

Holy Cross Weekend: "Holy Cross Day"

Numbers 21:4b-9; Psalm 98:1-4; 1 Cor. 1:18-24; John 3:13-17

September 13-14, 2025

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

Military chaplains wear the insignia of their rank and also of their religion. All chaplains are prepared to serve **any** service member of **any** faith in need of pastoral care and counseling, but they also lead worship services in their own tradition. At one time military chaplains all wore the insignia of a shepherd's crook, but then symbols were chosen for specific religions.

- Can you guess what symbol is worn by **rabbis** who are military chaplains? I would have guessed the star of David. The 5-pointed star **is** included, but it sits on top of two little tablets with the Hebrew numbers one through ten, signifying the Ten Commandments.
- Any guesses about the symbol of a **Muslim** chaplain, an imam? It's the crescent, symbolizing the new moon, which marks the beginning of each new month in Islam. The crescent and star originally stood for the city of Constantinople. But when the Ottoman Empire, primarily Muslim, conquered Constantinople, it took over the crescent and star as its own emblem. In pre-Islamic days, crescent and star may have represented lunar deities.
- Symbol of a **Buddhist** chaplain? The 8-spoked wheel, the Dharmashakra, representing the Buddha's teachings and the path to enlightenment.
- How about the **Hindu** symbol? (Definitely had to look this one up!) It's the Sanskrit syllable Om, a sound that is considered sacred, the mantra of the supreme god Brahman, signifying absolute truth, the path to deep self-knowledge.
- And the symbol of **Christian** chaplains of all denominations? The cross – we might say, "Of course." But that wouldn't always have been so.

Until Constantine legalized Christianity and outlawed crucifixion in the early 4<sup>th</sup> century, nobody created artwork of the cross or venerated it. The earliest picture of Jesus excavated in the catacombs is not as the crucified Christ but as a shepherd boy. Remember: it was a capital crime to be a Christian, and Christians had to worship in secret or risk being thrown to the lions or used as a human torch in Nero's gardens. There were no church buildings with signs on the front lawn. Early Christians worshiped surreptitiously in private homes, or outdoors, or sometimes in underground cemeteries called catacombs. They used code language to let other Christians know where they gathered for worship. Who knows what secret Christian symbol was etched in

charcoal on a doorpost or sketched in dirt on the ground? **The fish!** IXTHYS is the Greek word for fish, but it is also an acronym. Each letter of IXTHYS serves as the first letter of one of the Greek words “Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior.”

Crucifixion was a horrible way to die. Everybody knew that. For the Jews, it was also a sign of being accursed, rejected by God. Deuteronomy 21:23 claims, “...*anyone hung on a tree is under God’s curse.*” Saying that the founder of your religion had been crucified was no way to gain converts. Jesus’ death sentence of crucifixion was handed down by Pontius Pilate, a representative of the Roman Empire, which was still in power, still in charge, throughout the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries, into the 4<sup>th</sup> century when Constantine became emperor in 306 A.D. It was 7 years later, in 313 A.D., that he issued the Edict of Milan, announcing that Christianity would be tolerated and Christians would no longer be persecuted or executed. 13 years later, an archeology team underwritten by Constantine’s mother Helen, unearthed what they believed to be the true cross outside of Jerusalem. The cross came out from under wraps, so to speak, and the commemoration of Holy Cross Day on September 14 began at that time, over 1700 years ago.

Today’s Gospel speaks about the Son of Man being “*lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.*” (John 3:14b-15) That lifting up refers to being lifted on the cross in **crucifixion**, but it also means the **glorification** of the Son of God, the same language used for the **enthronement** of a king. Maybe it’s best pictured in a cross that doesn’t have the suffering, nearly naked, crucified Jesus on it, but instead the risen Lord in his royal, high priestly garments, victorious over death, crown on his head, beaming upon us in love, arms spread wide in blessing from the cross.

St. John’s Gospel is all about the cross as the place where the depth of our human sin meets and is redeemed by the heights of God’s love. Very often Christians who get media blitz coverage

speaking about a God who excludes all kinds of categories of people for whom Jesus died. Their portrayal of a narrow-minded, legalistic God alienates unbelievers and further distances former believers who left Christian community because they experienced outright rejection by the Church or were met by a cold shoulder from those who should have extended a warm and welcoming hand. The Gospel emphasizes the inclusivity of God's love, and the wideness of Jesus' embrace.

*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him. (John 3:16-17)*

How many people outside the Church would even guess **that** is the truth we should be sharing??

There's a paradox, though. Yes, as one of the early Church fathers said, "We are Easter people, and alleluia is our song." Yet, we cling to the crucified Christ, we acknowledge His suffering love for us, for **all** of us, and we accept that by following in His footsteps, being His disciples, bearing His name, living out our lives as "little Christs," "marked with the cross of Christ forever," we will endure suffering for His sake, and we will willingly share in the suffering of others. In his day, 500 years ago, Martin Luther railed against what he called **the theology of glory**, which nowadays is called the Prosperity Gospel. It's the claim that if you love God enough and keep all the rules you'll prosper in this life. It's the myth that God materially blesses all those who are faithful. It's following the straight and narrow for ulterior motives: namely so that you'll reap an earthly benefit, like more money, more power, more social standing. It's distancing ourselves from those who suffer and banking on God to protect us from suffering.

In contrast to that, Luther famously preached **the theology of the cross**. It is the belief expressed by Paul in this weekend's lesson from 1 Corinthians that our Lord's "...cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." (1 Cor. 1:18) Our Lord is glorified in His suffering. We worship the Lamb of God whose sacrifice on the

cross takes away the sin of the world. Our devotion to Him, our deeds of faith active in love, are not a bid to curry God's favor and win material blessings, but are simply performed in gratitude for all of God's blessings already received and in obedience to God's commandments. Elsewhere in St. John's Gospel Jesus says, *"If you love me you will keep my commandments."* (John 14:15) Hopefully we do – love Him and keep His commandments.

George Macleod was a minister in the Church of Scotland. In 1938 he founded the Iona Community, an ecumenical group of like-minded Christians concerned about spirituality **and** social justice, about the link between worship and work. He wrote:

I simply argue  
that the cross be  
raised again at the  
center of the mar-  
ket place as well  
as on the steeple  
of the church. I  
am recovering the claim that Jesus was not crucified  
in a cathedral between two candles, but on a cross  
between two thieves, on the town garbage heap; on a  
crossroads so cosmopolitan that they had to write  
his title in Hebrew and Latin and Greek; at the kind  
of place where cynics  
talk smut, and  
thieves curse, and  
soldiers gamble.  
Because that is  
where he died and  
that is what he died  
about. And that is  
where the Church  
should be and what  
the Church should  
be about....<sup>1</sup>

Us included. We don't wear the cross on our collar or epaulets, but we do on our brow. Amen.

<sup>1</sup>*Sursum Corda*, Redeemer Church (ELCA), Neptune, NJ (September 2000), p. 1.

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham