

**The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost**  
**July 26, 2020**  
**Romans 8:28-39**

*“The Cross”*

This is the first Sunday after bidding farewell to Pastor Campbell and family, and it seems kind of strange. It is a new chapter in life and ministry for the Campbells as they relocate to Belvidere, Illinois. We received word from them that they arrived safely, and we pray the Lord’s rich blessing upon them. The date for Pastor Campbell’s installation at Immanuel Lutheran Church in Belvidere has been set for Sunday, August 16, so it’s good to know that there is some breathing room for them to settle into their new home before everything starts up. In truth, it is a new chapter in life and ministry for us here at St. John’s. We haven’t moved anywhere, but this change in pastoral staff, together with changes due to COVID-19, bylaws revisions bringing about a different Church Council structure – all of these things signal a new chapter in life and ministry for us as well. What does the future look like for our congregation? We are praying about this very thing and discerning what the Lord would have us do. The new Church Council will have its first meeting today. Originally, I planned to preach on the Gospel lesson and Jesus’ parables about the treasure hidden in a field, the pearl of great price, and the net thrown into the sea. However, I have decided to change things up and preach on what is central to our faith: the cross of Jesus Christ using the new Chancel furnishings as illustration. It is through the cross that we are able to say in faith: **“For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord”** (Romans 8:38-39). That verse becomes the theme for preaching today. May the Lord’s rich and abundant blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word for Jesus’ sake.

Without question, the cross is the central symbol of our Christian faith. As Christians, when we see the cross, we remember the sacrifice that took place there: Jesus the Son of God offering his life as payment for our sins through the shedding of his blood. That instills in us a holy awe and reverence for the cross and what it means. St. John’s is known as “The Church of the Three Crosses,” and this is reflected in our church logo. This reminds us that Jesus was flanked by two other crosses there on Golgotha (Matthew 27:38) when he poured out his life as the atoning sacrifice for us all. When we come into the Lord’s house, it is the cross that stands front and center, a silent reminder to us of this once-for-all sacrifice sealed with the blood of Jesus. We may think that this is the only cross shape there is, but in truth there is great variety and meaning with many different crosses. “The most well-known cross is the Latin cross, which to Christians, represents the cross of Christ’s crucifixion. When shown with the image of Christ, it is called a crucifix. The shape of a true Latin cross, when folded, creates a cube, an ancient symbol of earthly authority. The cross of Christianity was a later symbol of the faith, replacing the lamb, fish, alpha/omega, and phoenix as emblems. It was previously considered a pagan symbol, with several early church fathers objecting to its use” (<http://symboldictionary.net/?p=2041>). This is what we are most familiar with.

Our Sanctuary’s beauty comes from simplicity of design marked by clean lines as well as spaciousness and light. When we contacted the Center for Liturgical Art in Seward, Nebraska (<http://liturgicalart.org>) about designing new Chancel furnishings in April of last year, we liked what the design team had to say: “I like to start with the cross and design the rest of the furniture around it. If our faith starts at the cross it follows that our design should as well, especially given the function of all the furnishings as visual symbols of the acts they facilitate. The chancel cross you have now would lend very nicely to a processional cross with changeable inserts and would help establish unity throughout the space.” When the design concept was returned to us, it was based on a different kind of cross – not the Latin cross, but the Greek cross. Huh? This took some explaining for all of us to understand. “The Greek cross is a very

early form of the Christian cross... the Greek cross predates the Latin cross and was not intended to represent the cross of the crucifixion, but instead, the four directions of the earth, representing the spread of the gospel, and the four platonic elements [water, air, fire, and earth]. The Greek cross was a popular floor plan for eastern churches at one time” (<http://symboldictionary.net/?p=2044>). It is the Greek cross that forms the basis of each new Chancel furnishing: processional cross and base, altar candleholders, missal stand, Baptismal font, Paschal candle stand, and flower stand. It’s hard to see this from the front, back, or side. The best way to grasp this is from above, and then clearly, the cross is seen. What began at Golgotha has gone out to the world in all four directions, and continues to go out. The good news of salvation accomplished for us through Christ at the cross spreads to more and more people through the people of Christ. This is what it means to join Jesus on his mission. We see where Christ is already out ahead of us in the mission field, opening new doors of opportunity to be Christ to our neighbor, and so we are looking for these connections with the people whom God has already placed in our lives. That’s what these cross-shaped Chancel furnishings tell us. In response to God’s great love for us made known by offering the life his only Son at the cross, we go out with the good news of Jesus into all the world. This good news of life and salvation in Jesus is that treasure hidden in a field (Matthew 13:44). This good news is that pearl of great price (Matthew 13:45-46). Holding fast to this good news enables us to have confidence when on that last day the angels come forth, gathering in all people like a net that is thrown into the sea as they separate the evil from the righteous (Matthew 13:47-50). We have confidence on that day because we have been declared righteous and acceptable before our heavenly Father through faith in Jesus, whose blood cleanses us from all sin (1 John 1:7). That is the message we carry out into all the world until Christ comes again.

Today’s Epistle lesson is often chosen to be read at funerals, and for good reason. At the end of the day, at the end of our life, at the end of the world, this is what matters. This is what makes an eternal difference; that nothing in all of creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. On this final Sunday in July, with a new chapter in life and ministry now opening before us as a congregation, we return to what is central to our faith: we return to the cross. The cross reminds us of the saving work which Jesus accomplished there, as well as reminding us of his sending us out into the world to be his witnesses in the world. Through our words and deeds, we point people to Jesus as we confess with believers of every time and place: **“For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord”** (Romans 8:38-39). Amen.