

Feast of the Holy Cross
Wicker Park Lutheran Church
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September 13, 2015

Some developmental psychologists suggest that children first learn through tactile sensation - they discover hot and cold, soft and hard, up and down first through their physical senses. Then as they create an intellectual vocabulary they move past tactile sensations into the exploration of signs and symbols. As children begin to understand signs and symbols they learn to see beyond the surface. It is then that they can come to discern the genuine from the artificial.¹

Our world has no shortage of symbols for children to explore in this phase. It is often the children's culture that helps to give meaning to these symbols. For example, when we see a red octagon we almost immediately think: stop. When we notice the letter "P" with a giant red circle and slash over it and we assume: "no parking." For a symbol is an object that represents, stands for, or suggests an idea, belief, or action. Symbols can be words, sounds, gestures, or visual images.

If you're following the news this past week we've seen new symbols take hold. We've seen the image of a 3-year-old child face down in the water become a symbol, and we've seen the Kentucky clerk, Kim Davis, become a symbol as well. Yet the meaning of these symbols, and most symbols, depends on who views them and how they're interpreted. Kim Davis on one hand could be a hateful bigot, or on the other hand could be the epitome of religious freedom.² The young child lying face down in the water could be ISIS propaganda encouraging Syrians not to flee, or it could be a symbol of the world's moral responsibility.³

So too on this feast day of the Holy Cross we have a symbol to unpack. Paul in today's reading from 1 Corinthians notes that some might see the cross as foolishness, while others might see it as the power of God. Some see this as an instrument of execution, this equivalent to an electric chair or lethal injection of our time. Others see the cross as a symbol of life and victory over sin and death. Then we see a symbol's value in the reading from Numbers when Moses lifts up a symbol of the poisonous snake – a snake that when living kills but then its image instead becomes life giving. The phrase "lifted up" is what

¹ <https://candlewycke.wordpress.com/2010/07/07/%E2%80%9Csigns-and-symbols-rule-the-world-not-rules-and-law%E2%80%9D-confucius/>

² . http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/02/us/kentucky-clerk-a-local-fixture-suddenly-becomes-a-national-symbol.html?_r=0

³ <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/09/aylan-kurdi-isis-propaganda-dabiq/404911/>

John pulls on in the Gospel. The Johannine scholar Caroline Lewis reminds us that in John the phrase “lifted up” cues us in to more than just the crucifixion, it also cues us into the resurrection and the ascension.⁴ However, choosing this Johannine text on Holy Cross Day has a tendency to draw us into the image of Jesus being lifted up on the cross.

For generations the cross has become the major symbol for the Christian faith. At our congregation’s playgroup this week we were talking about the 198-foot tall cross in Effingham, IL. The Cross Foundation built that cross to be “the plainest symbol of Christianity.”⁵ This symbol of Christianity is all over, and its meanings various. Some look at the cross and see a symbol for atonement, or in other words how humans are reconciled to God. Others see the cross as a communication of God’s loving sacrifice of God’s son for humanity. Some people see its representation of Jesus’ victory over sin and death. I could go on and on about the many views of the cross. With this multiplicity of views, one question that this feast day presents for us is: “what does the cross communicate to you?”

Well, if we asked Martin Luther this question we’d quickly get to his understanding of the “theology of the cross.” The theology of the cross recognizes that the primary place where we come to understand God and how God saves is through the cross. One aspect of this theology is that “God is present and working in the world exactly in the place where a person is falling apart.” That place “where they are discovering the limits of their power instead of its possibilities.”⁶

This symbol of the cross for Luther opens us up to experience God’s presence in those dark moments of life. Martin Luther challenges the idea that God is only present in the good and glorious times. With this theology of the cross we come to find God’s presence as a love one is dying... when we see the compassion and love shared by those gathered. In the complex workings of our minds in the midst of depression we know that our God walks with us through the darkest moments and deepest depressions. In the lonely pit of prison, we also know God is present, and that Jesus too was imprisoned. The symbol of the cross reminds us of God’s presence in those darkest moments.

Although this is the only feast day of the year where we focus on a symbol or object, we know that the cross is not our only symbol. As I look around this worship space I notice a lot of symbols that help us expand our understanding of God. A glimpse at the rose window in the back of the sanctuary shows us a variety of symbols that have then been turned into the medallions on the wall. We see a chalice or cup that likely harkens back to communion, community, and the blood of Christ. We see a book showing the Greek letters alpha and omega that might remind us that God is the beginning and end of all that

⁴ Working Preacher podcast. “Holy Cross Day.” 2014.

⁵ <http://www.roadsideamerica.com/story/10913>

⁶ <http://www.mbird.com/glossary/theology-of-the-cross/>

is communicated. We see a dove over a font likely symbolizing the descent of the Holy Spirit in baptism. We see a cross – that may remind us of death and life, complexity and simplicity, love and grace, powerlessness and power, hope and joy, sadness and triumph.

Symbols are all around us. Symbols communicate. And the famous theologian Paul Tillich reminded us that symbols are complex. He said a symbol always points beyond itself to something that is “unquantifiable and mysterious.” Symbols and their meanings can evolve as an individual or culture evolves. Symbols can also become idolatrous when they become the reality instead of pointing to something deeper. Tillich goes on to say that the unique nature of a symbol is that it gives access to deeper layers of reality, which are otherwise inaccessible.⁷

So on this day when we recognize a primary symbol of our faith, can we point to our many symbols without idolizing them? Can we allow our symbols of faith to speak and open us to mystery?

Friends, we know that symbols are powerful. Symbols are ways we can deepen our understanding of God and the world. This week I pray you reflect on what symbol or symbols deepen your understanding of God. I pray you find that symbols help you to share and explore your faith. Yet in this exploration you may just find that these symbols leave us right where we live our life of faith – in the mystery and awe of our God. Amen.

⁷ Tillich, Paul (1964). *Theology of Culture*. Oxford University Press. p. 54