

John 12:31-36a “Believe in the light.”

O Divine Illumination, may we have the wisdom, the strength, and the courage to seek always and everywhere after truth – come when it may and cost what it will, in Jesus’ name.

Bishop Curry, people of the Diocese of Olympia, family and friends of the Church gathered here and on-line, and dear Phil, thank you for entrusting me with preaching today. Diocese of Olympia, you have a gem of a new bishop, which is good, because you are a gem of a diocese and I feel sure that you all are going to help each other get even shinier as you tumble around being church together in the days and years to come!

I imagine the angels of God have been getting a good belly laugh at my being invited to preach on Holy Cross Day, when the Church’s devotional focus is on the veneration of a relic of questionable provenance. Holy Cross Day reveres wood that legend holds was discovered by St. Helen, mother of Emperor Constantine, during the excavation of the site in Jerusalem where the emperor’s basilica was to be built. I know that our customary desire is for bishops to be ordained “on Sundays and other feasts of our Lord or on feasts of apostles or evangelists,” and I know that, of course you all wanted Phil to be consecrated bishop ASAP, but, really, Holy Cross Day and me? What could go wrong? So many things! While I want to respect this privilege of preaching, I also want to manage your expectations. So I’ll confess that the saying, “just because it didn’t happen doesn’t mean it isn’t true,” has been getting quite the workout in my heart these last days and weeks as I’ve prayed about the relic of the “one true cross.”

What is true about the relic of the Holy Cross --this timeless and tangible reminder of Jesus’ sacred journey from death to resurrected life? I should say “relics” of the Holy Cross, plural now, because many many people wanted a piece of that true cross wood. I wonder how big the cross would be if all the pieces were reunited! Not coincidentally, Emperor Constantine’s vision of using the cross as a conquering sign before winning a battle for control of the Roman Empire is precisely what moved the Church away from using symbols like the fish and bread and anchors, and turned an instrument of shameful and brutal execution into a sign of imperial Christianity that now many wear as jewelry. See what I mean when I ask what could go wrong?

While relics of the Holy Cross may serve as physical reminders of Jesus and inspire faith, we risk revering them more than the Mystery they symbolize. The danger lies in allowing relics to overshadow the spiritual practices they mean to enhance, such as prayer, worship, and most importantly, dignified and respectful relationships with the beloved children God (and everyone is a beloved child of God, Christian or not). When relics are possessed and venerated to the point of superstition or are used to control or predict particular triumphalist outcomes, they divert attention from the true source of grace and power.

Relics of the Holy Cross, and crosses in general, are sometimes employed as tools to promote the myth of redemptive violence, the myth of redemptive suffering: the belief that suffering has an inherent moral or spiritual value that leads to salvation, particularly when endured passively or without resistance, or even actively pursued. This myth is deeply embedded in our cultural narratives, too, as in the message “No pain, no gain,” when, in fact, sometimes pushing through pain increases the injury. The myth of redemptive suffering can perpetuate cycles of abuse, neglect, and injustice by encouraging passivity in the face of oppression, rather than advocating for healing, justice, and the active alleviation of suffering.

Spend enough time with people on any of our society's margins, and you'll hear the myth of redemptive suffering described as a cross to bear. As a new postulant about 25 years ago, I was lucky enough to be sitting in a group with the late Bishop Barbara Harris when one of my friends described a situation of being mistreated because she was a young woman. My friend sighed and said, "I guess that's my cross to bear." Suddenly, Bishop Harris grew into her full stature, which you might remember was about nine feet tall when she was impassioned. She said, [point finger] "Let's get clear about what a cross is. A cross is a burden you voluntarily pick up on behalf of another for the love of Jesus Christ. It's not something you are born with or something that is put on you that you cannot get out from under. It is a burden you can put down any time you need to." We must heed Bishop Harris' words and help one another get out from under the controlling and toxic myth of redemptive suffering especially as it gets applied to those who are least and last and lost.

It's worth noting that in the Gospel of John, from which our lesson today is taken, Jesus never commands or even asks his followers to take up a cross. However, Jesus does issue ten commands throughout the Gospel of John and I find them pertinent as we celebrate this new beginning in the Diocese of Olympia, Here are Jesus' 10 commandments in John:

1. "Do not complain among yourselves." I love that one. (John 6:43)
2. "Do not judge by appearances." Also good. (John 7:24)
3. "Anyone among you who is without sin, throw the first stone." (that was Jesus' response when a woman had been caught in the act of adultery.... no one threw any stones, by the way.) (John 8:7)
4. (from today's Gospel lesson) "Walk while you have light, believing in the light, so that you may become children of light." (John 12:35-36)
5. "Wash one another's feet." (John 13:14)
6. "Love one another." (John 13:34)
7. "Love one another." (John 13:34)
8. "Love one another." Jesus says "Love one another" three times, so we know he really means it. And even though the Gospel of John has Jesus describing "love one another" as a new commandment, I think he means it's "new" like the moon is new every 29.5 days. The moon is always there even when we can't see it, just as the commandment to love was written into the Law of Moses centuries before Jesus was born. (John 13:35)
9. "Do not let your hearts be troubled." (John 14:1)
10. "Believe in God, believe also in me...but if you don't believe in me, believe in my works." (John 14:1...11)

In the Gospel of John, *believing* is not an intellectual or academic exercise, it always means doing. According to John, when we live into and lean into the truth of Jesus' life and love, we are performing the works of God. Jesus says exactly that in chapter 14: "whoever trusts in me will do the works that I have been doing and they will do even greater things than these." Believing in Jesus doesn't mean thinking something, it means loving others, living a life in humble service to others, showing them and sharing with them the intersections of heaven and earth that are all around.

In the Gospel of John, believing means following Jesus. He is the way. "Follow him through the Land of Unlikeness; you will see rare beasts and have unique adventures." Do you know that line from W.H. Auden's Christmas oratorio written during WWII? It's in our hymnals set to two not

particularly catchy tunes, so I'm not going to ask you to sing from memory. Auden's urging to follow Jesus "through the Land of Unlikeness [where] you will see rare beasts and have unique adventures" might sound like apt advice for one about to be ordained a bishop, and it is. *And* it's meant for all who claim Christianity. Consider the "you" to be plural here.

You know, as a Church our mission field is growing very rapidly in the Land of Unlikeness! This is thrilling news and overwhelming to me, sometimes simultaneously. And it helps me to remember that Jesus was always looking forward to what people could do with the abundant love of God. When we are walking in the way of Love, Jesus is always out ahead of us, encouraging us to follow, emboldening us with strength that comes from knowing that our worth is not found in our titles or honors or vestments or other treasures, but in our hearts broken open with compassion, and in our lives poured out in service – not in service to the Church, but service *as* the Church, service *as* followers of Jesus. As far as I can tell, Jesus never asked for proof of religious credentials before he fed or cared for others in need.¹ Following Jesus means extending grace and generosity indiscriminately, and forgiveness (more times than we can count), and fostering communities of justice and right-relationship. The resurrected Jesus distilled it for us in his bonus three-fold commandment at the breakfast fish-fry he hosted at the end of the Gospel of John: "feed my lambs, tend my sheep, feed my sheep."

Auden continues: "He is the Truth. Seek him in the Kingdom of Anxiety: you will come to a great city that has expected your return for years." I probably don't have to tell you this, but there is a lot of anxiety in the realm these days. If anxiety is defined as the fear of not having enough of what is needed to meet the challenges ahead, the Good News is that following Jesus doesn't take any more than we have. Jesus will be able to use whatever we have. Following Jesus is moving forward in love *with* whatever we have. And if it's less than we used to have, no worries. There's no minimum requirement except two or three gathered. If we have more than we used to have, great! There's no maximum either.

As we heard our deacon proclaim. "Now is the judgment of this world." Now is the time. Now is always the time to trust in, to rely on the interrelationship of the divine and the human. All the love we have is urgently needed to restore our relationships with God and one another in the Land of Unlikeness, the Kin-dom of Anxiety. Let's not be naïve. This is difficult and we are not immune to internal and external messages that equate success with worth and power with prestige. But if we are going to follow Jesus, we have to help each other lean into unique adventures such as not being worried about our reputations or our measurable successes.

Auden concludes: "He is the Life. Love him in the World of the Flesh: and at your marriage [and your baptism and your ordination and your consecration] all its occasions shall dance for joy." On this joyful occasion at the beginning of a new journey for the Diocese of Olympia with your new bishop, perhaps we are the relics we've been searching for. Perhaps this gathering is but one reassembling of the pieces of the Holy Cross, tangible reminders of Jesus' sacred journey from death to life. From this festive occasion, may we journey together into the Land of Unlikeness, through the Kin-dom of Anxiety, and into the Eternal Life of Love for Jesus and for each other.

¹ As these words were coming out of my mouth, I remembered the Syrophenician/Canaanite woman in Mark 7/Matthew 15 who expanded Jesus' understanding of his call.