

Daily Devotions

October 2 - 8, 2022

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Symbols and Faith

The tradition of symbols is rich in the Christian faith, particularly those denominations who find a center and balance in the Eucharist and liturgy that surrounds it. Be it in musical notes, stained glass, carving, or banner form- there are many ways that faith can be communicated without a single word spoken. In a world that sometimes seems filled with angry rhetoric, this is indeed powerful for us to notice, appreciate, and encourage in our daily lives.

Perhaps the most common symbol is that of the cross, but that wasn't always the case. 1 Corinthians gives those of us who take solace and comfort in the sight of an empty cross insight as to the role it played in the early church. Paul is writing to a community divided by quarreling, and he admonishes them with a reminder of the cross of Christ, begging the readers not to empty it of its power (chapter 1:17).

In those days, the Christian movement was dynamic in a way that the brick and mortar of our institutions cannot replicate...yet we can *remember*. Isn't it a bit comforting to know that even in the infancy of the church there was squabbling from time to time? Paul wrote the first letter to the congregation in Corinth because, among other things, people were trying to get a pecking order in place. Whose baptism was superior, Paul's, Apollos', or Peter's? This might have been something that would have hooked him in his work as Saul, but the cross was a reminder to Paul and his audience that humility is foundational to belief.

Likely the last image the people wanted to hear about was a cross. An exercise I like to use in Confirmation is to imagine what would happen if a first century Christian time travelled to our communities in the present day. What would their reaction be to the big buildings with an instrument of death so proudly displayed? Even if we had an opportunity to explain how through the eons the wisdom of God and work of the Spirit had imbued it with the sort of hope that, (by its very nature), can reach into the most broken places in our lives- they likely still wouldn't be too keen to stick around for an after-worship cup of coffee and poundcake.

It's no coincidence that it took hundreds of years for the cross to be used to symbolize faith. In fact, the earliest depiction of the cross in reference to Christianity (that we know of) was graffiti meant to mock Christianity. The Alexamenos Graffito is a crude picture of a donkey on a cross with the words scrawled underneath "Alexamenos worships God." For more reading on this see: *Martin Hengel, Crucifixion in the Ancient World and the Folly of the Message of the Cross (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977).*

This week, we're going to explore other symbols that the early church used to guide and encourage faith in Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Some you may see in the building in which you

attend formal worship, others are rarely used, but still hold special meaning. Each are precious. As make our way through the week, we aren't seeking which is the best, or most appropriate. We don't have to completely understand. Much like Paul encouraged the community in Corinth, think upon the symbols along with Paul's words about how differences don't have to be grounds for dissent:

Think of us in this way: as servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries (1 Corinthians 4:17).

Paul was speaking about himself, Apollos, Peter, and all who labored on behalf of the gospel. Today we, and the symbols that we hold dear, are being called to function much in the same way.

Sunday, October 2, 2022

The Ichthus



Ι	Ιησους	=	Jesus
χ	Χριστός	=	Christ
θ	θεός	=	God
ύ	υιός	=	Son
ς	σωτήρ	=	Savior

While still known only as the People of the Way, the earliest Christians drew the Ichthus to symbolize the teachings of faith in Jesus. Ichthus is the ancient Greek word for fish, and an acronym that served as a covert teaching tool under heavy persecution.

This works on so many levels. Jesus called fishermen to proclaim the nearness of God... even helped them at least once! Fish were used to feed people's hungry stomachs while souls were fed by the preaching, teaching, and mercy of Jesus' ministry of reconciliation. After the Resurrection, the disciples went back to fishing for fish. Jesus met them on the beach and ate fish with them before sending them out to call others to belief in the Triune God.

Prayer: *Holy God, we give you thanks for your gift of grace to humankind. For all of the simple beauty we often overlook- we praise you. Open our hearts, that we may see redemption in you as something never earned, yet freely given, for the sake of Jesus Christ. Amen.*

Monday, October 3, 2022

Spiderman

Ok, so technically not Spiderman the comic book superhero, but my first call of Zion in Fairwater, Wisconsin has in its stained glass a butterfly coming out of a cocoon. And the top *totally* looks like Spiderman's head. I would often use it as an icebreaker at youth events or if I sensed that their attention had wandered. Never at funerals or council meetings though. Well, maybe one or two...

The *butterfly*, however, was used as a way to teach about the transforming power of the love of God. How a caterpillar seems to die, and when it emerges from the spent cocoon, has been made different, beautiful and all together new. It is a timeless reminder that we who are made in the image of God are capable of experiencing the very same as we journey through life. The fragile butterfly is a beautiful symbol of Resurrection.

When we moved to my current call at Bethel, I was a bit disappointed that I no longer had unintentional superheroes in the sanctuary. That is, until my son Mark, then about one year old, started hooting during the church service. We saw through his eyes, among the beautiful pastels of Bethel's windows, were brown glass that look *very much* like owls. It was a silly, yet holy moment, and balance had been restored to my sense of call to parish ministry.

It also reminded me of my earliest memories of worship at St. James in Rudyard. I remember sitting in the balcony trying to see where God was at. I knew somewhere because the adults kept talking like God was in the building. Never feel bad for letting your mind wander while in a church service. Being able to daydream is a miracle all its own!

Prayer: *Generous God, gift us with the wisdom that is found in the childlike delight that you call us into. May we take comfort in being one family united in love for you. Amen.*

Tuesday, October 4, 2022

Bells

The use of bells in worship predates Christianity by hundreds, if not a thousand years, and is one of many meaningful symbols that the Christian faith has incorporated from other faith traditions. Bells have and continue to be used to call people together prior to worship, a prayer aid during, and mark special community observances of joy or mourning. In his book *Man and His Symbols*, Carl Jung wrote, "...(*symbols have*) a wider "*unconscious*" aspect that is never

precisely defined or fully explained. No one can hope to define or explain it. As the mind explores the symbol, it is led to ideas that lie beyond the grasp of reason.” (1964 ed. Pg. 4)

This appeals to me greatly, not only as a pastor, but as someone who is quite aware of my limitations. A holy experience doesn't have to be defined. What may be an ordinary sunrise for one person may change another's life. And that's okay! One person isn't observing the sun incorrectly. The use of bells, in my experience, are a wonderful example of this- perhaps most felt on All Saints Sunday. This is the day where we read the names of the saints in our midst who have died in the past year as the bells toll. Some names are long time members who had a huge church funeral. Others are people who didn't have a church home, and whether the funeral happened in the church building, funeral home, or graveside, all names are read in worship and the bells carry a Resurrection promise into eternity.

I find myself moved during All Saints for many reasons...among them:

+There are people I love who have passed away, and I miss them. Yes, I believe in heaven, but the sorrow and grief remain in my heart. When the bell sounds, I find that I am able to hold on while letting go. The veil between life and death thins with each chime. It's difficult to explain, but a profound experience.

+There's so much more I wish I could do. When we lose someone we love, the first year is always the most difficult, but we never fully get over the loss. There are times when I'm providing pastoral care where I feel like a bit of a fraud...giving advice on topics I grapple with in my own faith. Then the bell rings and I am reminded of Jung's wisdom that there is so much beyond human understanding...and that's okay. To pretend otherwise would be putting ourselves in a place of breaking the First Commandment.

Prayer: Merciful One, call us together that we may bear gentle witness in this world as we seek justice, humility, and peace. Remove arrogance and indignation from our identity as your beloved ones, and lead us to the ideas that you lovingly place beyond the grasp of reason. Amen.

Wednesday, October 5, 2022

Bees

This is one I didn't know about until the pandemic! One of the ways I kept busy while staying socially distant from others was foraging. I began to walk in the woods with no particular destination in mind. It was fun to identify different species of plants and animals and have conversations with other foragers about them. It reminded me of my father, who kept bees and sold honey for many years. I have many happy memories of helping him collect and process the honey. I also marveled how he had a full-time job, was a loving parent, and was able to do all the work that went into taking care of bees.

Knowing the importance of bees to all of creation, I began to do more reading on how to help pollinators and found that the early Christian church used symbols of bees to describe what life together can be like...busy! - (but also sweet and worthwhile).

The website schoolofbees.com has a lot of information about honeybees, including the symbolic and religious history. From that site:

-According to the Bible, it is quite common for Christians of the ancient times to compare their communities to a beehive. Especially with monks and their monasteries. It is said that bees have all the virtues a Christian (strives toward), and this includes wisdom.

-We all know for a fact that one of the most industrious species on the planet would be the bees. They work in an organized fashion and are quite productive. With their hard work, they are able to pollinate thousands of crops, make honey, create beeswax, and royal jelly – all by simply doing their jobs in the hive- which is to care for the queen and feed her offspring. The term “busy bee” has often been used to describe industrious people working hard towards a particular goal.

I think that it is a worthy exercise to think of our faith communities like a beehive. No, no, I'm not saying you elevate an overworked leader and go needle everyone who threatens to come near. But instead, think how much honey a hive would produce if only a few bees went out and collected nectar? Not much at all! In a bee's lifetime, by itself, it collects enough to make one tablespoon of honey. Yet how often do we assume that the work of the church is for those that we pay to do so- like pastors, deacons, administrators, or the lay members who volunteer for leadership?

Instead, what if the default was to be intrinsically motivated to bring the pure love of God with us and make it one with our entire life? Likely there would be a good swarm of activity going on, and the fruits of the Spirit would be evident.

Prayer: *Tireless One, we bring to you our weariness, trusting that you empower us in the baptismal covenant to bear witness to your love in word and deed. Grant us grace when we fail and allow us to properly acknowledge our ego when we succeed. Show us the blessings of servanthood. Amen.*

Thursday, October 6, 2022

Biblical Scenes

One of my favorite parts about worshipping in new settings is to see how God's word is portrayed through the art of the space. At Bethel in Menominee, our building has a beautiful triptych, or three stained glass windows, behind the Communion table. On it are representations of God the Creator, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Although Sunday mornings can be

busy, when things are quiet before or after worship, I like to let my mind wander while looking at them.

Keeping in mind the quote from Tuesday's devotion from Jung, I don't see these as a distillation of a divine message in the least. Rather, for me, they are an invitation to see that God stretches far beyond the walls of our buildings and my understanding. This is a relief when I consider the weight that many bear in their walk of life, myself included. We don't have to be all knowing, but we can enter into the presence of the one who is.

There is a chapel in the Grand Teton National Park that I visited with my family when I was in high school. Instead of stained glass, banners, or other decoration, behind the altar was a clear window perfectly framing the mountains. As I think back upon it, I give thanks that the builders of the chapel recognized a need for a space for contemplation and long thoughts but didn't seek to confine the beauty of God to a building. I was reminded of this when I was in college at NMU and worshipped at Eden Lutheran in Munising. They also have a clear window that overlooks the beautiful harbor that they are situated upon.

The natural world around us bears witness to the divine every bit as much (if not more) than depictions of Biblical scenes. Over and over the Christ story illustrates that the beauty of God is found in the midst of life's routines.

What is depicted in the congregation you worship? What do the images evoke in you?

Prayer: *God of the cosmos, we give you thanks for all the ways you enter into our lives. Bless us with the understanding and peace that we receive in the beauty that is you- in all its forms- intricate and ordinary. Amen.*

Friday, October 7, 2022

Chi Rho



This is a symbol that figures prominently in liturgical faith communities. It is often seen on paraments, stoles, stained glass, and banners. The Chi Rho is an overlay of the Greek letters of

the same names, the first two letters that spell Christ. The ‘Chi’ looks like an X, while the ‘Rho’ a P. As a child, I would see this symbol in worship and try to figure it out. Growing up in Rudyard, Pickford was a rival in many sports. I thought the congregation was supporting the Rudyard Bulldogs by displaying a sign that conveyed “no Pickford Panthers fans allowed here.” If anyone from Pickford is reading this, the Chi Rho **does not** mean that, and you are more than welcome in any worship space that displays it - as is anyone else.

Although I was misinterpreting the symbol, it is an example of the pitfalls that go along with the use of symbols. Because they have such power to move us, those with an agenda that goes against Jesus’ greatest commands to love God and neighbor have, and continue to co-opt, Christian symbols. Whether melding patriotism toward one nation to faith practices, or proudly displaying signs of the Prince of Peace while lifting up leaders who divide through hateful rhetoric, this is something we (individually and together) need to stand against.

This doesn’t mean that we gatekeep faith and the symbols that go along with it. But we can be another voice when people seek to share faith through intimidation, shame, and guilt. The Chi Rho and every other Christian symbol is meant to be shared gently, without coercion.

Prayer: *God of all, broaden our minds to view one another and ourselves as you always have -worthy to be called your own. Keep us from the temptation of self-righteousness, and may we ever serve you in loving humility. In Christ’s name we pray. Amen.*

Saturday, October 8, 2022

Candles

The use of light and shadows play an important part of the rituals of the church. One of the most meaningful worship services in the church year that has to do with light and darkness is the Tenebrae service- most often observed on Good Friday. In Menominee, Bethel Lutheran, Emmanuel Lutheran, and Grace Episcopal congregations join together for this ritual. It is an ancient service where the Passion Story is read, and as we hear of Jesus’ betrayal, arrest, torture, and death, candles are extinguished until all the worshippers are in complete darkness. Often a loud noise is also made to symbolize the earthquake that happened after Jesus’ death.

The purpose of this worship isn’t to convey that darkness is evil and light is good. For too long, that line of thinking had led to fear of anything dark...including fellow humans. As I experience Tenebrae as a leader and as a participant, I embrace the growing darkness. I reflect on how I wish the story could play out differently...what if the people could have recognized Jesus as love incarnate? What would it have been like if the celebration of Palm Sunday had never ended? It is difficult to hear of how he was mocked, beaten, and abandoned. But as the shadows grow, I’m able to reflect on the brokenness and wounds of my own life. As emotions rise, I give thanks to God for the gift of darkness. Because of God’s love in Christ, I can see my wounds, doubts, and fears as an offering to God...and how I don’t have to bear them alone.

What would life be like if the sun always shone? Sleep would elude us and we would forget how to dream. While the darkness can sometimes bring about fear, it can equally be a comfort...that whether we weep in a church service or behind closed doors, we are met by a force that *understands* and accepts us just as we are.

Prayer: *Gentle God, thank you for guiding us through every trial and temptation. We give you thanks for your light that shines. We thank you for the darkness that surrounded us when we were made in secret, and for those who dwell in the light of your eternal embrace. Help us all be faithful stewards of your mysteries. Amen.*
