

## "Restoring the Cross"

I Corinthians 1:10-17; John 3:11-17

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

February 22, 2015 – 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Lent – Rev. Ronald Botts

Last month I went to the antique show at the Fairgrounds. This is a huge exposition boasting of more than a thousand dealers. If you want to get around to all the booths, you'd better plan on spending at least half a day. It's great fun and you don't have to buy anything unless you wish. One warning, though. When you see the hundred dollar price tags on toys you once had and threw away, you'll want to kick yourself.

The only thing I can liken the show to is an immense attic, with generations of strange and wonderful items all gathered together. Now, for some of you, this is probably the very last place you'd want to go. You're the ones who would say you've been working hard to get rid of the junk you already have. Who wants more? But there's an equal number of people who find great delight in discovering something unique from the past and taking it home with them. People collect all kinds of things, from cookie cutters to license plates.

Now I always like to be on the lookout for things that might be of interest to people I know. I have some friends who love to picnic in Greenlawn Cemetery and then take long strolls. (Well, they're a little different.) So I picked up an illustrated booklet that tells the history behind some of the more outstanding tombstones.

One of the most common things at an antique show is furniture. You see pieces in all styles from all periods. Often these items require considerable work to restore them. A magazine carried the account recently of a man who went to a sale and his eyes fell on an old dirty coffee table. It was finished with a heavy coat of faded white paint. Crayon marks blended with an assortment of scratches and scrapes. All and all it didn't have much going for it but, since the price was low, the fellow bought it.

Curious, and knowing he didn't have much to lose, he decided to strip the piece. He put on the solvent and let it sit. When the white paint began to bubble, he started to scrape it off. To his amazement, under the old paint, there was a surface of inlaid woods-- maple, walnut, and mahogany-- set out in an intricate pattern of rosebuds. He worked steadily for the next few hours, wondering how anyone could have painted over such beauty. Before his eyes a literal rebirth of the table was taking place.

How much that little wooden table would tell if it could talk. Over the years it might have grown old to eyes that ceased to appreciate it. So with a can of paint, it was turned into a shiny white table to conform to newer fashions. More years pass and the paint ages and cracks. It's put in a child's bedroom and there it picks up all the crayon marks. Finally it is stored away in some dusty corner of a garage, forgotten. What it was originally has now been lost, covered over by accumulated layers. Yet, it's still there in all its beauty if you can get beneath the surface.

It seems to me that this is something like what's happened with the cross. Once a strong symbol of Christ's sacrifice and love, the cross has been layered over with cheap gold and fake jewels, something to dangle from our ears or attach to the dash of our cars. For some it's simply a fashion accessory. For others it's just decoration and has been on a shelf so long that it's covered with dust. Often a cross is so beautiful that we forget what it really stands for and what price was initially required.

Turning to our Epistle reading for today Paul is concerned with growing divisions in the young church at Corinth. It is being threatened by dissensions and rifts. Cliques are being formed where the people are loyal to one or another of the various missionaries who have helped to shape and nurture it. Some identify most strongly with Paul. Some with Apollos, a Jewish Christian from Alexandria who spent some time there after Paul. Still others identify with Cephas.

Paul makes the point that Christ, however, cannot be divided. No leader can claim him exclusively, and no particular group of followers can, either. The apostle asks, "Was I, Paul, crucified for you? Of course not. My mission from Christ is to proclaim his gospel and not in such way that it points to my eloquence or wisdom, but that it shows forth the one who sent me. I am not ultimately important. I do not want to draw people to me, but to draw people to the true faith, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power."

In this Lenten season we are drawn again to look squarely at the cross and to consider its influence upon our lives. We're urged to view the hideous instrument of torture and death, and understand that a powerful love and sacrifice transforms this tragic crosspiece into a symbol of hope. The only way we can really do this is to strip it bare of all the layers of misunderstanding and nonsense that has been put upon it. For us to truly feel its impact we have to restore the cross to the way it was originally, and not how it has been distorted and commercialized.

The cross is not a decoration. It's a message. But if it is intended to tell us something, what is it saying?

Let me try to get at this through recalling a film entitled "The Bridge." Perhaps you saw it some time back. This movie tells the story of a young couple who have a son. They are extraordinarily happy as a family, and the boy admires his father and wants to grow up just like him.

Well, one morning the father goes off to work where he is a switchman for the railroad. A section of that line crosses a broad river and the bridge must be opened periodically to allow ships to pass through. When on duty this is the responsibility of the man in the story and the safety of all concerned depends upon him.

On that particular day the man hears the whistle of a fast-approaching train and starts the huge gears to lower the drawbridge into place. He's done this thousands of times. As he gets the bridge halfway down, however, he sees in horror that his son has come well out on the stationary part of the trestle on the other bank. The boy apparently came to surprise him that morning and has used the bridge as a short-cut.

The father realizes there is no way to stop the speeding passenger train even if there was time to signal. The boy is too far off shore to run back in safety even if he were able to gesture him back. The switchman clearly knows his two alternatives. If he brings the bridge down into place, the boy will be killed immediately by the huge locomotive. If he stops the drawbridge mid-air, the train will derail and all aboard will die.

In close up we see the agony on the man's face, for he loves this son of his more than life itself. His hand goes one way, then back again in the few seconds left to decide, but finally he pulls the lever... which continues the bridge on its downward course.

The camera switches now to inside the train. The people are laughing and having a good time as the cars race across the bridge, going on as they have the whole trip. They have no awareness of how narrowly they have averted disaster, nor do they realize how much their welfare has cost the switchman at the controls.

This is a compelling story that rivets us to the screen. More than that, I see it as a parable. Aren't we, like all of humanity, on that racing train? We're so busy getting on with life that we're oblivious to most everything that lies behind our existence. We don't see how precarious our well-being really is nor sense the dangers that lurk around us.

In the screen story there is one who could not let the masses perish, even at the cost of an innocent son who must die so that all others can live. If you can discern this modern-day parable, then you will come to understand the message of the cross.

The cross in our sanctuary tells of a love so penetrating that it can reach even to me with all my faults and, in forgiveness, free me from the burden of my sins. It assures me of new life bought for me at the highest of prices. It shows me the way to live which, while not easy, is the only way of fulfillment.

This Lent we need to rediscover and restore the real cross beneath the distortions and layers that tend to obscure it. We need to find it again so that this powerful symbol might have a transforming and continuing effect on our lives.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life."

That is our promise; that is our hope. That's the message of the cross.