

February 28, 2021  
Lent 2 (B)  
United, Oak Park

### **Heights and Depths of Jesus' Cross**

A few years ago when our family was returning from a trip to some southern states we passed through a portion of central Illinois where Interstates 57 and 70 come together for a few miles near the town of Effingham. What made that point in our trip so memorable was the sight of a 200-foot steel cross looming above the east side of the highway. We were not inclined to stop at that moment—since we still had quite a bit of ground to cover before getting home by the end of the day—but had we exited the freeway, we could have seen a chapel near the base of the cross as well as a series of ten large plaques, each of which bears the words to one of the Ten Commandments.

In looking up some information about the Cross at the Crossroads, as it is known, I learned that it was dedicated in September of 2001, just days after 9/11. That particular cross has served as an inspiration to many travelers and the site has been the gathering point for a number of marches and rallies in the area.

One could argue that the Cross at the Crossroads, with its mission at the intersection of two of the nation's busiest roadways, reaches more people in a single week than many national church bodies do in an entire year. Even if the sight of that large cross appears through a car's windshield for only a few seconds before quickly fading away into the rearview mirror, it could be one of the few brushes with any form of religion that many motorists ever have.

For centuries, the cross has been the primary symbol of the Christian faith, not just to Christians, but to others as well. A cross at the top of nearly any church steeple proclaims a message of salvation and invitation to the world. There isn't much confusion about what people who gather in that place are primarily about. Of course it might take further inspection to determine whether or not people there meet on Sunday mornings, or also on Saturday evenings, or whether they observe the custom of Seventh-day Adventists and meet on Saturday mornings. But still, most Christians who entered a building where a cross was a prominent feature would probably find something that was familiar to them in one way or another.

Yet is it possible that such public expressions of the primary Christian symbol really don't capture the essence of Jesus' message at all? Take our reading from the gospel according to Mark today: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me...those who lose their life for my sake...will save it" (8:34-35).

Here Jesus wasn't merely pointing to a symbol, nor was he even truly speaking about his own death. He was most certainly speaking about how his disciples would continue to live the pattern of his own life, a life of sacrificial love and suffering that also happened to lead to death on a cross.

This pattern about which Jesus spoke was decidedly not triumphalist in any way. There was no glory in the way of the cross. It was not a banner to be waved. Neither was it about claiming divine rule or kingly might. It was the opposite of all of those things. And for that reason Peter took Jesus aside to challenge him on it. Yet Jesus responded to Peter in a way that was even more clear about what path his disciples needed to take. Anything less than humble obedience to a

way of suffering and losing oneself by caring for the people whom Jesus came to serve would be following the evil one.

Recent insights about the gospel according to Mark have identified it as having a ring structure, meaning that the book has a definite center, with both inner and outer cores that reveal similar themes. Today's reading is from the book's center—the first of three predictions about Jesus' passion. There's no mistake that what we have heard today was at the heart of Mark's purpose in actually composing the book.

It is here where we encounter the reality about Jesus' death and resurrection; a reality that must be proclaimed *and practiced* by Jesus' closest disciples. So Jesus commissioned his disciples as *servant* leaders who were themselves to provide a welcome for the least powerful people.

This shortest of the four gospel books also provides key insights into what some of the problems might have been for early Christian communities who were living a generation or two after Jesus' death and resurrection: they were establishing hierarchies of leadership,

competing with other Christian communities, and not welcoming those who had the greatest of needs.<sup>1</sup> In short, Christian communities that Mark had in mind were struggling to keep Jesus' death and resurrection in the forefront of their lives and mission to the world.

As we encounter this passage in the midst of another season of Lent—where we pay much attention to what should be our core mission and focus—can we see how these words intend to reform *us* and to challenge corrupting influences on the church of our day? We don't have to look very far to see examples of people abusing their power and positions of leadership—even in religious institutions. Serving people's genuine needs, without a concern about personal gain, ought to be the primary activity for the faith community.

I don't think Jesus would have much interest in many of the ways that we measure a church's effectiveness today, such as which television preacher commands the most number of viewers, which mega-church has the largest auditorium, or which congregation has built the tallest

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<sup>1</sup>Gordon W. Lathrop, *The Four Gospels on Sunday: The New Testament and the Reform of Christian Worship* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2012), 85–86.

steeple. None of those things would be a good measure of the power of Jesus' cross and suffering.

If Jesus were interested in the *most* of anything, it might be in how much worldly gain we have *sacrificed* in order to serve people who are hurting, or how much we have *risked* our lives in order to help the most vulnerable people around us. While many leaders in our world today might declare that to be the picture of a *loser*, faithful disciples of Jesus would respond that such *losing* is indeed what it's all about.