on this wave for a long time (Mark 8:33b)." And *that* is tempting, and yet it is away from God and in the opposite direction of where God is calling him. To go the opposite direction is to think of himself before God. And still Peter has a point. He sees that Jesus has a choice, just as we all do. Jesus needn't have died. Presumably if he would have followed the advice of his friends like Peter and avoided the showdown, he wouldn't have. Instead Jesus chose to die. Why? Because he believed that he had to if the world was to be saved. Thus, Frederick Buechner suggests that the cross represents the best of humankind as well as the very worse (Buechner, Frederick. *Whistling in the Dark*, pg. 18)

We wear the cross to remind us of that paradox, for it stands for the tragic reality of humanity not just at our worst but at our best. Senator John McCain makes this very observation as he tells the story of being a scared American prisoner of War in Vietnam. He said, "I was tied in torture ropes by my tormentors and left alone in any empty room to suffer through the night. Later in the evening, a guard I had never spoken to enter the room and silently loosed the ropes to relieve my suffering. Just before morning, the same guard came back and re-tightened the ropes before his less humanitarian comrades returned.

He never said a word to me. Some months later on Christmas morning, as I stood alone in the prison courtyard, the same guard walked up to me and stood next to me for a few moments. Then with his sandal, the guard drew a cross in the dirt. We stood wordlessly there a minute or two, venerating the cross, until the guard rubbed it out and walked away.” McCain reflected on that experiences saying that for him that was faith. “Faith that unites and never divides, faith that bridges unbridgeable gaps in humanity. It is the faith that we are all equal endowed by our creator with inalienable rights to life liberty and the pursuit of happiness” (John McCain. “Virtues of a Quiet Hero.” October, 17, 2005. *This I Believe*: National Public Radio).

No we cannot understand the meaning of the resurrection without experiencing the power of the cross. Put simply, any more than one can fully understand a good meal without having gone hungry or the value of a good friend without ever being lonely. The cross invites us to see what matters most.

Whatever a preacher tries to say about Lent and the reality of the coming cross, we must acknowledge in some way the harshest realities in which we live. For that is what the passion, the crucifixion of Jesus is all about. Thomas Cahill wrote in his book, *The World Before and After Jesus*, “that every age since Jesus’ the human race has done its best as did the first Christian not to look on him whom has been pierced.” The cross is a place of truth about love, about hate, about humanity, about God. Not the kind of mirror we want to look into. But nevertheless, when we recognize human pain, we see truth, when we see truth we are compelled to respond.

I chose to begin my Lenten discipline this season by reading *Night* by Eli Weisel. Weisel was 15 years old in 1944 when he and his family were taken from their home to the Auschwitz concentration camp, then to Buchenwald. *Night* is the terrifying record of Wiesel’s memories of the death of his family, the death of his own innocence, and his confrontation with the absolute evil of man. By the end of the book I found myself overwhelmed with sadness asking, how could anyone endure such torture and loss? And how could humankind be so intensely ignorant and evil? With anger and grief filling me I turned the final page of the book to find Wiesel’s Noble Piece prize acceptance speech, which was presented in 1986, some forty years after his persecution. In his words I found what happens when someone takes the evil of the world and transcends that experience to do good. He wrote:

There is so much injustice and suffering crying out for our attention: victims of hunger, racism and political persecution...Human rights are being violated on every continent. More people are oppressed than free. How can one not be sensitive to their plight? Human suffering anywhere concerns men and women everywhere....As long as one dissident is in prison our life will be filled with anguish and shame. What all these victims need above all is to know that they are not alone; that we are not forgetting them, that when their voices are stifled we shall lend them ours, that while their freedom depends on ours the quality of our freedom depends on theirs. We know that every moment is a moment of grace, every hour an offering; not to share them would mean to betray them. Our lives no longer belong to us alone; they belong to all those who need us desperately (Eli Weisel. *Night*. Nobel Peace Prize Acceptance Speech, 1986).

Friends, that is the message in the symbol of the cross. That is what Jesus meant when he instructs us to “deny ourselves and take up our crosses and follow him” (Mark 8:34). To live as he did

with commitment and courage, to risk, to give what we have, to love and care deeply, to be open to sufferings and vulnerability is to be alive as God wills us to be free. Let us pray that we never simplify the cross to mean anything less. Those who lose their life will save it Jesus said, and then with courage and commitment and a heart full of love did just that. May we have the courage and the faith to do the same. Amen.