reading is the Cross (uppercase "C"), the symbolic emblem that is now the most recognizable mark of the Christian faith and a major hinge point of our theology.

Christian notions of the cross vary.

* For some it is the supreme symbol of God’s love for us, as the song says, "an emblem of suffering and shame...where the dearest and best for a world of lost sinners was slain" as God sacrificed God’s Self for humanity.
* For others it is emblematic of a fate we all deserve because of our sins, but one which we do not have to face because Jesus faced it for us by taking our place and thus "satisfying" our debt to God.
* For some it is the place where Christ confronted the power of Satan who first appeared to have won when Christ died but who, come Easter morning, lost everything when Christ rose from the grave.
* And for others it is simply the preferred method of execution in the Roman Empire, to which Jesus was unjustly sent for confronting the shortcomings of the established religious leaders.

Some who looked at the Cross decided that understanding its meaning was simply too difficult. The 17th century British poet, John Milton, wrote a poem on the birth of Jesus called "Ode Upon the Morning of Christ's Nativity." When he attempted to write a companion poem on the death of Jesus, he gave up in frustration. His collected works include the unfinished fragment with Milton’s scrawled words: "This subject the author finding to be above the years he had when he wrote it, and nothing satisfied with what was begun, left it unfinished."

Milton’s unfinished poem hinted at some vital truths: there can be no deep understanding of Christianity without talking about the Cross, and there is no single understanding of the Cross that satisfies all Christians (or Christianity's critics). Whatever the Cross and Jesus' death upon it means, the New Testament ties the Cross firmly to the resurrection of Jesus.

As Gerard S. Sloyan, professor emeritus of religion at Temple University, reminds us, all four gospels "present Jesus' crucifixion in close conjunction with his being raised from the dead," and he stresses that the "joining of the two is as much theological [as] chronological," making Jesus' death and resurrection "one mystery of faith, not two." He goes on to point out that the apostle Paul's "use of the terms 'death,' 'cross,' 'death on the cross' or 'word of the cross' always implies resurrection, often in a phrase that occurs nearby. In the same way, his use of 'resurrection,' 'glory' or 'splendor of the Father' when referring to Christ is a way of including the death in shame that preceded it."

**A pulling effect**. But we are getting ahead of ourselves. This is Good Friday and Easter is not yet here. So, for this day at least, we must content ourselves to think on the Cross of Jesus by itself, and what we must remember is this: What eventually came from the Cross, specifically our call to follow Jesus as his disciples, gives profound meaning to our lives and our world, even if it cannot be fully articulated.

In that regard, we may glean some insight from Jesus himself. Shortly before his death, he spoke to his disciples about his coming "hour," by which he meant his suffering and death. He told them, "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." The gospel writer John, comments, "He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die" (John 12:32-33). Jesus says that his death will have a pulling effect. Jesus will draw people to him. Surely, not all who feel drawn will respond, but something about his death and his subsequent victory over death will attract people. Which is what happened. Some of us are here today because we were drawn to the Christian faith by the crucified Christ. That attraction caused some of us to open our hearts to him and proclaim him our Lord.

The refrain of Bennard's hymn says, "So I'll cherish the old, rugged cross," and on one level, we ought to recoil at that. Should we cherish a tool of corporal and capital punishment? Probably not. Jesus himself did not cherish the cross; he prayed to be spared it*.* But if we are talking about the meaning of the Cross, about what Christ’s suffering and death gained for us, namely God’s forgiveness and eternal life, then cherishing it is entirely appropriate. I suspect this is how Bennard felt when he wrote of cherishing the Cross.

Dr. Charles E. Ferrell pastored a church in the city of Bennard's birth, Youngstown, OH. At a gathering of Christians, Ferell met a woman who bore two children with a genetic defect. Her son died at age 6. Her daughter appeared to be all right until age 10, when the genetic problems essentially froze her at that age. Moved by the woman's story, Ferrell asked her if having children with those conditions wilted her spirit. The woman replied, "People often tell me that it has been my cross to bear. I tell them, 'No! As far as I am concerned, there has been only one cross that counted. The cross of Christ. That cross has seen me through.'"

We wear crosses on chains, emblazon crosses on t-shirts, and stick crosses on our cars to remind ourselves that the Cross of Christ will see us through. A few years back, there were little cards printed with tiny wooden crosses pasted to them. Next to the cross was a little poem titled "The Cross in My Pocket" which explained in verse that the cross was a reminder "to no one but me / that Jesus Christ is Lord of my life / if only I'll let him be." This is one way of cherishing the Cross, or better yet, of cherishing the relationship with Christ to which it points. Ultimately, that may be the best way to view the Cross, as the invitation to a relationship that saves and lifts us and brings us peace with God. As we contemplate Christ’s cross tonight, may we see it as the gateway to a new relationship with our God.

Prayer: Merciful God, today we remember the pain and suffering of the cross, and all that Jesus endured so we could be free. He paid the price to offer us the gift of eternal life. Help us never to take for granted this selfless gift of love on our behalf. Help us to be reminded of what it cost him. Forgive us for being too busy, or distracted by other things, for not fully recognizing what you freely given, what you have done for us. We thank you, Lord, that by your wounds we are healed and that because of your sacrifice we can live free. Thank you that sin and death are conquered, and your Power is everlasting. Thank you that we can say with great hope, “It is finished…” For we know what is still to come. Death has lost its sting and we are alive forevermore. In Jesus’ Name, Amen.

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**"The Old Rugged Cross" Revisited**

Good Friday, April 2, 20201 John 18:1-19:42

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

"A monstrous blasphemy." That is how Erik Routley, a composer and minister who some consider to be the greatest hymnologist of the last century, described the well-known hymn "The Old Rugged Cross." A monstrous blasphemy! Routley explained his comment by saying, "I believe it to be wrong, misleading and spiritually wicked to treat the Cross as affectionately as that lyric does." Routley made the comment in a 1967 publication, more than 50 years after the hymn had been introduced to the public. His opinion did not sway public opinion,: "The Old Rugged Cross" was (and is) a fan favorite, widely used in churches across America. Routley’s mind was not entirely closed to the hymn, for he went on to say, "I may yet learn that with all its unspeakable vulgarity it has said something authentic to somebody."

Well, the hymn spoken to many "somebodies" and not in tones of "unspeakable vulgarity," but with the message of the gospel. "The Old Rugged Cross" is now well over one hundred years old, and it remains popular. Its author and composer, the Rev. George Bennard, started work on the hymn in the fall of 1912, completing it a year later. Bennard, a native of Youngstown, Ohio, gave his life to Christ at a Salvation Army meeting, and later served as a Salvation Army officer and a Methodist evangelist. In telling how the hymn came about, Bennard said it was the result of "a real soul struggle" in which he was "praying for a full understanding of the Cross and its plan in Christianity." After countless hours of study and prayer, Bennard could finally say, "I saw the Christ of the Cross as if I were seeing John 3:16 leave the printed page, take form and act out the meaning of redemption."

**The meaning of the Cross.** Today is Good Friday, the day when the Cross takes center stage in the Christian narrative. The lectionary readings for this day begin with Jesus' betrayal and arrest in the garden and extend through his crucifixion and burial. In those readings, the cross (lowercase "c"), the literal wooden object to which Jesus was nailed and upon which he died, cannot be ignored. But also present in the