

“Take Up Your CROSS & FOLLOW me”  
Rev’d Patrick Close  
September 1, 2002 (15 PENTECOST – YEAR A)

Today’s Gospel places a challenge before us, the Church. We see it in Peter and we hear it in Jesus’ words. Now, I need to tell you that I really like Peter. I think of all the disciples, he represents us. He gets it right sometimes, but most of the time he doesn’t get it! Just stop and think for a moment. Several weeks ago, we witnessed Peter trying to walk on water. Do you remember what happened? That’s right ... he sank! A couple of weeks ago he was with Jesus in Caserea Phillippi. When Jesus asked who the disciples thought he was ... Peter got it right! He said, “You’re the Messiah, the Son of God!”

Alas, that brings us to today. Jesus talks about the mission that God has called him to. He is to confront the religious and political in Jerusalem. He will die and be resurrected. Peter doesn’t understand that this is the way Jesus must go. The Cross is his path. Peter reacts emotionally. He blurts out, “NO!” What Peter, and we, don’t understand is that the ways of God aren’t ways. We are so set on trying to make God and Jesus over in our image that we fail to see God’s plan. Jesus rebukes Peter. Who wants to be yelled at by Jesus? Not me! Peter has gotten it wrong again.

Now one of three may not sound bad to you. If you’re a baseball player, that would mean a batting average over .300 ... and that’s not bad. But for us as Christians, we must do better. It is vital that we get the message right. As the story continues today, Jesus says, “Take up your cross and come follow me.” The Cross and following are the ways of Christians. Every generation, every person and every Church must revisit this saying and respond.

What is being asked of us here is to become a disciple of Jesus. Do we really understand what the cross means to us? I am afraid many of us don’t know. If we don’t respond to Jesus’ call, we are likely to end up with a Jeremiah in our life. You know Jeremiah ... he’s the one in the earlier lesson today that warns of the pending judgment. This is the result of failing to hear and heed God’s call. We will be judged too. It won’t be on how many times we came to Church. It won’t be on how many times we intended to do God’s will. We will be judged on the fidelity of our discipleship.

Let’s talk a little bit about the symbol of the cross. To take up the cross is not a popular notion today! I can’t help but think about the saying, “My ways are not your ways (Isaiah 55:8)”. God does work in strange ways. How many of you are wearing crosses today? The custom of wearing a cross is strong and trendy ... BUT WHAT DOES THE CROSS MEAN? There’s an anecdote that goes like this. A woman went to a department store to purchase a cross. When she approached the young girl who was a sales clerk at the jewelry counter, the girl asked, “Do you want a plain cross or one with a little man on it?”

We may be amazed at this story but the truth is that we have failed to communicate what the cross means. People simply do not know the connections between the historical events and the faith symbols in our Church. We are not telling the story. It’s not just the task of a few clergy or lay people ... it is the responsibility of each and every one of us. The cross has become a decoration or good luck charm. Do you remember the vampire movies? The cross is that thing

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that will ward off the evil people. The problem is that the message of the cross is diluted and becoming lost in our culture. We don’t know what it means.

What’s behind this symbol the cross. We have them all over the place. It’s there on the walls, the flags, the banners, the Stations of the Cross, the altar. What does it mean? One of most remarkable features I saw during my trip to Ireland were the High Celtic Crosses. They were massive, carved stone crosses that began to appear in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> century. The first Christians placed them on sites that would soon become monastic cities. The crosses appeared first, before the Church buildings were erected. They marked the holy and sacred ground where the faith community would gather.

The Celtic Crosses served another purpose. They told the story of Jesus. The distinctive feature was a circle combined with the cross. The circle represented God, the Creator. The cross represented Jesus, the Redeemer. The crosses were elaborated carved and demonstrated the unique approach of Celtic Christianity. The story of Creation and redemption were depicted with Jesus, animals and beautiful artistry. The Cross is the ultimate symbol of God’s love and redemption. It is a constant reminder of the sacrifice of Jesus, his obedience to god’s will and the hope that lies beyond it in the Resurrection. It is also interesting to note how the Celtic crosses changed. Do you know what appeared on them after the Synod of Whitby, when Roman Catholicism became the way of the British Isles? Priests and bishops were added to the story!

Think about the many different crosses that exist. They depict different parts and times of our faith history. There is the Jerusalem, Latin, Orthodox, Canterbury, and Maltese types just to name a few. Look around us. We have crosses with Jesus hanging in pain and suffering. They remind us of the crucifixion. Jesus died for us. The plain cross reminds us of the days he lied dead and then the Resurrection. God’s promise, hope and love are represented in this symbol. The “Christus Rex” depicts Jesus with a crown, vestments and hands raised. It is a reminder of the ascended Lord who is our kind and chief priest.

The rosary, the vestments, and prayer beads ... all are marked with crosses. I went through my drawers and boxes this week. I found something not uncommon to clergy ... we collect crosses! I found all kinds. Some were given to me as gifts, like the large cross I usually wear on Sundays. It was a gift of the family of a teenager I befriended years ago. The young man went to study art in France. The family brought me back the cross one summer as a gift of thanks. I still have the first cross I acquired, and the new one I bought in Ireland. I have glass crosses made for me by a friend who worked with stained glass. Another one that is special is a wooden cross with a silver image of “I love you” in American Sign Language. All these crosses have meaning to me. What does the cross mean to you?

The cross is a sign of discipleship. It marks us as a FOLLOWER of Jesus. A disciple is a student, a proclaimer and a doer. They are those who model their lives after Jesus Christ. The cross is a reminder of God’s love and Jesus’ sacrifice. God chooses not to work in the world through political or economic parties. God does work through human beings. The cross is a reminder of what Jesus did for us ... he died for us. Through his death, we found the path to Resurrection. As Christians, we called to embrace this symbol and follow Jesus.

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Joseph Campbell speaks about the cross in his wonderful series, “The Power of Myth.” He says, “... the cross is not only one historic moment on Cavalry, but the mystery through all time and space of *God’s presence and participation* in the agony of all living things.” The cross is an important, impressive and powerful symbol. It draws us more deeply into the love of God. It is our call to love and suffer as well. It is our call to be different from the rest of the world.

What I am left with is wondering what we will do for Jesus today? The temptation is always present to try to make Jesus over into what we want (that was Peter’s mistake). I believe our call is to understand what God wants and what God wills. Any call from God DEMANDS ACTION. They can be big or small. When it comes to the cross, I have a small way of making it known. As most of you know, I like to wear lapel pins. Many are crosses of different types. When people ask me about them, I briefly tell them what the cross means. Then I remove the pin from my jacket and give it to the other person. I go through a fair number of lapel pins this way!

I’d also like to share the way another parishioner makes the cross known to others. My last sermon in April, before I went on sabbatical, spoke about living stones. I gave each of you a polished stone as a reminder that each of us are called to be active Christians! This week when I returned, I received a call from a parishioner. She shared with me that she was praying what to do after that sermon. She said, “Finally, I just said, God ... use me!” It came to her later that she was to make “Jesus beads” for everyone in the parish.

This woman carefully and prayerfully makes the Jesus beads. The 21 beads remind us of the numbers three and seven. The Trinity is made up of three: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Seven reminds us of the days of creation. It is also a symbol for God, perfection and completion. Three knots (Trinity) connect the beads to the cross. Five knots are used to tie the beads together, reminding us of the five wounds suffered by Jesus on the Cross.

This parishioner asks others to use the beads three ways. The first use is the Jesus Prayer with each bead (“Jesus, son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner”). She found this difficult for some people so she said to others, just use a mantra, or one word prayer, like repeating the name of Jesus. Finally, she said, you can just carry the beads with you as a reminder that God in Jesus is always present with us! Now this is action. She has already given away more than 80 of the beads. I have more here for each of you. When I run out, she will give me more to distribute.

Christianity is a faith of being and doing. We are called to take up the cross and follow Jesus. I believe that means explaining to others what the cross means. I believe that means doing little and big things that express our faith to the world! It leaves me only with one question as I conclude ... So what are we going to do for Jesus today?