

The Wisdom of the Cross

Holy Cross Sunday (September 14, 2019)

I

Our scriptures teach us that following "the way that leads to life" is the way that humanity becomes fully humane -- the way we become virtuous -- truly just and compassionate; patient and kind. The things that make our lives truly meaningful and happy.

We're taught that **growing in love** is the key, for love is the source of all the other virtues. And we're taught that we grow in love by receiving God's absolute love for us, which empowers us to love God back, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. This is how humanity becomes fully humane.

At least, that is the theory. But..... does it actually **work**, in practice? For the real proof is in the pudding, not in a recipe that **sounds** wonderful, but may not actually turn out.

I suspect that, like me, some of us have tried and tried and tried again to follow this divine recipe for growing in love, but found that, in the end, **we don't actually turn out** quite as "humane" as it promised. We find that, when pressed by persons or situations that rub us the wrong way, we easily become quite **in-humane** -- both to ourselves and to others. And this can leave us feeling quite bad -- as though we're "failures" at faith. We think to ourselves: "**I followed the recipe. And it's a 'divine recipe'; so it must work! Just not for me.**" We can easily fall into the downward spiral of "Woe is me! I'm such a bad Christian!" -- which sucks the faith, hope, and love right out of us. But, somehow, we resolve to keep trying.

If, like me, you have struggled with your faith in this way, our readings on this Holy Cross Sunday **shed light** on our dilemma. For they help us to understand more deeply the "divine recipe" for growing in love, and how to follow it. And, as we'll see, the recipe is really not quite as simple as it sounds. There is a key ingredient in it that we often forget to add.

II

As you would expect, all of our readings on this Holy Cross Sunday, are about the Cross of Christ -- the deepest symbol of our faith, the crux of divine love, the heart of our Eucharist, the real **means** of our growth and transformation.

The Cross is a *mysterious* thing. No matter what we've been told, it's meaning is not obvious, but hidden. It goes against the grain of our ordinary ways of thinking. It is a "stumbling block" to how we usually understand life. For how can something so *profoundly inhumane* **also be the key** -- to developing our humanity, to growing in love?

When we read the "divine recipe" for becoming fully humane -- that we're to dwell in God's love, and love our neighbors as ourselves -- we often fail to see that the Cross is the key ingredient in the recipe, what actually makes it rise and not fall flat. Without the Cross, it falls to the level of a mere platitude that **sounds** good, but lacks the power to actually transform our hearts and minds and lives.

We all know the common refrains about the Cross -- that Jesus died on it to save us from our sins and give us eternal life. And that he did so "for God so loved the world." But what does this actually **mean**? How does the Cross actually **help** us to grow in love in our daily lives?

They're not easy questions. To answer them, Jesus takes us back to a sacred symbol of Israel: **the bronze serpent** in our first reading (Numbers 21:4b-9.)

There we find the Israelites -- all bit up by poisonous snakes, ridden with guilt and fearing death. They confess their sins to Moses and ask him, to ask God, to "take away the snakes."

And Moses prays. But God doesn't take away the snakes, like they asked. Instead God instructs Moses to give them **another** snake! But it's a snake of a different kind. It's a symbol. And because it comes from God, through the helpful hands of Moses, it's a sacred symbol.

As the story goes, **it wasn't enough** for the Israelites to simply have the symbol physically "there" in their midst. It had to be held up on a pole by their leader, and they had to "look" at it -- intentionally "see" it -- for it to have its healing effect.

To "**see**" something is an old metaphor for "**understanding**" it. If I say "I **see** what you mean," I'm saying that I **understand** what you've said to me. And so to "look" at, and "see," something in this sense -- is **not about** taking a casual glance at it with our physical eyes, **but about** engaging our hearts and minds to understand what it is saying to us.

So when the Israelites "looked at" the bronze serpent in this more serious way -- What were they to see? What were they to understand?

The symbol was created to take them several places in their hearts and minds.

Perhaps first of all, it was to take them back to the Garden of Eden, to the clever serpent who spins **the great illusion** which persuades humanity that "the way that leads to life" is actually vicious, not virtuous. That becoming virtuous is just a divine scam that God uses to keep humanity from getting their hands on the good things they deserve, but which God wants to keep, all for himself. The symbol reminded them that when their hearts and minds get infected with these illusions, they **unknowingly** abandon "the way that leads to life" and begin walking on "the way that leads to death" -- fully persuaded that they are choosing **wisely** -- when, in fact, they are **deluded**, and making choices that will do harm to themselves and others. And so, the symbol spoke to them of their vulnerability to **thinking they know what they're doing**, when actually, as Jesus later says on the Cross, "**they know not what they do.**" This was the "dark side" of the symbol.

But it has another side. The serpent was "held up" on a pole by Moses for all to see, **like a trophy of war**, a sign that their enemy had been defeated. The "clever" serpent that worked to delude humanity, persuading them that good was evil and evil was good, had been **defeated** by God's gift to humanity of his Word, the Jewish Scriptures. For they exposed the "clever" lies of the serpent and replaced them with divine truth. The **defeated** snake, held up for all to see, spoke of the **healing wisdom** of God's Word. How it frees our hearts and minds of **illusions** about our lives that lead us to make poor choices. How it teaches us how to walk wisely, in "the way that leads to life", how not to fall off track, and how to get back on track when we do. This was the bright side of the symbol.

And so, as they "see" the bronze serpent, as they **understand** its dark and bright sides, it gives them both the **diagnosis** and the **treatment** of their affliction. It clarifies how they "fell" into illusion, and how God is lifting them out of it. It leads them to repentance, to changing their minds about how they were understanding and living life. It leads them to surrender their lives (again) to God. Who removes the guilt of their "fall" with forgiving love, and gives them hope to begin living their lives anew, in the light.

In our gospel reading (John 3:13-17), Jesus chooses this **one... particular...** Jewish symbol to help us understand the Cross.

He wants us to **understand** -- that what the sacred symbol of the bronze serpent accomplished **partially**, for **only** the Israelites, and **only** on one occasion, must be accomplished **fully**, for **all** humanity, and for all time. And that this is what he would accomplish on the Cross.

On the Cross, he would unmask the illusions, the lies, that capture human hearts and minds, and persuade them that the "**wisest**" choices of all are the ones that increase their **status**, their **esteem**, their **power**, in their own eyes and in the eyes of men.

He would reveal the truth -- that such choices are born **not of wisdom**, but of a "snakey" **cleverness**. A cleverness that **all of humanity**, with our big brains, are highly vulnerable to. He would reveal that such "clever" choices actually diminish our humanity, not develop it.

When he is on the Cross, all who "look" will "see" that it is this very "cleverness" that put him there. For it always crucifies those that thwart its aims -- imagining that this will remove the obstacles to its desires -- as it always has, in the long history of the blood of martyrs, since the beginning of time. But **this** time, it will not work. In fact, it will do just the opposite.

For when the **Messiah** is lifted up on the Cross, all who "look" upon him, will have the veil lifted from their eyes. They will see the madness and the evil of this "cleverness" for what it is. They will see it at work within themselves. And the serpent will lose its power over their hearts and minds. They will be set free, no longer simply by the wisdom of the Word that can be read or heard, but by the Word made flesh, by the Wisdom of Christ, who is himself... "the way that leads to life." He can easily be killed by "clever" men, but death cannot hold him. He will be with them always, leading them within their hearts and minds -- throughout their lives in this world -- into the eternal life of God.

III

When we hear the "divine recipe" for becoming **fully humane**, as we were created to be.... When we hear we are to dwell in God's love, and to love our neighbors as ourselves... We often fail to see, to understand, that this requires wisdom.

Not some 'high falutin' wisdom, but what St. Paul calls "the wisdom of the Cross" (1 Corinthians 1:18-24.) This is the recipe's secret ingredient. The formula doesn't actually "work" without it.

We need the power of the Cross, not just in emergencies, but every day and night.

When we get up in the morning, and aim, in this new day, to dwell in God's love and to love others as we love ourselves..... If we're listening..... the Spirit of Christ will remind us of the Cross, of our great vulnerability to a "cleverness" that will keep us from achieving that noble aim. The Spirit will call us to "look" to the Cross. The Spirit will **teach** us what it means for us today. The Spirit will inspire us to embrace it in our hearts and minds, and to keep embracing it throughout our day. To be sure, we will still fall into that "snakey" cleverness from time to time during the day. And do things we shouldn't, and fail to do things we should. Given our great vulnerability, that's quite predictable. But whenever it happens, if we stop.... and listen..... the Spirit will remind us -- again & again -- to come back to the Cross, for an infusion of divine love and wisdom. And we will rise again, dust ourselves off, and get on with our day.

At night, when our day is over, and we're reflecting on how it went -- how well we rested in God's love and loved our neighbors as ourselves; how we fell; how long it took us to get back up; and so on. If we listen....The Spirit will remind us again, remind us to bring our whole day to the Cross, and to leave it there, as a love offering. **Thankful** for the day's victories. **Learning** from its defeats. But leaving them **all** at the Cross.

This is just as important as our daytime awareness of the Cross. We can have "cleverness attacks" at night as well. They can keep us up, going over & over the things we **should've** and **shouldn't** have done; the things **others** should've and shouldn't have done; what might happen next; and so on. We need the Love and Wisdom of the Cross in the night -- to keep our hearts and minds from "spinning off" into these vicious cycles; and to "break us out" when when we've gotten caught up in them. The Cross creates in us the **peace** that we need to get a good night's rest, and wake up ready for a new day in the morning.

The Cross is **probably** something that Christians should understand fairly well !!!

Both in theory and in practice.

For it is not only what enables us to truly flourish in the "little picture" of our daily lives. It also helps us understand the "big picture" of our world -- of the **humanity** it is striving to develop -- and the **inhumanity** it is striving to deliver itself from. It is the Cross that gives us **hope** in all of this, because it empowers us to understand, and to act, wisely and in love.

In **all** of his words to us in scripture, Jesus is teaching us the Wisdom of the Cross.

And if we listen... the Spirit will remind us of all that he has said.

Thanks be to God.

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