

Theological Observer

Holy Cross Day

"Now is the judgment of this world, now shall the ruler of this world be cast out; and I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself." He said this to show by what death he was to die. (John 12:31-33)

The durability of an institution depends on its traditions. Our seminary's tradition was disrupted by moving from Springfield to Fort Wayne in 1976. To stay connected with the past, the Luther statue was brought from Springfield to its pedestal at the campus entrance. A less obvious relic was the former Kramer Hall bell hanging in the shorter of the two towers outside the chancel of the chapel, and so the tradition of graduating students ringing the bell after taking their last exam could continue. A third relic, a less than artistically compelling crucifix from the Springfield chapel, appeared unheralded on the altar. The high-peaked ceiling of this chapel was intended by the architect to point the worshipers' attention to God's transcendent glory, but the mystery of Christianity is that God's glory is found not in heaven but in the cross. Even the huge cross on the chancel wall was an afterthought. In Springfield the crucifix corresponded with a seminary set in a section of town where petty crimes often escalated into felonies. Students lived in a world defined by a theology of the cross. The Fort Wayne campus reflected the Missouri Synod's glory days when in the 1950's it seemed that two new congregations were opened each week. All this was reinforced by the massive mosaics of Christ reigning in glory in the south classroom building and the library. The campus lawns were of golf-course quality. Visiting German clergy called this place "the Missouri Synod Country Club."

All this stood in contrast to what Paul said: "God forbid that I should glory except in the cross of Christ Jesus my Lord" (Gal 6:14). And so the diminutive crucifix taken from Springfield redirected the gaze of the worshipers from the celestial heights of the chapel to the agony of the cross. It is an antidote to finding God in heaven and compels us to find God in the cross. Like a hot knife cutting through butter, the figure of the crucified Christ disembowels any theology of glory. "In Christ dwells the fullness of God bodily" (Col 2:9). Some years later another theophany occurred. A vividly colored crucifix was attached to this pulpit. Like the true cross discovered by St. Helen in Jerusalem, its precise provenance is unknown—perhaps a classroom or a cellar in Springfield. But still there was more to come. A graduating class made a gift of the processional cross with an equally vivid depiction of the crucified Christ. Some said that crosses were customary, bland crucifixes were acceptable, but the vivid depictions of Christ's death were best left to Roman Catholics. That kind of crucifix has all the marks of a Mel Gibson production—a bit too gory. With three crucifixes in place in this chapel, the

preachers in this pulpit could hardly avoid saying with Paul that they were determined to know nothing except Jesus Christ and him crucified. Another graduating class had crucifixes placed in every classroom. Step by step, trench upon trench, through the incursion of one crucifix after another, the royal banners were going forth in this chapel and Satan was in retreat. The blood flowing from the side of the crucified one was the blood of the Holy Communion, and the water was the water of Baptism whereby Christ incorporated drowned sinners into his body.

Things divine do not look divine to us. For the world the cross is an instrument of torture, but for God it was the moment of glory. "Now is the judgment of this world, now shall the ruler of this world be cast out; and I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself" (John 12:31-32). A sweater turned inside out looks different. So what appears to us as the abyss of hell turned inside out becomes the moment of judgment whereby God justifies all men to himself and condemns those who refuse to find him in the agony of the cross. In ordinary history the crucifixion is one event among others, but for God it is the only moment that has meaning, it is the moment without beginning or end, a moment in which the creator sacrifices himself for his creatures to become their redeemer.

No one knows if St. Helen found the wood of the cross. Probably not. Crosses were stakes in the ground recycled for the next waiting victims. Her son, the Emperor Constantine, by making the cross a legally recognized symbol, emptied the cross of its shame, and a cross without shame is no cross. All this is a parable of our lives. Paul found the cross in his own sufferings for the sake of the gospel. We can do no better.

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This sermon was preached at Concordia Theological Seminary on Holy Cross Day, September 14, 2010, in Kramer Chapel. The Editors