

“Signs of the Cross”

A Sermon Delivered by Rev. Tamara Lebak, Associate Minister
At All Souls Unitarian Church in Tulsa, on March 29th, 2009

It has been less than a year since our move to our house on the river. (Which was so beautiful covered in snow this morning.) In several boxes in our garage, still to be unpacked, are 25 to 30 crosses of varying size and type, waiting to be hung on our walls.

My fascination with crosses came early, even though the churches of my youth failed to include me. You all know those stories; I have told them before. But here’s the short version again: I couldn’t join the black Baptist church because I was white, I didn’t join the white Baptist church because I was ostracized for dancing in the church following my Baptism, and the Methodists – God bless ‘em – did not bother to hide their irritation at my questions about the Apostle’s Creed and who was going to hell. So, in my crisis of faith, in my teens, I turned to education, and to French Existentialism instead of religion. They seemed to be able to handle my questions, as well as my anger, about being so easily dismissed. The rules seemed clear and logical. Education also seemed to be a lot more inclusive than the versions of church that had been presented to me, in my limited perspective, at the time.

My fascination for crosses began at Pere La Chaise cemetery near Paris when I was sixteen. This also happened to be when I first fell in love with photography. I loved freezing an image in time and space so that I could appreciate the detail. In the photographs I could even discover things I may not have noticed through the lens. I was an exchange student to Belgium at the time, and had taken a trip from Liege, Belgium to Paris, France. I had my mom’s 35mm *real film* camera (remember those?) loaded with black and white film.

Surrounded mostly by above-ground crypts and beautiful monuments, I took three rolls of film, of nothing but crosses. Over 100 pictures. They came out even better than I had imagined. The metal and stone crosses in black and white transcended time for me. In this stone garden of memory there were crosses of all sorts. There were what some call *Greek* crosses, with four arms of equal length, like the Red Cross symbol. This cross, I later discovered, is a common sign found in the artifacts of Greece and Transylvania. There are artifacts dating to 9500 BCE displaying the Greek cross, which symbolizes the horizon and the ascent and descent of the sun.

There were Indian crosses in stone, a sort of Swastika-like cross, which was used as a mark of blessing for nearly 4000 years before it was imprinted on our minds as a symbol of the Third Reich. The Indian cross was a symbol of auspiciousness. It has been used as a symbol of

the sun, of the four directions (North, East, South, and West) and of the world-wheel (the eternally changing world, around a fixed, unchanging center or god – a supreme divinity, In Sanskrit swastika means *sva* (one's own) and *astika* (it is). For some cultures the Swastika and the Indian cross represented lightning, fire, or light, life, health and wealth. Used by many cultures around the world, including in the near and far east, North America, Africa and Europe, the Swastika has been preserved in the sewing of the Romanian women from Transylvania (our religious ancestors.) The Indian cross can even be found in the Fifth Century representation of the Buddha's Footprint.

Along the meandering paths of Pere La Chaise I took photos of many crosses. I imagine there were *solar* crosses, which is the cross with bars of equal length inside the circular shape of the sun. The solar cross emphasizes the ever recurring cyclical nature of the seasons. This is likely the origin of the Greek cross and so is even older. The solar cross is the simplest conceivable representation of the union of opposed polarities. Probably the oldest symbol in the world, it appeared in Asian, American, European, and Indian art, from the dawn of human history. The solar cross is also called the *wheel* cross, for it appears as a wheel with four spokes. The four-armed freestanding cross represents shadows cast by the rising and setting sun at the two solstices. In time, the wheels lost their rim and it began to resemble a Greek cross.

I also imagine in that cemetery there were carvings of the *tau* cross (where the cross bar is all the way at the top) like a capital T, which was used to mark sacred water jars. The tau likely developed from the widespread and ancient symbol of the sun god, and is also representative of the Roman god Mithras. The tau was known as the 'cross' of the Hebrew Scriptures, the mark made by faithful Israelites to distinguish them from those of their kinsfolk who had lapsed into paganism long before Jesus was crucified.

On some of the stone crypts there were *Egyptian* crosses, or *ankhs*, which represent life and regeneration. This cross is also called *crux ansata* which means "cross with a handle." It was adopted by the Gnostics as the symbolic representation of both physical and eternal life. The top loop symbolizes the sun on the horizon. It has also been described as symbolizing the place where the polarities of male and female meet in order to create life – that magical and mysterious process of life's creation.

I came home from my excursion to Pere La Chaise, with picture after picture of mainly the *Latin* cross: the cross we have come to know as the symbol of Christianity. The *Latin* cross is also called the *Roman*, *Protestant*, or *Western* cross. The Latin cross was actually used as a pagan symbol for a *millennium* before the founding of the Christian Church. It has been found in

China and Africa. It appears on Scandinavian Bronze Age stones, depicting the destructive hammer of Thor, their god of thunder and war. To pagan cultures, the Latin (now Protestant) cross, was regarded a magical symbol, bringing good luck and diverting evil. Rock carvings of the cross have been interpreted as a solar symbol, or a symbol of Earth, with its points representing north, south, east, and west. The Latin cross, in some cultures, has also been seen as a representation of the human form. The upper section corresponds to the north wind, the most powerful, the all-conquering giant, the head and intelligence. The base is the south wind, the seat of fire and passion, and of melting and burning. The right beam is the east wind, the heart and the source of life and love. And the left beam - the gentle wind from the spirit land, the dying breath and the subsequent journey into the unknown.

I framed several of those black and white pictures of crosses from Pere La Chaise, and they have hung in nearly every home I have lived in since then. They have moved with me. And as I have matured, so has the depth of my understanding of the cross. When I first brought those pictures home I was chastised a bit by my friends. They knew I was not a Christian, especially not then, and pictures of cemetery crosses struck them as a bit morbid. But to me, they seemed to represent a truth that went beyond Pere La Chaise. And even beyond Christianity. A truth that we are living at the crossroads of life and death. Seeing crosses over crypts and mausoleums seemed to send me a *carpe diem* message Of “Remember! Life is fleeting! Pay attention! Seize the day!”

Once it was known that I liked crosses, everyone began giving them to me as gifts. I have a hearty collection of crosses now, shaped and carved, fired and molded, silver and bronze. The pinnacle of my collection, though, is a pre-Hurricane Katrina New Orleans driftwood cross. It is a blatant examples of the crossing of cultures. It is decorated with a statue of St. Christopher, folk art painted shells, and of course – a real chicken foot. (A bit to voodoo for some but I love it!)

In all my research, what I have found most fascinating is the versatility of the symbol of the cross. It has the ability to *incorporate* (to take into its meaning, into its body) whatever culture that happens to contain it. It sends a radical message of rejecting duality – a versatile message of hope. And that is part of the message I want to bring to you this morning.

You see, the meaning of any symbol, even the cross, comes from a variety of places. We have to *add up* the various meanings in order to land on the truth. (And the addition sign just happens to be a cross as well.) We need to *add* the *history* of the symbol, to the *intention* of the one using, declaring, or wearing that symbol. If addition is too complicated, maybe the cross will

help us remember to turn things on their side a bit, and *multiply* (the multiplication symbol, once again a cross, now on its side.) Multiply the *cultural* meaning of the symbol with the *interpretation* of the person observing that symbol. In our addition or multiplication we can see that meaning-making is a *process*, and we can use the symbol of the cross to remind us.

Where meaning lies is quite tricky. When we read a story, when we hear words, when we speak, the *real* meaning – the truth – lies somewhere *between* the speaker, the symbols or language, and the listener, reader, or observer. It is a process, an unfolding, somewhere in between. So the truth lies at the center point – at the crossroads – where all of these meanings intersect.

One of the reasons I have such deep affection for the Bible is its capacity to hold multiple meanings. First of all, in the Bible, *cross* shows up all over the place – hardly ever as a noun, rather it appears as a verb. Crossing rivers, crossing towns, crossing over to the other side. All beautiful metaphors for the journey on which we all find ourselves in this world. Actually, the first time the word *cross* is used as a *noun* in the Bible, it is not to refer to the cross of Jesus. It is used to refer to the crossroads: that choice point in our lives where we must make a decision of which path to take. The choice point from which our future will come. The image brought immediately to my mind when I see a cross, is an intersection where we are at the center, trying to make a choice, trying to make meaning.

Several weeks ago we were blessed to have Rev Dr. Rebecca Parker here at All Souls preaching on her new book *Saving Paradise*. Dr. Parker explained that in her research, the main message of Christianity was not focused on Jesus' suffering and death on the cross until Charlemagne.

During the conflict between the Saxons and Charlemagne's empire, a debate about the Eucharist erupted between Saxon theologians and Charlemagne's court theologians. After over a century of debate, and the imposition of a new death-centered theology by the point of the sword, the crucified Christ displaced the risen Christ.

In the wake of this conflict, the first image of a dead Jesus emerges. After that, crucifixion images begin to spread. But what came before as the symbol of Christianity?

I want to go back even further – before the crucifix, before Charlemagne. Because the first Christian symbols were not the crucifix, or even the empty cross on which Jesus died. In fact, in my research, it seems that the cross alone, the Latin cross, was not seen as the symbol of Christianity until Constantine 300 years after Jesus lived. Scholar John Denham Parsons wrote

in his book *The Non Christian Cross*, “During the first three centuries of our common era, no relic bears a representation of an instrument of execution such as we cause to appear in our sacred scriptures.” There is no evidence of a cross as it is presented in Sunday school today. The word often translated as “cross” that appears in Mark, (I brushed up on my Greek for you this morning.) It is the Greek *stauros*, which simply means stake, and does not imply any cross bar. That image was added later. There are stakes of many different kinds, and some are used as methods of torture and capital punishment. But there are no depictions of the Latin cross as we know it, referred to as a *stauros*, until the *Fourth Century*. Then came Constantine, who worshipped the sun as the source of life. His famous vision of using the Greek letters X P I was an adaptation of a Gaulish solar deity. It was a way to unify two armies coming together to conquer. It was reinforced by the masts and the bows of their ships. The sign of the conquering Roman state became that of the cross. And the nation became Christian with Sun-day as our Sabbath and the sign of the Sun God our symbol.

So what does all this mean and why does it matter? What matters is that the sign of the cross has a history long before Christianity. It is grounded in “that which gives us life.” Not that which takes away the life of the son of man. The cross is that which unites two opposing polarities. The Unitarian Universalist Christian Fellowship has met here all weekend, holding numerous worship services and celebrating their identity as Unitarian Universalists who find value in the message of Jesus. And yesterday, Bishop Pearson spoke about the Garden of Eden. We are given the right to eat from any tree in the garden but the tree of duality – the tree of good and evil. The tree that divides life into good and evil. And our salvation now lies in the awareness of where these two meet – in the hearts of humankind.

So what does the cross mean to you? What is your relationship to the cross and with the cross? The answer lies somewhere in the conversation between you and your history, your culture, your revelation. For even in a purely Christian church the answer varies widely, and assumptions may keep you far away from truth. For me, the cross is about uniting dualities. The message of Jesus, and his life, help me to do that. His idea of recognizing divinity *within* man – *within* Humanity. And since Humanity did, in fact, partake of the fruit from the tree of good and evil, now what? Now we seek salvation in the center of the cross, at the choice-point of how to be, at the crossing of our divine nature with our human nature.

The cross, for me, is less about the branches and more about the center – the intersection – where two seemingly opposite polarities meet in me, in humanity, in the now. The place where heaven and earth come together, where *they* meet. Where spirit and earth collide. Where we

draw meaning from the macrocosmic realm down to the smallest microcosmic realm, from our past and into our future and it all celebrates life! Humanity is the measure, at the center, where good and evil exist, where our past and future collide in the now. The cross, for me, is the choice point of how I will manifest my gifts in the world. It is where *self* and *other* meet. It is the place of contact where life happens, where love happens. The center of the cross is the crossroads, the reminder, the choice point, where I can find and make meaning for my life. It is where I can discover truth in this world, before I die.

In that cemetery of Pere La Chaise, I made contact with ancient symbols of humankind, trying to speak to me about life and death. In that cemetery I was drawn to the center, where worlds collide.

What if we all made space for the symbol of the cross to be more of a verb and less of a noun? What if we allowed its meaning to unfold between its history and our experiences? What if we inquired of others what it means to them, instead of assumed? The signs of the cross are many, and its capacity for meaning vast. The signs of the cross are both bound by context and transcend well beyond it. May we all find something valuable in our life's crossing.

Amen.