

The breathtaking High Cathedral of Saints Peter and Mary in Cologne, Germany, is home to the Gero crucifix. There, in a side chapel next to the sacristy, stands the earliest surviving crucifix in Europe. The carving is a little over six feet tall and about five and half feet across—about life-size. The front of this morning's bulletin has an image of the sculpture that may be the earliest depiction of Jesus dead on the cross.

The Gero crucifix is old, but it is not as old as you might imagine. Carved in Saxony in somewhere around 965 C.E., the partially gilded oak crucifix is said to be the first to show a realistic representation of the consequences of suffering in Jesus' face and in his body language. The weight of his body sags from between hands nailed at slightly different heights, stretching his muscles and skin. His stomach bulges from the dead weight of the torso pressing down from above. Death has closed his eyes. His lips are contorted and the corners of his mouth hang down. His thin legs, bent at the knees, are turned to one side above feet that are spread and nailed to a block at the base of the cross. Earlier images might have put the Blessed Virgin Mary or a throned crown at his feet, but here there is only dripping blood.

The Gero crucifix is a disturbing image, but it is more influential than you might imagine. The powerful emotions the Gero crucifix stirs reflect a late tenth century shift in Christian theology—a new era in Christian thought that placed salvation through the death of Jesus at the heart of the doctrine of our faith. The innovation of realistic portrayals of the crucifixion laid the foundation for a trend in Christian art that led to more and more exaggerated realism from the crucifixion panel of the Isenheim Altarpiece in Europe to the Cristo Aparecido in the Americas to the graphic violence that takes center stage in films like *The Passion of the Christ*.

These images convey the great suffering that Jesus had to undergo, but they do not express what God expects of us. God's yearning for us is

never pain, but life. God's desire for us is to live out the good news of the Gospel—to live as though we trust that God's heaven has come near.

For nearly a thousand years, Christian artists and theologians focused on the life of Christ, the love of God and the Gospel message. They painted and carved and wove images of Jesus as shepherd, Jesus in various moments from his earthly life or as the just and all-sustaining holder of all, but always alive. By the 10<sup>th</sup> c., the image of a bloodied and humiliated Jesus on the cross had come to parallel the spirit of Europe. It was an image with which people could emotionally identify because it seemed to sum up their own lives, and there we began to lose focus. Even now, our frightened human eyes can so easily become fixated on the cross that killed Jesus that we can confuse the cross that was his to bear with the cross that is ours to bear. Or we can confuse crosses we have made for ourselves with what God has prepared for us.

We do well to absorb the refocusing that Jesus provided to Peter. “Get behind me” is a corrective, a warning, to prevent something from going wrong. “You are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” Jesus is not shaming, but cautioning. This is an instruction to transcend the human response and to focus on the example of Jesus. The problem is Peter's philosophy, not his passing thought.

Peter has human empire on his mind, not the reign of God. Peter is stuck inside a philosophy of human political domination imagining that the Messiah will be a new imperial leader. No wonder Jesus does not want Peter and disciples not to tell anyone about him. Not yet. Jesus did not come to dethrone the human social systems and power structures that killed him, but to present a vastly different pattern—a divine pattern.

And yet Peter's desire for the imperial outcome is clearly tempting for Jesus, who calls Peter a “Satan.” Keep in mind that in Jewish thought, satan is not a proper name, but a reference to a particular kind of challenger who makes choosing good over evil enough of a challenge that the choice can be truly meaningful.

Peter's confusion is understandable. He had no other point of reference. The crucifixion is still in his future and the thought of Jesus's death so upset Peter that he missed the promise of the resurrection. We do have another point of reference. Yet even with the Risen Christ present before us, still the image of crucifixion can be so compelling that we, too, can miss the promise of the resurrection.

The promise is this: Jesus gave his life for us so that we might experience God's kingdom. This is the Divine pattern that Jesus set at the heart of our faith: life given for others leads to life in abundance. Jesus gave us the way to live the pattern of self-giving service that he lived and that he now lives through us in a new way. The element of choice is crucial to the pattern that Jesus left us: Jesus gave himself by his own choosing as we must give of ourselves by our own choice, not by having others take from us by coercion or force.

Jesus never promotes doormat theologies. Nowhere does Jesus advocate for ignoring our genuine human needs or to see ourselves as undeserving of love, dignity and respect. Jesus offers no justification for enduring abusive relationships or tolerating injustice. Nor do we have to go get ourselves killed in order to get behind Jesus and follow him. Giving of ourselves in love is vastly different than having others take from us.

To follow behind Jesus Christ means consenting with determination. To follow behind Jesus begins with finding our deepest selves—to savor the unique person that God created each of us to be and then to allow the Holy Spirit saturate our minds and hearts. To follow behind the Risen Christ is to rely on God with all that we are and to live the life God has given us trusting that God will bring it to abundance.

Once we have established a relationship with our own unique personhood, we can choose as Jesus did—to return all that we are to God, trusting that God will form and transform us into specific manifestations of the living Christ. The more of ourselves that we choose to give to God, the deeper we move into the heart of God's unconditional love. The more that we experience God's unlimited acceptance of us as beloved children, the

more we are liberated from our fears and the more we can see the Spirit working in our lives and in the struggles we see all around us. That is liberation, not license to do whatever we want. The pattern of life-giving service includes emptying ourselves for others through our presence, our actions and our words. Life given for others leads to life in abundance. Because we follow the Risen Christ, we let people know that their lives matter to God and to us.

Following behind Christ, we enter into the mysterious truth that the God who loves all creation without exception also loves each individual with exceptional love. Following behind Christ into that mystery returns us to right relationship with God and with each other; all of us belonging to God, overcoming our fears with each other and living into joy. The deeper we follow Christ into the mystery, the more we become aware that God's house has no dividing walls but only doors opened wide for all. This increasing awareness fills us, inspires and invigorates our actions on behalf of wholeness, justice and peace.

I find great beauty and comfort in images of Christ on the cross, even in crucifixes featuring a dead and spent Jesus. My joy is not in the pain and violence, but in glimpses of the pattern of God's love that Jesus lives even now. I see these images and many others as doorways into the mystery of faith that we proclaim when we chant together: "Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again!"

By his cross, Jesus has opened the way to new life for us and will return in the fullness of time to heal all suffering. And with an astonishing variety of details and the abundant diversity of human lives and loves, for each one of us, our cross is to *be* the evidence that the kingdom of God has come near.