

## Symbols of Love

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Luke 24:28-31, 1 Corinthians 11:23-26

Have you ever stopped to think how important symbols are in everyday life? Symbols abound in life and culture: the American flag, the bald eagle, the five Olympic interlocking rings, the Nike "swoosh," an engagement ring... they are everywhere you look.

The American Heritage Dictionary defines a symbol as "something that represents something else by association, resemblance, or convention, especially a material object used to represent something invisible." Symbols give visible and physical expression to something that would otherwise remain rather abstract and intangible. We human beings need to "visualize" things.

For instance, "love" is a pretty abstract concept. It's not enough for us to talk about love - we want to "see it" and "feel it"; we want to have some physical expression of it. That's why the exchange of rings is an important feature of every wedding ceremony. At a wedding, *words* of love are spoken by a man and woman -- big, important words like love, cherish, honor, and keep -- But rings are also given with the explanation: "*rings are symbols of covenant, signs of unending love and faithfulness...*" Wedding rings are a visible, tangible way of expressing some of the deepest and most inexpressible feelings in a couple's life. The rings as symbols become visual reminders of the love they have for one another. Those visual reminders are very important.

When God wanted his people to know his love, God expressed it symbolically with visual reminders. God knew it wasn't enough to say "I love you" through the words of the law, the prophets, the letters of Paul. Words alone wouldn't do. God's demonstrated his love through symbols and signs -- "*And this will be a sign for you: you will find a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.*" God's love became visible in Jesus. "The Word became flesh." So the apostle John could exclaim: "*That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our own eyes, which we have looked at and touched – this we proclaim concerning the Word of life.*"

Jesus himself was the supreme symbol of God's love – God's love made visible and touchable.

Beyond that, of course, we have the cross . Every religion has its visual symbol -- the lotus flower of Buddhism, the yin yang of Taoism, the crescent of Islam, the Jewish Star of David.

When you think about it, there were many possibilities for a universally acceptable Christian symbol.

Christians might have chosen the crib or manger in which the baby Jesus was laid, or the carpenter's bench at which he worked as a young man in Nazareth, dignifying manual labor, or the boat from which he taught the crowds in Galilee, or the apron he wore when washing the apostle's feet, or the crown as a symbol of his Lordship, or the dove which was a symbol of the Holy Spirit.

The followers of Jesus could have chosen the fish as the main symbol of Christianity – it was popular with the early Christians and is still popular (especially on bumper stickers). The early Christians chose the fish for several reasons: The Greek word for fish (*ictus*) worked nicely as an acrostic for "Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior." It was not an obvious sign to persecutors, and of course, Jesus' ministry was associated with "fish." He chose fishermen to be among his disciples and gave them a commission to be "fishers of men." It is said that during the persecution of the early church, a Christian meeting someone new would draw a single arc in the sand. If the other person was a Christian, he or she would complete the drawing of a fish with a second arc. If the second person was not a Christian, the ambiguity of the half-symbol would not reveal the first person as a Christian.

But in the end, Christians chose not a fish but a simple cross as the supreme symbol of their faith.

This choice of the cross was very significant. 'Christians' wished to commemorate as central to their understanding of Jesus neither his birth nor his youth, neither his teaching nor his service, neither his reign, nor his gift of the Spirit, but his *death* -- his execution, his crucifixion -- as the supreme sign of his love, for by pouring out his life's blood on those cruel wooden beams, he broke the power of sin and death and reconciled us to God. No wonder that Matthew, Mark, Luke and John give so much space to Jesus' journey to the cross and his suffering there. The cross rightly stands at the center of our faith.

Beyond the powerful, central symbol of the cross, our Lord has also given us the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper as powerful symbolic demonstrations of his love. In some of his last words to his disciples, Jesus said, "*Go and make disciples of all nations...baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.*" And in the Upper Room shortly before he died, he broke the bread and drank from the cup and he said, "*Do this in remembrance of me.*" Ever since, the disciples have been gathering to commemorate and celebrate that special meal. Baptism and the Lord's Supper are what we call "sacraments" – outward symbols of an inner spiritual reality.

Dale Bruner, a popular Bible teacher has said, *'The Sacraments are God's hugs... God physically approaching and touching us.'* The symbols of water and bread and the wine make visible and tangible God's love for us.

Sometimes Protestants say, "The bread and wine of Holy Communion are only symbols of Christ." *Only* symbols?

We often overlook the power of the symbolic. The lump in your throat when you see our country's flag go by in a parade, that horrible sense of loss you feel when you lose your wedding ring, the horror evoked by a Nazi swastika or a Ku Klux Klan burning cross -- can you honestly say they are merely symbols?

One of the best books I have read recently is Flag of our Fathers (the book is better than the movie) – the story of the Marines who raised the flag on Mt. Suribachi on Iwo Jima. That flag was more than just a photo op – to the men who were in the thick of battle, to see their flag flying proudly on the highest part of the island was an amazing spur for them to fight on to victory. The American flag: *only* a symbol? No wonder the burning of an American flag provokes such anger.

It is part of the nature of symbols that they are transparent to that which they symbolize... they evoke that reality, open it up to us, make it accessible to our senses... make it visible. A flag, a handshake, a kiss, a cross, a wedding ring, a loaf of bread, a chalice of wine -- all are symbols which say more than words can express.

The bread and wine of holy communion are symbols packed with significance. To the ordinary non-believing observer, they are merely bread and wine. But to us who belong to the Lord, they mean everything to us. They are symbols that represent Christ's costly self-giving in body broken and blood shed. And they represent his continuing presence among us; they open us up to that wonderful reality. When we gather around the table, what happened to the disciples at Emmaus, happens to us: *"our eyes are opened and we recognize him."*

A church leader of old, Leo the Great, once said of the bread of the Lord's Supper that it "makes conspicuous" Christ's presence among us. Without that bread and wine, without that gathered congregation and its prayers, without that sermon and the eating and drinking, we might be blind to that presence....

And so we cherish the supper, and we celebrate it often; for we need not only to hear the gospel preached, but to see it and touch it and smell it and taste it in the physical signs of bread and wine.

There is one other thing I would point out about the symbols of bread and wine. These are ordinary, everyday things. In the upper room, the bread was nothing special and the wine was ordinary table wine -- not a fine, aged cabernet. Jesus had a way of taking the

stuff of everyday life...coins, mustard seeds, growing vines, daily work, water, bread, wine...and using them to help us see the presence of God in our midst.....

Which is to say that Christ comes to us and meets us in the midst of everyday life - right here where we live and work and play. Sometimes we forget that. We are forever getting confused into thinking that God wants to meet us somewhere else, in some holy land -- in Jerusalem or in Rome. Not here in Mukilteo, Washington... Not here at my morning breakfast table... Not at my church.

One writer [William Willimon] puts it this way:

We are forever thinking that it is in some mountaintop experience, in some moment of spiritual ecstasy, some emotional high, some religious trip that God meets us. So we search for the Holy Land, we venerate relics, we try to tune in or tune out, escape, or whatever. All this is part of our fantasy that God is somewhere other than here, among some other people than us.

But where did Jesus himself say he would meet us? Broken body and shed blood, ordinary bread and everyday wine, common people and your usual friends. He meets you here."

And so he does; the Risen Lord meets us here in this very room. These symbols of his love -- the bread and wine -- remind us of his presence. Our "eyes are opened and we recognize him." So come to him with joy and feed on his love. He gives himself to you that you may live for him. May his name be praised! Amen.