

Re-considering the Cross

Ash Wednesday 2016

Tim Phillips, Seattle First Baptist Church

Over the years, I have pretty much abandoned the cross as a symbol of my faith. There are good reasons for that, as some of you know.

Ever since Emperor Constantine thought he saw a cross in the clouds, it has been a symbol for various forms of imperial Christianity that often seem to have world domination as their goal.

As the symbol of the Crusades, the cross was part of a campaign that got the ball rolling on the violence we experience in the Middle East to this day. But the Crusaders didn't just have Palestine on their minds. Under the banner of the cross, they killed thousands of Jews in Europe on their way to the Holy Land. They also killed hundreds of our spiritual ancestors, the Anabaptists, who, because they were committed to a life of peace, refused to fight Muslims.

Just as damning has been the use of the cross to justify violence in general and domestic violence in particular. If the cross represents how far God would go to redeem humanity – even subjecting God's Beloved One to the brutality of the cross for the sake of love, then shouldn't we all allow ourselves to be brutalized by family members or partners for the sake of love.

Responding to the use of the cross as a justification for domestic violence, Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker have demonstrated that the early followers of Jesus did not use the cross as a symbol of their faith. A fish. Vines and branches. Images of Paradise, yes. The cross, no. Because the cross was a sign of the very violence and shame they were rejecting.

So, when I see Ash Wednesday coming down the road and I imagine wearing ashes in the form of a cross on my forehead, I have to stop and think about what I am doing.

I have had to re-consider the cross before standing here tonight.

And this is what I have come to say.

I will be wearing ashes in the shape of a cross this evening exactly because of all I have just said.

Perhaps it is counter-intuitive but tonight I will wear a cross of ashes because I own that my tradition has perpetrated this violence and I am, in ways that I may not even understand, complicit in it. I am not above it. I cannot pretend or dismiss it away. I am in it and it is in me.

So, this cross I will be wearing is not jewelry. It is not made of some lovely silver or gold. It is made of ashes because, in the biblical tradition, ashes are a sign of repentance. And this is my opportunity to not only say I'm sorry for whatever violence I and my spiritual tradition have inflicted on the world but to commit myself – again – to the practice of peace.

To return to the biography of Dietrich Bonhoeffer – that pastor and teacher who died in a Nazi concentration camp – for him, the cross was a sign of resistance. As the swastika began replacing the cross not only in German culture but in the churches, Bonhoeffer was clear that the cross stood for something else – it stood for solidarity with Jews whose suffering, he said, was the crucifixion of Jesus happening all over again.

Bonhoeffer had a choice to make – the swastika or the cross. He chose the cross. He chose resistance. In the end, he chose a path that led to his own death.

I've always thought it shocking that Dr. King, painfully aware of the flaming cross of the Klu Klux Klan, didn't abandon the cross altogether. The frightening spectacle of a cross burning in your yard seems like it would have rendered that symbol completely useless for his faith and work.

Still he quotes the old John Bowring hymn:

*In the cross of Christ I glory,
Towering o'er the wrecks of time;
All the light of sacred story
Gathers round its head sublime.*

“We must see the cross,” he writes, “as the magnificent symbol of love conquering hate and of light overcoming darkness. But in the midst of this glowing affirmation, let us never forget that our Lord and Master was nailed to that cross because of human blindness.”

So I will wear this cross of ashes tonight in honor of all the pastor Bonhoeffers and all the Dr. Kings in the world for whom the cross is an act of resistance to hatred and bigotry and, for that reason, were marked for death.

And the truth is, I will wear this cross tonight as a reminder of my mortality. I have to tell you that my mortality weighs heavy on me tonight. The death of Gordon Harper is gripping my heart tonight. Peter Koshi also passed away this week and there are friends in grave circumstances and friends who are bright and brilliant and broken by addiction that may yet take their lives.

Whatever I want to believe about my superpowers – or whatever I want other people to believe about them -- this cross of ashes testifies to the limits of my human existence. The smudge on my forehead isn't meant to hide anything. It's not covering up anything. It's putting right out there the reality of this human life I share with you and you share with me.

Let me be clear that this cross of ashes is not something to be ashamed of. It's not a blemish on my otherwise perfect face. It is a promise I make to unmask myself and to be real. It's like those words by Rod Romney:

*We lift our hearts, we bring our lives,
Just as we are, without disguise,
O Spirit come, create us new,
That we may walk in peace with you;
That we may love ourselves in you;
That we may serve this world for you.*

I have come tonight, with the help of those who are honest about the pain and struggle of the cross, with the testimony of the Dietrich Bonhoeffers and the Dr. Kings and the Gordon Harpers of the world, with the honest sharing of my own mortality, with the gift of your presence here tonight, to re-consider the cross and to receive on my own body that which marks me as blessedly human -- as one with whom the God of all glory has identified in the cross.

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing not only to God but to all of you this evening. Amen.

NOTES

Charles Marsh in *Strange Glory: A Life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Vintage Books, 2014), see p. 172. *Strength to Love*, Martin Luther King, Jr. (Fortress Press, 1963), p.48.