

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today we depart from the regularly scheduled lectionary readings and turn to celebrate the Feast of the Cross or as we know it, Holy Cross Sunday. This feast day falls on the fourteenth of September and since it has fallen on a Sunday we turn to the assigned readings for this appointed feast day of the Holy Cross. Today we celebrate the cross itself as a sign of salvation rather than a symbol of torture and death. This day is not to be confused with, nor is it like, Good Friday where a portion of the liturgy itself on that day is entitled the “Adoration of the Cross.” In our Good Friday liturgy, we pay honor or adoration to the entire image – the cross, the person, and the *passion* it all represents and not just the cross itself.

We celebrate Holy Cross Day because of Helena, the mother of Constantine. Constantine, a Roman Emperor who became a crucial figure in the early Church, NOT theoretically a Church Father or a theologian, or a Bishop, or a writer of scripture...rather, Constantine was an emperor who put an end to Christian persecution by making Christianity a legal religion. Constantine convened an ecumenical council known as the Council of Nicaea, a critical meeting of Bishops and theologians that defined the nature of Christ and our Christian theology as we know it today. We bear the fruit of that meeting to this day when we recite the Nicene Creed. It was Constantine’s mother’s Helena who on September 14th in the year 330, discovered what many believe to be the empty tomb and the true cross of Christ. It is on this site of both the crucifixion and the tomb of Jesus that the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem was built. The church remains today as a major pilgrimage center for Christians worldwide. But in simple fashion, we make our pilgrimage to *this* place, *this* day, to celebrate the Holy Cross of Christ. And it is on this cross that God’s love for us all is made manifest. But there is something to be said about how trivial some elements of today’s worship have become.

The cross has become a piece of jewelry that we decorate ourselves with, an accessory decorated with different jewels that shows off our faith. In the same way, our Gospel lesson is lost to its title, John 3:16. This passage is reduced to a slogan found on anything such as a tattoo, a suicide note, a sign at a sporting event, a billboard, or a bumper sticker. I’m not really complaining about the exposure, but unfortunately the meaning of both the cross and the Gospel passage itself have been reduced to trivialities and the depth of both is not even considered when seen in public view. And in some cases, they have become legalistic weapons to hurt and scare others, instead of seeing and understanding the inviting comfort of God’s love that is revealed on the cross and in the Gospel text for all who look upon them or read them.

As I was researching the impact on the culture and the history of this passage as a slogan – “John 3:16” I came across a picture of a billboard that read, “Where will you spend eternity? Heaven or hell, read John 3:16.” Interestingly, as we wheel our legalistic weapons as cute slogans, we seem to do so with *NO* clear understanding of what they truly mean and the true impact of both the Gospel passage and the cross itself. In this, the cross is lost or reduced to a cultural icon like our golden arches and this Bible passage is lost to its reference numbers that have become a slogan with no other indication of what John 3:16 is or what it means. Whenever I see John 3:16 being used for a slogan or a threatening billboard like the one that threatens eternal hell if I don’t read John 3:16, I want to scream or put up another sign next to it saying, read John 3:17 instead,

¹⁷ "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

Jesus is sent into the world to save what we seem to be so easily condemning with our self-righteousness and our legalistic understanding of faith and Holy Scripture.

I want to unpack what seems to be missed with the cross and this passage from John's Gospel. First, Jesus in this Gospel from John is revealing God to us in his actions and his teachings. What we learn and see Jesus doing and saying in this Gospel from John we can equate this to what we can understand about God. The reality of God is beyond our comprehension, but Jesus brings God to us in ways we can see, hear, and understand. Simply put, what Jesus shows us about himself in this Gospel he is actually showing God to us. So double meaning and irony play a huge role in this Gospel.

And when we think about the cross this day in our worship, we hear that Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, and then Jesus tells Nicodemus and us that the Son of Man must be lifted up as well. The Greek term *ὑψόω* (*hupsōō*) is the term for "lifted up" in English translation. However, this term in the Greek has a double meaning and this double meaning is seen in verse 14. The term not only means lifted up it also means exulted. The serpent is lifted up, but God, through Jesus Christ is exulted on the cross and both the serpent and the Son of God become symbols of healing.

And as I said earlier, some will wear a cross with the intention of showing their faith to others. But the cross is NOT a symbol of "MY" faith, the cross is a symbol of healing and salvation for all. Likewise, the same misdirection of understanding takes place with this Gospel passage that is posted all over the place. For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son...this little conjunction or word in this passage, "so" changes everything when it is read in the Greek. The little Greek word *οὕτως* (*houtōs*) translated as "so" in this passage does NOT translate as some like to think it does and we read this with the understanding of this is how much God loves me...and others...placing more focus on us. It is in this understanding of this passage that we have taken it and plastered it all over the place and use it as a legalistic weapon on others. But when it is translated according to proper grammatical rules...this passage reads, "In this way God shows proof of His love." ...that He gave His only Son. Showing us how God proves His love. This also puts more of an emphasis on Jesus and not just on us. Likewise, the cross that I wear does not show my faith, it shows proof of God's love.¹ God' love is a love that does not start and end with me, but it is a love for all...including those whom the slogan threatens.

Today from our lessons, we learn the message of the cross, in that, God takes a lowly serpent and tells Moses to set it on a pole and lift it high so that all who look upon it may be healed. In this, God takes the poisonous ways we live, turns them into to something else by placing them on a pole for all to see and be healed. *Looking past ourselves*, may we see the cross not as foolishness, not as a tool of torture and death, not as a symbol of MY faith rather may we see the cross and God's Son, who has taken on our nature and our lot, and is lifted up for all to see and be healed...in this may we see the revelation, or the proof of God's love given through them...a love given for all who look upon them. This cross, according to St. John's passage, is the ultimate revelation of

¹ A word study by Scott Stien entitled, "So" Misunderstood - John 3:16 Might Not Mean What You Think" at <https://preparedtoanswer.org/article/8366-so-misunderstood-john-316-might-not-mean-what-you-think>

who God is and how God shows proof of His love for us. On this cross, once a symbol of death and a tool of torture is now proof of God's love for us and in that love for us is grace and salvation.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.