

Sermon: "Symbols" Matthew 22: 34-46 June 26, 2022
Rev. Steve Clifton Rideau Park United Church Ottawa, ON



Both Rideau Park and Emmanuel United are Affirming Ministries. We proclaim to the community around us that God's welcome extends to everyone, people of diverse ages, abilities, gender identities and sexual orientations, races, ethnicities, religions, and economic backgrounds. All are welcome.

One of the ways we communicate our Affirming status is through the use of symbols.

It's hard to put a mission statement on an exterior wall, and it would take too long to read it as you drove by in any case, so here at Rideau Park we have rainbow banners by our entrances on both Alta Vista and Cunningham. The rainbow symbol wordlessly communicates a wide welcome.



In the Christian tradition we like to use symbols to communicate with those on the inside and with those on the outside. We get used to our symbols so we may stop noticing them, but in any church, in any sanctuary they are there.

In a children's story a few years ago we were talking about doves and the children kept finding more and more dove symbols in this space- they are everywhere if you look.

Just in the rose window behind me there are 13 symbols brightly communicating something about our faith.

- A dove representing the Holy Spirit.
- A Lamb representing Jesus, the Lamb of God
- Lion, Eagle, ox and angel, representing the 4 Gospels
- There are even a few floral symbols there, and I am not sure what they represent...



In our part of the Christian world here in the early 21st Century, it is the cross that is the most common symbol of our faith. And even the cross comes in variations that symbolically communicate something nuanced...

There is the empty cross, which speaks of resurrection

There are crucifixes that remind us that Jesus suffers with us

There are Celtic crosses that are engraved to tell the whole story of salvation from Eden to Judgement



My wife Keva and I were in England for 2 weeks this month, exploring Yorkshire and we came upon many interesting variations of crosses in churches and church yards, each communicating something special through this common symbol.

This cross is found in St Wilfrid's Church in Burnsall, a faith community that goes back to the 7th Century.

They have a collection of ancient crosses taken from their grounds. This one pictured is a Viking cross. Its flared ends are shaped like the hammer of Thor, the Norse god of thunder and war. The symbols of the old faith are present in the symbol of the new faith. Symbolically the cross speaks of past, present and future.

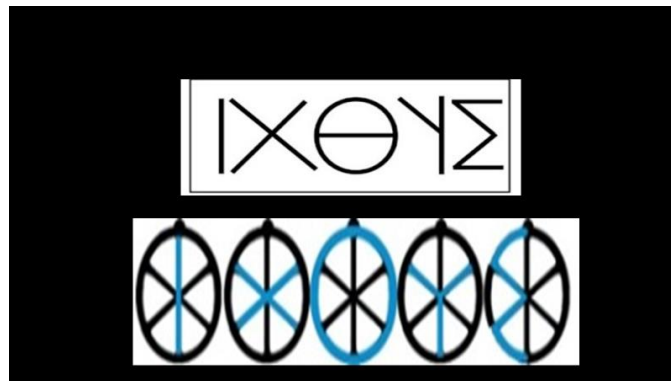


The cross is a common symbol of our faith but it's not the only one. In different times and places other symbols have been commonly used to speak about the way of Jesus.

Over the weeks of summer, I am going to be talking about symbols. Symbols of faith. Symbols that lift up or shine on some aspect of our faith tradition. And today I will begin with this pictured symbol. The “Icthys” circle.

This symbol is very old. The streets of Ephesus are marked with this circle etched in stone; it’s found in Athens and other Greek cities of the time. It’s a first century symbol of faith.

This symbol communicates to others inside the faith community, alerting them that they will find other followers of Jesus nearby. Someone outside the community would miss the meaning. Christians were persecuted in the first centuries of our faith so this symbol quietly communicated between disciples of Jesus.



The Icthys circle cryptically contains the Greek letters that point to Jesus. The first letters of the words of the phrase “Jesus Christ Son of God Saviour” Icthus - are hidden in the circle

In what is now Egypt and Syria, in the first few Centuries of the Christian tradition, the wheel, like the one in our picture, was also a common symbol used to depict the essence of the Christian life. The way of Jesus was about love. It was about relationship.



The wheel here has 8 spokes. The spokes are God’s people, all God’s people: friends, family, neighbors, strangers, enemies... everyone. We meet, we spokes, we all come together, at the wheels hub. The hub, the centre of it all, where all things connect, is God.

The spokes are people and the center where they meet is God.

What happens as we get close to the center of the wheel? We get closer to the other spokes. As we get closer to God in love we get closer in love to one another.

What happens when we get closer, in love, to others? Well, just as the spokes of the wheel meet in the center, so when we get close to others in love, we find we are also close to God.



Jesus said that the greatest commandment was to love God and our neighbors as ourselves. Love of God and love of others, the essence of the way of Jesus, is captured by the early church in this symbol of an 8 spoked wheel.

Fast forward to today. What is the essence of our faith today? If we were express the essentials about the way of Jesus what would we say...? Is Christianity first and foremost about love and compassion, about how we relate to God and one another...? How is Christianity described? How is it depicted in the press? What do the loudest religious voices in our culture say about the Christian faith?

We began with an Affirming Ministry rainbow symbol. In light of the loud and angry voices that seem to speak of our faith in our culture, how important is it communicate the good news as we see it in symbol, word and action?



A few years a back our American neighbors held an election. And a particular version of Christian faith was often articulated in election platforms and candidate speeches.

Richard Rohr, an American Franciscan writer and teacher who lives and works in New Mexico, writes about an election pamphlet that he was given. It described the essence, the “non-negotiables” of the Christian faith that the candidate was going to Washington to defend: it was about contraception, abortion and same sex marriage (all of which, the pamphlet said, were bad.) Fighting against public funding of contraception, denying LGBTQ rights and fighting abortion were what one New Mexico candidate saw as the essentials of the Christian faith.

And Rohr recorded his bewilderment: When did these things become the non-negotiable heart of our faith: “It’s clear that offering forgiveness and living love towards others, especially our enemies, these were the non-negotiables for Jesus.” Abortion, contraception and same sex marriage are all things that Jesus never talked about.

What is the essence of our faith? How might we communicate it so that we might be heard?

For the first few centuries of our faith tradition the essentials of the Christian faith were summed up in a simple symbol. The name of Jesus and the greatest commandment captured symbolically, communicating the gospel with simplicity. Love God – love your neighbor as yourself. As Jesus said all the law and prophets hang on this. . Love God – love your neighbor as yourself.

Amen