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## *The Cross: Pain, Paradox, and Love*

**A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam G. Candler**  
**Proper 19 – Year A – In anticipation of Holy Cross Day**

*Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. The Lord drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night, and turned the sea into dry land; and the waters were divided. The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. ... But the Israelites walked on dry ground through the sea, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. Thus the Lord saved Israel that day. Exodus 14:21-22, 29-30a*

Why do we carry these crosses everywhere?

We wear them around our necks and on our arms. Some are made of the most ordinary materials and some are made of the most expensive. Some are as simple as two plain lines. Others are ornate and complicated, with no end to their beautiful variation. We lift crosses up into the air, and we process in lines behind them. We place them on our walls and doors.

But what do they actually mean?

Do they mean simply that we are pious? That we are warm and cozy, soft-hearted people? Do they mean that we harbor some long lost spiritual dimension in our past? Do they mean simply that we are from a religious family?

No, the cross means more, much more, than those things. Sadly, regrettably, tragically, the cross has also been used wrongly. It has been used in acts of violence. It has been used in acts of racism and anti-semitism and prejudice. It has been used in ways that are directly antagonistic to the way of Jesus.

No, the cross means something that is the very opposite of violence, and it means something that is much more profound than mere emotional pietism.

In several ways, the cross starts with Moses. Jesus himself alluded to Moses when he said that just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so would Jesus be lifted up. In the Hebrew scriptures, Moses lifted up lots of things! He lifted up a serpent, and it became a staff, the staff that would aid him in leading God's people out of oppression from the pharaoh. Moses then lifted up his hand, his very hand, and caused the waters of the Red Sea to part so that God's people could be liberated.

Jesus, the new Moses, knew that he would be lifted up too. He knew that he would be lifted up on a cross, the wicked instrument of torture in his day. In Jesus' day, crucifixion was a shameful form of death, akin to the electric chair, or even akin to lynching. To wear a cross around your neck in Jesus' time would be akin, in our time, to wearing an electric chair around your neck. Strange. Horrible. Brutal.

What happened? It is a testament to the power of Christ that the image changed. (I will not go into the theological details here, but I will during this morning's Sunday School class at the Dean's forum!) But the image became transformed. Jesus

“made an instrument of shameful death to be for us a means of life and peace.” That transformation declares that even the most painful suffering and most gruesome death are not stronger than God. God is greater. God defeats death at the cross.

Why the cross? Why do we carry these crosses everywhere? Today, I have three words with which to answer that question. The cross, the holy cross, means three things.

First of all, the cross means pain. Pain. I wish it didn't mean this. I wish life itself did not include pain. There are some religions, in fact, who try to say that pain and suffering do not exist, that they are just illusions.

But Christianity admits that yes, pain and suffering really do exist. In fact, we share an important tenet with Buddhism in this regard. Life is suffering. Life, we believe, is much more than that, of course. But life does involve suffering. None of us gets around pain and suffering. The way to the other side of pain and suffering is not around it, but through it.

It is Jesus who shows us how to go through, not around, pain and suffering. The holy cross, then, reminds us that Jesus himself encountered pain, and betrayal and false witness and innocent suffering, too – more so than most of us ever will. We follow Jesus and the cross because they show us the way through. Remember: the cross never gives us permission to inflict pain; it gives us the strength to live through it.

Secondly the cross means paradox. This is more complex. It starts with the very paradox between suffering and joy, and between death and life. The cross means both death and life. Christians are supposed to know how to deal with both. The cross, two simple intersecting lines, represents the truth that life always has two lines going through it, at least two lines, usually many more.

The very shape of the cross, an intersection of two lines, can be seen as paradox, as the meeting of two different worlds. Many people have understood the horizontal axis of the cross to mean reconciliation with each other, and the vertical axis of the cross to mean reconciliation of humanity with God, with the transcendent. Perhaps the cross means the paradox of reconciliation.

Christianity is a deeply spiritual way, not a rational way. People who wear the cross care about the reconciliation of “both/and,” not “either/or.” Paradox means the ability to live with opposites: for instance, in the midst of the sea, the Israelites walked on dry ground. For instance: in Jesus, we live with both humanity and divinity, concepts that are often seen as opposites, but which, to us, are not.

Finally, love. The cross means love. It was love that brought Jesus into the world, and it was love that led Jesus to the cross. The reason we follow Jesus to the cross is because we want to love like he loved.

In short, wearing the cross around our necks means that we choose to love. In the midst of pain, we choose to love. In the midst of paradox, we choose to love. In the midst of things we cannot hold together, things we cannot understand, we choose to love. In the midst of life, we choose to love, to give ourselves for each other. To for-give.

Love was the choice Jesus made, and he made that choice most powerfully at the cross, the holy cross.

In the Christian calendar, today, September 14 is known as Holy Cross Day. But, of course, every day is Holy Cross Day, because every day shows us something about pain, paradox, and love.

The Holy Cross means pain, but it means paradox even more, and even more still, the cross means love. Jesus loves us, this we know, for the Cross tells us so.

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