

Cruciform Calibration

We live in an imperfect world where things can/do wear down. Over time, things get out of sync; out of whack. Over time, clocks get out of time, and they need adjusting. Ovens, over time, need re-calibrating. Some may cook a little hot; some a little on the low side. Re-calibrating sets things right so you're cooking at the proper temperature. Hunters know that you sight your rifle in every single year. You need to make sure that your aim is true and that your sights/scope didn't get bumped during the off-season. Anyone familiar with aircraft knows that your gauges and instruments, especially your altimeter and your compass, have to be checked and calibrated ***regularly***. You know what happens if your compass is just one-degree off? If you fly a heading just one-degree off, after just sixty miles ***you will miss your mark by a whole mile!*** Needless to say, making sure everything is properly calibrated is vitally important, and as I said at the start, life shows us that pretty much ***everything eventually needs re-calibrating***... even "good Christians."

Now, why would we say that Christians—***all Christians***—need a day like "Holy Cross Day" to "re-calibrate" and re-orient? Well... it's not that hard to figure out! How often good Christians and good congregations, even with the very best intentions, ***wind up focusing on the wrong things***; e.g., entertainment, fund raisers, finances and budgets and building projects, attendance stats, etc. It happens, and it happens to **ALL** congregations... even "good Lutheran" congregations.

Look, let's just get right down to it. Nobody is going to heaven because they played pickleball on Thursday nights at church. Kids don't go to heaven simply because they did crafts and had snacks and played laser tag on Wednesday nights. Being part of a men's group that enjoys breakfast and swapping war stories and doing odd jobs around the church doesn't get you one inch beyond the pearly gates. Nobody is going to heaven because they never missed a potluck. Nobody is going to heaven because enough cookies were sold and enough funds were raised to cancel out the national debt. ***Bake sales don't pay for one single sin.*** Food pantries may fill silos and bellies, but they don't fill souls with what's needed for entry into heaven. Big screens and drum solos make no satisfaction for the wage of sin. Budgets and Bylaws don't save people. A new "family life center" covers over zero sins. Being the most popular, well-attended, well-funded place might provide people with a sense of security, but it's a false sense of security. None of these things matter to God or to our salvation, and what matters to God and what matters to our salvation should be all that matters to the Christian, and yet... as life so often shows us, all these other things do matter to us. In fact, quite often these things ***matter more to us than what matters most, maybe not at the start, but over time....***

Let's go back to that aircraft compass imagery. Are any of these things "wrong" or terrible or sinful in and of themselves? No, not at all! But... "*I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life.*" "*I am the Way.*" It's very easy to say, "*Jesus is what it's all about,*" but if you're heading isn't true; if you're not squared up on Jesus and you're just a little bit off—***just one degree off***—it won't take long, ***and you will miss by a mile!*** Close only counts in horseshoes and hand grenades, right? Worse yet, when these things become the desired destination—when you're ***purposefully*** setting the course to go this way—***you're headed the wrong way, and the landing will be tragic.*** That goes for congregations as well as individual Christians.

Now, before we go any further, we need to make clear that we're not re-calibrating and re-focusing on ***merely a cross; a symbol; a piece of furniture or statuary.*** I realize this is "Holy Cross Sunday," but it's not merely about a cross, whether it's an empty cross or a crucifix. Many people over the centuries have entered into eternity by way of this horrendous instrument of capital punishment. It's not the cross, in and of itself, that saves you, even if Jesus is the One on that cross. ***It's the divine Word of God that He Himself attaches to this particular cross; this is what saves a person.***

The Old Testament lesson is an excellent example of this. God **NEVER** promised that you wouldn't be bitten. It's not that ***only*** the complainers and troublemakers were bit. Rather, "*everyone, when they are bitten, when they look to that bronze serpent, they will live.*" ***Did you hear God's promise?*** God specifically attaches His Word and Promise of life to the foulest, most offensive, most terrifying thing in their lives at that time; the very thing that was killing them. He specifically instructed Moses to construct a bronze fiery serpent—***the epitome of pain, suffering, and death in their lives at that time.*** Talk about counter-intuitive! I'm quite sure that the last thing any of those snake-bitten Israelites wanted to look at was another deadly snake towering over them on a pole in their midst. Yet, to that image of pain and death our Lord attached His promise of life and deliverance. ***Sounds a little "sacramentalish," doesn't it?*** God attaches His command ("do this"), and His promise ("and you will live") to something real and tangible (the bronze serpent statue). And as we're told, whenever someone was bitten, when they would look to that bronze serpent, ***holding fast to and trusting in the Word and promise of their Lord,*** they lived. They were saved because they ***held fast in faith to the promise*** that the Lord had attached to the bronze serpent.

Folks: This is what the "re-calibration" and "re-orientation" that is Holy Cross Sunday is all about. ***It's not about venerating or worshipping a cross.*** It's about getting the compass of faith properly slaved up on the Way, the Truth, and the Life. "*No one comes to the Father except through Me.*" It's about re-calibrating and re-orienting back to what the faith and the mission of the Church is all about. Let's be honest: over the course of a year; over the course of time, even

with the very best intentions, ***we can get off course and off focus***, whether it's in the congregational sense or the individual sense. The "not so important things" can/do become the most important thing, and the most important thing—***the only important thing***—can/does wind up getting relegated to "not as important." No one would ever say this, but the fruits we bear prove the ugly truth. This is what Holy Cross Sunday is all about.

"We preach Christ crucified!" This is what the Church is all about (or at least... that's what the Church is ***supposed*** to be all about). We center up and focus on the crucified Christ because it is He and His cross that proclaims the reality of our sins. *"Cursed is everyone who is hung upon a tree."* Here is the One who has taken our place and become the curse for all of us, in our place. The wage of sin is death, and all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Rom 3:23). It's here in the person of Jesus—God made flesh—***it's here on His cross that the "all" is reduced to the "One," who stands in the stead for the "all."*** This cross proclaims our reality as sinners who cannot save themselves, not even a little bit. If we could work off our sins; if we could earn/merit even a small fraction of God's righteousness, ***then this didn't have to happen!*** As St. Paul himself says to the Galatians, *"If God's righteousness could be attained through the works of the Law, then Christ died for no purpose"* (Gal 2:21). This cross proclaims the Truth that *"No one is righteous; not one"* (Rom 3:10).

This cross of Christ also proclaims ***the Gospel promise and reality*** that *"it is finished!"* ***This is key!*** Christ's cross isn't just a death sentence, ***but a proclamation of divine pardon!*** Almighty God Himself proclaims victoriously from this cross, which was God's plan from before the foundation of the world, that the entire wage for all sin and death has been paid in full with His death. *"It is finished!"* Only God Himself can make that proclamation, and it be true. It's here, not in a manger, not in the empty tomb, but here on the cross that the Almighty in the flesh makes full and complete satisfaction of our damnable debt; a debt paid purely out of a divine mercy, grace, and love that we will ***never*** be able to fully comprehend or adequately appreciate, even in heaven.

This cross also re-orientes us and re-calibrates us to hold fast to and trust in the Word and promise that our Lord has affixed to His sacraments of Holy Baptism and Holy Communion, even and especially as we live our lives in this snake-filled desert wilderness. *"I will never leave you or forsake you. I am with you always."* Follow those life-giving waters of Baptism back to their source. Follow the life-giving sustenance of Body and Blood back to its source. ***What poured forth from Christ's spear-riven side as He hung on this cross? Answer: water and blood.*** As ironic as it is, that gift of life hasn't stopped flowing from that cruciform source since that blessed moment in time. The water of life continues to flow forth from the Lord of Life, uniting us to Him and His death and resurrection. *"Do you not know that all of us who've been baptized have been baptized into His death?"*

(Rom 6:3) This [His death on the cross, which is what the water from His side proved] brings the forgiveness He accomplished here... to us, right here in the midst of our sin and death. Where there is forgiveness, there is life... eternal life. The same goes for Holy Communion. The Body and Blood He nourishes us with here is the feast of victory He accomplished on His cross. ***Every time we take and eat and take and drink, He is uniting us to this cruciform victory.*** “*Taste and see that the Lord is good!*” A properly calibrated faith understands this.

Folks: This is why we observe Holy Cross Day. There’s certainly a lot more we could say; i.e., the life/faith that is properly calibrated and in-tune with the cruciform reality of God’s mercy, grace, and love for them in Christ ***will always be showing forth repentant joy and thankfulness in thought, word, and deed.*** That’s just fact. Contentedness with going against the will and desire of God (especially willfully so); contentedness with the very sins that put Jesus on that cross... such a thing is completely out of sync with a properly calibrated, Christ-centered repentant faith. That’s just fact. We could go into all this, but we won’t, not because of time constraints, but simply because such a properly calibrated, cruciform faith isn’t something that can be prescribed or mandated. ***You can’t calibrate yourself.*** The Holy Spirit of God, working in/through these means of grace—Word and Sacrament—does the calibrating. Faith comes through hearing; hearing the Word of Christ. “*We preach crucified.*” That’s our job and calling, as a congregation and as individual baptized Christians: to preach, proclaim and show forth Christ crucified. We’re gonna leave it at that and let the Holy Spirit do His job.

Those who have ears to hear will hear. I pray that through this hearing you are re-calibrated, re-focused, and renewed in the cross of Christ and all that it means for you. More than that, I pray that you ***remain*** calibrated in Christ, ***renewed and refreshed every single day.*** May all that you say and do, henceforth and into all eternity, ***preach and proclaim Christ crucified.***

AMEN