

What DO others say about you? What do you think your friends say about you to others when you aren't around? What about your life, would you like your children and grandchildren, your coworkers, and casual acquaintances to remember?

Several years ago, I went to a funeral for a close family friend in Toledo who had been like a father for me and a grandfather for my kids. I saw many people I had not seen for 20 years. Everyone's appearances had changed the way time does that, but there was enough familiarity to our shapes that we all recognized each other. And in the words that were shared about Ralph, I had to smile, because I recognized the shape of his life by the words that were shared. He had been shaped by Christ and his love for his family, and what a great shape that will continue to be for all.

On the other hand, what is it like when you start talking to someone and realize they don't remember who you were? Or maybe someone changed so much that you just didn't recognize them? Has a familiar place changed so much that get lost? Or have friends changed so much that you just aren't comfortable being with them anymore? And are there people you gave up on who surprise you with change they have made?

Years ago, there was a controversy about a movie called "The Last Temptation of Christ." Much of the backlash was to the irreverence of the movie, and so I never watched it. I finally decided to read the book which the movie was based on. In doing so I learned the author is an incredible writer, and the novel was a powerful, reverent imagining of how intense the passion and suffering of Jesus "the man" truly was. Sometimes you need to look beyond the surface to find the truth.

In his forward the author talked about how writing this novel moved him to tears as he tried to imagine what it was like for God to live as a man. The book might not be appreciated by everyone, but in a creative way it dealt with what each disciple might have seen in Jesus, and the type of Messiah they wished that he would be. It made their reactions and his commitment to his mission come to life in a powerful way. It wrestled with the topic of our text today in a colorful and real way.

Jesus asked what others said about him and his disciples gave all the "pat" answers: "Miracle worker! Healer! Teacher! Freedom fighter!" Finally, Peter shouted "Messiah!" And Jesus said, don't tell anyone yet.

Why he did that was revealed in the very next moment. Having opened the "Messiah" door Jesus explained what that meant – suffering, cross bearing, death, and resurrection! And Peter said, "NO WAY!" Peter wanted a freedom fighter not a servant king. He wanted earthly power and might, not foot washing and loving grace.

Jesus made clear that he was to take on a different shape than they hoped and dreamed – and that shape would be called the cross! Until they got to Calvary, they couldn't understand Jesus (hence, his words to "be silent") ... don't get my shape wrong! Peter, like we do so often, wanted to shape Jesus into his expectations, and Jesus said that the cross is the only shape that defines the love I bring. And that is

where our conversation must begin.

In our world a cross is for a gold necklace or to decorate a place of worship – for them it was reserved for the most horrific criminals and announced guilt worthy of capital punishment. To terrify others from committing the same crimes, the condemned had to carry his own cross, through boisterous crowds, to his place of execution. The cross was the beginning of a punishment that always ended in death.

Peter was horrified at the thought of Jesus enduring what he didn't deserve. But Jesus wanted that shape to define his love. By being nailed to a cross, Jesus assumed its shape. In allowing himself to be chained to the punishment and death we deserve, he announced how powerful and complete his love is for us. The cross meant certain death, but Easter announced that the shape of the cross now means certain life! Peter couldn't see past the heavy burden of that cross, while Jesus saw it as a shape that would free Peter and all the faithful from ever being burdened by the guilt of sin and pain of death. Lifted as a punishment, for Jesus, the cross became the cure!

For those of us who seek to live by faith, Cross bearing is not "living with a heavy burden" but assuming the shape of Baptismal love. The easiest way to explain this is to remember a cross reaches out and stretches whomever it touches into a new shape that is unable to embrace me but can only reach out with the love of Jesus.

That is the inspiration for our call to be "looking up and reaching out." Christ's cross reaches up to God and through the cross, God reaches down to us. Christ's cross reaches out to a dying world, and through that cross the world is able to reach out and hold onto the Savior of love.

What is my cross? What is yours? The cross is not the "punishment you bear" but the service you offer. The cross is your response of time, effort, and gift for the sake of God who loves you so much.

From Baptism our goal is to allow the cross to change our shape from the shapes of perfect beauty and wealth that are the world's goals. The shapes the world offers lead only to suffering and death. But when we "take up Jesus' cross, we are following in his footsteps and lifting what he has made "light." As he says, "my yoke is easy and my burden light!" (Matt 11:30)

Like any discipline, this daily practice, and practice makes this more comfortable and more familiar. Together, we are called to sing a song of love that is our gift from the cross and empty tomb. Our life is not about nailing others to the crosses they deserve but shaping my living by the amazing grace that has set me free.

A decade ago, a law was passed in Europe that makes it illegal to wear crosses in public jobs. The reason for the law is that the cross was considered an offensive symbol non-believers and the large Moslem population of England. The rationale for upholding the law is that the wearing of a cross is not required by the Bible, as the head scarf is for Muslim women by the Koran. Wearing a cross is perceived to be an optional choice which because it offends some, has been made illegal.

Such is the wisdom of the world. But even if a government makes it illegal to wear a cross, can the world not see by the shape of our loving faith the shadow of that cross! I find that law offensive, but for us the cross is more than a symbol, and no one can remove its power from our lives!

As important as the cross is, its victory is already assured and of greater importance is the shape our living takes – that the cross is our model and faith, and love are the shape that others recognize you and me by. It troubles me to see the increasingly hostile actions of governments and public opinion against faith, but I know what shape my living must take no matter what the prevailing popular and secular wisdom might be.

Peter wanted an earthly Messiah, but Jesus said, "Wait till you see how much better your Messiah will in fact be!"

And aren't the shadows of an empty tomb a lot brighter than the cross Peter feared so much. And without the cross, there would have been no throne! And that is why Jesus told Peter to wait ... For us the wait is over!

How has the cross shaped your life? And what shape do others see in the words and actions of your living? Never forget that the shadow of death is destroyed, and the bright light of an empty cross announces loving hope and saving peace!