

The Gift of the Cross
February 17, 2018 – Ash Wednesday

He was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed.
(Isaiah 53:5)

Friends, as I prepared for this evening's service, I opened our Lenten Devotional Booklet. (As an aside, if you don't have one of these booklets, please pick one up as you leave the sanctuary today.) Anyway, I read the devotion for today; and I was reminded of that red pencil that every teacher wields; and that Red X that I found so many times next to my spelling words. That Red X told me, this is wrong; you have failed, at least on this word or this paper or this test. But our devotion tells us, if we rotate that X 45 degrees either direction, it becomes a cross. If we rotate that X 45 degrees a transformation occurs.

2100 years ago, the cross was also seen as the ultimate sign of failure; for the cross was an instrument of torture and death, and crucifixion was one of the most heinous, torturous acts ever devised by humanity. You may be aware that the earliest Christians did not use the cross as their symbol. The cross was feared and hated by those under first century Roman rule. So, in the first century of the Christian Era, the early church took the fish as their symbol of faith and belief.

But, in the second century that all changed, for in the second century, the Christian church realized that, with the resurrection, Jesus had conquered sin and death, even death on the cross. And so, the cross has become more than just a symbol for Christianity, the cross has become the ultimate symbol of transformation, of rescue and triumph, of life and love.

Today, many of us wear crosses as jewelry. Others carry crosses in their pockets. Some of us have crosses on the walls of our homes or offices. I hope when you put on a cross or look at a cross, you will see more than just a symbol of our religious denomination. I hope that you will see more than even a symbol for Jesus. I hope, every time you put on a cross or even look at the cross, that you will think of what Jesus has done with and through the cross.

Oh, Jesus died for our sins, Jesus died on a cross to save us from sin and death. Yes, we all know that; and that is the best news in the world. But recognize that, Jesus also took that cross, the greatest fear, the greatest suffering, the greatest pain, and transformed it into the most beautiful object the world has ever known, the symbol of love and hope and peace, and yes, even joy. But let the transformation not stop at the cross.

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect. (Romans 12:1-2)

I preach a lot about “call” and about Christ’s call on our lives. But I hope, when you look at the cross, you will not only marvel in the transformation from an instrument of death to a sign for life and love and peace. I hope when you put on a cross or look at a cross, you will sense a call to live in the light of that cross, to live that love and peace and joy that the cross represents. The scriptures call us to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. In other words, the scriptures call us to think. But not to think as the rest of the world thinks, but to think as a disciple of the risen Christ, to think as one who is always seeking to follow the risen Christ, to walk with Christ in the path that Christ has called us to walk.

And that’s what Lent is all about. Lent is about transformation. Some people give something up for Lent. Well friends, if you give something up for Lent, and come Easter put it back and the week after Easter things are no different than they were before Ash Wednesday, the “giving up” has been for naught. Some people add things for Lent. Maybe they do some extra volunteer work or spend more time in prayer or Bible Study. Maybe they give a little extra money to a favorite charity; and those are all very good activities. But I pray that this Lent will truly be transformational, transformational for you and for me. I pray that we will emerge from Lent on Easter Sunday different people, transformed people.

Indeed, I know that I am “preaching as the choir.” I know that you are good people; some of the best people I know. I also know that all of us can always improve. Indeed that call to do what is good and acceptable and perfect applies to all of us. That call to be transformed applies to all of us; and, the cross is the call to transformation.

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (Matthew 6:19-21)

This is the traditional scripture for Ash Wednesday; and, in our consumer driven society, these words from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount are truly transformational. The message of Ash Wednesday is that all things on this earth are temporary. The words you will hear as I place some ashes on your forehead in

the sign of the cross are: “From dust you have come, and to dust you shall return; repent and believe the Gospel.” Friends we are all mortal. We are all going to die. That’s the story of Ash Wednesday. But there is good news, and the Good News comes in the form of a cross; because, when we look at the cross we see beyond death to a newness of life; and that’s the gift of Jesus Christ – the newness of life beyond the grave. Treasures on earth simply are not important. It’s the treasures in heaven, it’s the transformation through the renewing of our minds.

Yes, in a couple minutes, if you so desire, I will place some ashes on our forehead; but I will place them in the sign of the cross. This Ash Wednesday, look at the ashes. They are a reminder of our mortality. But then, look through the ashes to the sign of the cross. The cross that reminds us of the joys of life in the presence of the risen Christ, both in this world and in the world to come. Praise be to God for the gift of the cross. Amen.