

## The Wondrous and Woeful Cross

Shawn Feidler | Sunday, February 28, 2021

Almost every Christian house of worship has one. They are made of rich, dark wood, polished brass, chiseled stone. They are delicately painted on sanctuary ceilings and stained onto glass in deep hues. Whole church buildings are constructed in its shape. They might--depending on the tradition--come fashioned with a body or bare without. Strung up by wire, suspended above the faithful. Carefully placed on a communion table.

The cross is perhaps the most universal Christian symbol. It's presence defines our sanctuaries; it's mark defines our belonging.<sup>1</sup>

It's probably the first Christian symbol any of us learn. As children, by way of Sunday school crafts and Easter plays, we knew the cross. And so did a young Jesus.

We don't know much about the childhood of Jesus, but we might imagine an upbringing in the lush Galilean countryside. Peaceful and serene, learning the hymns of his mother and the carpentry of his father.

But when Jesus was just a boy, a census was imposed by the Roman empire. In those days, a census was bad news. For the occupied, at its least a census meant increased, crippling taxation. At its worst, a census was taken so the empire could know how many bodies they had for hard labor or for war. And for the people of Galilee this census threw them over the edge and they had enough. They refused to take part, they resisted and they revolted. Despite the peoples' courage, the uprising was crushed by the Romans. As punishment for Galilee's rebellion, Rome crucified 2,000 men along its main roads. The crucified were the fathers, grandfathers, uncles, older brothers of Jesus' disciples.<sup>2</sup>

It is these Galilean disciples, formed by the trauma of oppression and crucifixion, that Jesus leads to Caesarea Philippi, a city symbolic of Rome's occupying power. There in that city, where their strong Galilean accents made it hard to blend in, where they are already feeling nervous and unsure, there Jesus says, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

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<sup>1</sup> Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 2; Lent through Eastertide.

<sup>2</sup> Roman-Jewish historian Josephus

Taxed into poverty by the Romans. Family murdered violently by the Romans. They themselves are harassed daily by the Romans and now Jesus brings them to the center of Roman power to tell them that following him meant carrying a Roman cross.

Now remember at this point, the cross holds no spiritual significance for the disciples. Jesus has not yet been crucified, they don't know how he will die. The cross was just a cross: a crude, Roman method of execution, something that had been used to murder their family and friends.

But the cross was more than an execution method, it was an intentional form of terrorism. When Romans hung a young Galilean Jew from a cross their first goal was not execution--there were faster ways to kill. No, the goal of hanging a suffering, naked, dying, humiliated person from a cross was to terrorize everyone who watched. Crucifixion first and foremost was addressed to an audience<sup>3</sup>. It was a Roman billboard.

The Roman's used the cross to remind the occupied people of their low status. The cross was a form of protection for the privileged, warning those who even thought about resistance or rebellion of the deadly cost of their actions.

According to the NAACP, from 1882-1968 at least 4,743 lynchings occurred in the United States. <sup>4</sup>Of course, these are only the ones recorded. The Equal Justice Initiative calls these "racial terror lynchings" because, like crucifixion, the goal was not just death--but to terrorize.

For white people, lynching was a form a protection of their precieved way of life. It was a tool to maintain a social order that kept white people in a place of privilege while serving as a warning of the deadly cost to those who thought about changing or challenging the status quo.

And while many of this nation's lynchings took place in the south, northern leaders were complicit. They often ignored what was being reported and, in an effort to reconcile the nation following the Civil War, they disavowed federal authority to prosecute the lynchers.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Paula Fredrickson

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.naacp.org/history-of-lynchings/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://eji.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/lynching-in-america-3d-ed-091620.pdf>

It is challenging to describe just what a spectacle was made out of these horrific acts. Newspapers printed announcements of upcoming lynchings. Spectators gathered in their Sunday best. They cheered, music played, they danced and picniced. They cast lots to divvy up the victims' clothing as souvenirs. They photographed themselves smiling widely next to the bodies--the black and brown bodies--of those they just murdered.

Theologian James Cone, in his seminal work, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, wrote:

Both the cross and the lynching tree were symbols of terror, instruments of torture and execution, reserved primarily for slaves, criminals, and insurrectionists- the lowest of the low in society. Both Jesus and blacks were publicly humiliated, subjected to the utmost indignity and cruelty. They were stripped, in order to be deprived of dignity, then paraded, mocked and whipped, pierced, derided and spat upon, tortured for hours in the presence of jeering crowds for popular entertainment. In both cases, the purpose was to strike terror in the subject community. It was to let people know that the same thing would happen to them if they did not stay in their place.<sup>6</sup>

“Take up their cross and follow me.” A command that sends chills down the spine of his disciples and they aren’t the only ones. Verses before, Mark tells us that before this difficult teaching, Jesus called the crowd with his disciples. Scholars point out that the crowd in Caesarea Philippi would have included Romans who occupied the region. The same people whose power and ethnicity benefit from the oppression and terror inflicted on the Galileans. It is to them--as well as the disciples--that Jesus issues the call to take up this symbol of terror.

If they desire the salvation that Jesus offers, if they want to be true followers of his way, if they want to save their lives, they must position themselves against the ways of the empire and live in solidarity with those whom the empire is oppressing.

You see for the disciples and the Romans both, the cross was not just some personal burden to take on--the cross was a lynching tree, a tangible, real, haunting symbol of the deadly cost of oppression and the high stakes of Christian discipleship.

For many Christians, those whose theologies have been informed by euro-centric, white theologians, the cross has over these 2000 years become sanitized, glamorized, turned

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<sup>6</sup> James Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 31.

into harmless, non-offensive decoration. Something we make beautiful and wear around our necks or paint on our bodies. It has become an emblem of redemption and love, but so detached from the ongoing suffering and oppression of others.

For Cone and many other Black theologians the pain and terror, the reality of the lynching tree, keeps the cross from becoming an abstract symbol of sentimental piety. Instead, by remembering that the cross is the lynching tree, the place of great horror and agony, the cross becomes the purpose of Christian faith.

Cone insists that “humanity’s salvation is *revealed* in the cross of the condemned criminal Jesus, and humanity’s salvation is *available* only through our solidarity with the crucified people in our midst.”<sup>7</sup>

In this way, Jesus' command to take up our cross is to take up the cause of the suffering. Those living under the crushing weight of oppression; of systems rigged against them, of bodies disrespected and destroyed.

It is to not let any cross, instrument, system keep us powerful and protected at the cost of others lives.

“Taking up the cross” as Martin Luther King said, “is the voluntary or deliberate choice of putting ourselves without reservation at the service of Christ and his kingdom; it is putting our whole being in the struggle against evil, whatever the cost.”<sup>8</sup>

That’s what it means to take up the cross, to be a Christian, that’s how we find our salvation--in the work of the cross, here and now. In our deep solidarity with the suffering of the world.

So let us exhort the cross, lift high the cross, revere the cross--as the terrifying, haunting symbol of human pain and passion--Let it keep our minds disturbed and our hearts dedicated to our Christian work--until the day comes when, with God’s help, we overcome this world with cross defeating resurrection.<sup>9</sup>

Amen.

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<sup>7</sup> Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 160.

<sup>8</sup> MLK, February 4 1956, "It's Hard to Be a Christian" Montgomery

<sup>9</sup> With gratitude to David Swanson.

