Holy Cross Day – September 14, 2025 Pastor Chris Repp
1 Corinthians 1:18-24 Grace Lutheran Church, Champaign, Illinois

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

If you read my September newsletter article, then you've had a brief introduction to the history of this minor festival that we call Holy Cross Day. I mentioned that article how the emperor Constantine coopted the symbol of the cross for his own purposes in the early 300s, and how his regime manufactured the legend of his mother discovering the "true cross" of Jesus as a church was being built on the site of his crucifixion. That is what this festival day was originally about – a completely made-up event, created for the purpose of legitimizing and supporting the powers that be. Which is supremely ironic, since it was those very powers that oppressed Jesus' people and put Jesus to death, aided and abetted by the leaders of Jesus' people. But, as I also noted in that newsletter article, in spite of all that, we have kept this day on our calendar because it gives us a chance to focus in on the true meaning of the cross and to confront all those misuses of the cross that have crept into our culture and our piety.

Where to start? Maybe, let's get a fix on where we are. What is the cross to us in this time and place? How is it used? I counted up three crosses on the walls of my own house, which maybe isn't a lot for a pastor. Some pastors I know collect crosses. They have entire walls full of them. I also wear a cross around my neck, but only on Sundays, or other days when I'm leading services. You might say it's part of my uniform. It's reminder to me and to you of my commitment to my calling to represent Jesus and the message about the cross that Paul writes about in our second reading. That's a calling that all of us who are baptized share, so maybe you wear a cross too. And maybe you also have a cross or two on your walls at home too like we do, as a similar sort of reminder. So the cross is a marker of identity and commitment for Christians. But it's more than just a personal reminder. It is also public. It lets other people know that we are Christian. That's what the big cross on the outside wall of the church is for. It identifies this building instantly as a Christian church. What the cross is *not* seen as in our time and place is terrifying or offensive. It is not meant to provoke fear or revulsion.

But of course there are notable exceptions to that use of the cross, exceptions that are associated with another symbol. So, let's do a similar mental exercise with that symbol. (This one.) The noose. What is a noose to us in our time and place? How is it used? I'm going to guess that none of you have nooses on display on your walls at home, and trust that that is a pretty safe guess. Because I'm also going to guess that you know how nooses are used as symbols. They are also symbols that are used as a reminder, a reminder of a period in our nation's history, from the 1870s to as late as the 1950s, when over four thousand black people, mostly men, sometimes women, sometimes with their children, were publicly lynched in 12 southern states. And lynching was more than just hanging. It was humiliating and gruesome, often slow and painful. And it was a public spectacle, attended by white men, women, and children as a festive event. There were even food vendors. Photographers took pictures of the dead and dying victims and sold them as postcards that people would send to friends and family. The noose has been used, and is still used, by white supremacists as reminder that white people once did that to black people with impunity, and a threat that it could happen again. It is used when black people speak out for civil rights and racial justice, or simply when they commit the offense of becoming successful and prominent citizens. You've heard the reports of nooses being left at work places, constructions sites, homes, and university campuses – including right here at the University of Illinois in 2019. The noose *is* a symbol that is meant to be terrifying and offensive. It is meant to intimidate, and to provoke revulsion and fear.

Now you might be wondering why in the world I am talking about nooses on Holy Cross Sunday. If you haven't made the connection already, let me be clear. The noose helps us to understand the original meaning of the cross and of Jesus' crucifixion, because the cross in ancient Rome carried the same kind of meaning that the noose caries for us today. Like the noose, the cross was a tool of oppression, used against certain kinds of people to terrorize and intimidate, to remind those people who was in control, who had the power of life and death over them. And those certain kinds of people in the Roman Empire were slaves and rebellious foreigners. Crucifixion could not by law be used to execute Roman citizens. Crucifixion was also a humiliating public spectacle involving a horrible, gruesome, and excruciatingly painful form of execution.

It is when we understand this, when we can make this connection, that we can begin to appreciate the scandal of the cross, and even its political significance. To the people of the ancient world it was incomprehensible that God would choose to come among us in Jesus and die the humiliating, painful death of a slave and foreigner. It was even more mind-boggling that this kind of death was God's means of conquering the oppressive powers of this world and undermining the powers of sin, death, and evil, that it was the way God brought about God's reign into the world, the kingdom of God that we pray for in the Lord's Prayer.

On the cross, Jesus identified himself with the lowest of the low: the slaves, the foreigners, the criminals, those who were feared and despised by respected, upstanding, decent people, people of morality and piety. The meek, the hungry, the poor, the trafficked, and those who cared for them and who desired justice and dignity for them – those were, and are, Jesus' people, the people he gave special attention to, the people to whom he declared the Kingdom of Heaven belongs.

It's when we fail to make this connection that we can allow the cross to be misused as symbol of the exact opposite of what God is up to in Jesus. We allow it to be coopted by the likes of Constantine, the Crusaders, and the Conquistadors, as a banner of war and conquest, of oppression and exploitation. We also allow it to be used as a public symbol in the culture wars, to signal "us" against "them," to support the status quo, and to enable good, upstanding, decent people to continue despising all those who aren't like us.

The cross is a paradox, an inherent contradiction. It is the nexus of good and evil, of life and death. It is the place where God in Jesus Christ meets us at our very worst; in our cruelty, in our suffering, in our hatred, in our despair, and in our hopelessness. And right there, on the cross, he takes our very worst upon himself, wrestling it into the grave, so that our very worst does not become the last word on our lives and our identities. In exchange, Jesus gives us his very best: his compassion, his mercy, his right-relationship with God and with the world, and most of all, his life, shaped by all of those very best qualities. And now, freed from the worst and endowed with the best, we are drawn into his life and his values, loving others, even when they are at their worst, with persistent care, compassion, and mercy, giving ourselves away in him for the life of the world.

May we keep the paradox of the cross ever before us in our lives of faith and service in the world. May it inform and empower our witness. May it strengthen and embolden our resistance to the powers of sin, death, and evil. And may the peace of God, the peace that the cross of Jesus accomplishes, the peace that passes all understanding, keep our hearts and mind in Christ Jesus. Amen.