

STUMBLING OVER THE CROSS?



Scripture:

Psalm 19

¹The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. ²Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge. ³There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard; ⁴yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.

In the heavens he has set a tent for the sun, ⁵which comes out like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy, and like a strong man runs its course with joy. ⁶Its rising is from the end of the heavens, and its circuit to the end of them; and nothing is hid from its heat.

⁷The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the LORD are sure, making wise the simple; ⁸the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is clear, enlightening the eyes; ⁹the fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever; the ordinances of the LORD are true and righteous altogether. ¹⁰More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb.

¹¹Moreover by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward. ¹²But who can detect their errors? Clear me from hidden faults. ¹³Keep back your servant also from the insolent; do not let them have dominion over me. Then I shall be blameless, and innocent of great transgression.

¹⁴Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.

John 2:13-22

¹³The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁴In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. ¹⁵Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. ¹⁶He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" ¹⁷His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me." ¹⁸The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" ¹⁹Jesus answered

them, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” ²⁰The Jews then said, “This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?” ²¹But he was speaking of the temple of his body. ²²After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

This is the Word of the Lord! Thanks be to God!



STUMBLING OVER THE CROSS?

Lent is a good time to talk about the cross of Jesus. How do you feel about the cross? Do you have one around your neck? Do you wear it or have it in your home for decoration? Some people think of the cross like a good luck charm, to ward off evil. What does it symbolize for you?

THE EVIL EYE

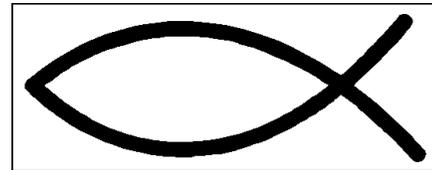


In Turkey, they have a symbol that comes in various sizes to ward off evil. They call it the Evil Eye because it wards off evil and it looks like an eye, and it can be found everywhere! Here is one of the forms of the evil eye that can be hung on the wall. The bus driver of our tour bus had a small evil eye tacked on the stairway wall where we stepped on and off the bus. There was a larger one in the middle of the lobby hanging above us when we walked into our hotel.

Do you use the cross in the same way? I have a cross above my kitchen door. But I don't think of it as warding off evil as much as it shows what I believe in. Crosses are beautiful. Evil Eyes are quite beautiful, too.

Even though the cross was an instrument for torture and death in the Roman era, Jesus used it as a sign of God's love and understanding of those who suffer.

A FISH SYMBOL – ICHTHYS



But the cross was not the first sign early Christians used to symbolize their faith community. It was the ICHTHYS, a fish symbol meaning in Greek: Jesus Christ, son of God, our Savior.

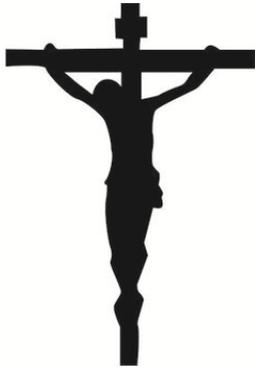


The Chi-Rho standing for Christos also predated the use of the cross. Constantine put the Chi-Rho symbol on the shields of his soldiers. Actually the cross symbol predates Jesus.



The Ankh is the Egyptian hieroglyphic cross shaped symbol meaning life.

THE CRUCIFIX



The Roman Catholic Church began using the crucifix only in the 6th century. The church fathers decided to keep Jesus on the cross to remember the suffering he endured for our sins. Protestants are Easter People. We are always thankful for an empty cross reminding us of Christ's victory over death and Christ's resurrection.



The circle on the Celtic cross outside our door originated from the pagan symbol for sun and now represents the world. Jesus died for the whole world.

Our Ash Wednesday cross is currently covered with words or phrases on papers symbolizing what we want to let go of during Lent or give up to God in this Lenten season. There are words there like: fear, anger, big expectations of others, lack of discipline, the need to forgive but can't, hatred. There is a line in the hymn, "Lift High the Cross," that goes: Set up thy throne, that earth's despair may cease beneath the shadow of its healing peace.

CHRIST'S PEACE AND HEALING

The cross is now a symbol of Christ's peace and healing rather than an instrument of suffering and death. Yet in this passage we read from today, Jesus doesn't appear to be very peaceful.

We find Jesus very upset in the temple. He shows his outrage at the way the sale of sacrificial animals has turned the sacred temple into a marketplace. Not only did the scribes and temple leaders allow them to disrupt the holiness of the temple, but the sale of the animals for the purity sacrifices, the doves, pigeons, lambs, and cows, were being sold at such exorbitant prices that the poor people had to go away empty. Without a chance to present a sacrifice, the poor had no chance to experience a cleansing renewal ceremony that many had walked hundreds of miles to do.

FAIRNESS AND JUSTICE

Jesus was all about equity and fairness. And when he saw the sacred temple allowing the marketers to gouge people with their prices, he showed his outrage at the injustice by tearing up the market.

God seeks justice for all and this passage shows us that God gets angry about injustices. Yet, you probably noticed that Jesus didn't strike anyone dead. He just swirled and hurled his whip but didn't really strike.

Jesus was as non-violent as possible but still got their attention and made his point to the temple leaders who were observing him.

He wanted his disciples to learn two things:

- 1. To not be afraid to take a stand when you clearly see people being taken advantage of.**
- 2. To listen to his prophesy about his death and resurrection. He was talking about himself when he said, "Destroy this temple and I will raise it in three days." Jesus wanted them to be prepared.**

Dr. Tom Boomershine says that Jesus' words are angry in this passage, but he was

especially angry with those who were selling the doves which were supposed to be the poor man's sacrifice. That is the group he shouts out, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my father's house a marketplace!"

JESUS SHOWS HIS AUTHORITY

His command is addressed to those who were directly abusing the people in the sanctity of the Holy Temple. People were going home empty handed and not allowed to enter into the purification rites if they could not afford to buy one of their birds to sacrifice.

In this one incident in the temple, Jesus showed his authority as the Messiah at the same time he showed his authority in throwing them out. And no one resisted him. His power was obvious to all.

HOW DO WE STAND UP AGAINST INJUSTICE?

So how do we show our authority as Christians? How do we stand up for those who are suffering injustices today, even when it happens in the church?

Some Bible history scholars state that this story of the cleansing of the temple gave the crusaders permission to be violent and wipe out those who opposed their understanding of the Christian faith. Others during the reformation believed that this story gave them permission to burn people at the stake for being what they considered heretics! These two examples show the tragedy that results when the Bible is misinterpreted.

A few years ago, Reza Aslan wrote: **The Zealot: The life and times of Jesus.** In the book he proposes that Jesus was a rebel and organized his disciples for violence rather than peace. But Aslan bases much of his proposal on this story of Jesus cleansing the temple when there are so many more passages showing Jesus turning the other cheek and promoting peace.

Origen, the famous Christian theologian who was born in 184 AD, believed that this

story was meant to be understood as a spiritual cleansing. The temple was the souls of the scribes and priests who were allowing injustice to reign. So Jesus came in to turn the tables on them, so to speak, and cleanse their souls of evil unjust ways.

What does it mean for you to be an authentic believer in Jesus Christ? God wants us to share the Good News about Jesus out of love for others. Sometimes this is done with words, but more often with our actions, not to convert, but to help them seek justice and embrace the joy in trusting God's love.

LIVE IN PEACE

And even though Jesus showed the anger God feels when injustice and suffering happens in the world, we are to strive to always live in peace with one another and accomplish God's goals in non-violent ways.

The cross as a symbol of healing love and forgiveness for our sins is one way of remembering that God is here with us and for us. But Rob Bell says when he thinks of God he doesn't think of the cross, he hears a song. (A video, "Rhythm," was shown to the congregation.)

Benediction:

Psalm 121 reminds us: "The LORD will guard your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forevermore."

You don't need idols. May you trust that the grace of our Lord, Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit will bring you peace now and forevermore. Amen



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