

Holy Cross Day, 2008
Good Hope Lutheran Church

Grace, mercy and peace be multiplied among you, in the knowledge of God, and of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, AMEN.

This past summer here at the church, I officiated at several weddings—and let me stop right there to emphasize, ALL the weddings this summer were pleasant experiences for me. Weddings can be different sometimes, to be honest about it; but these weddings were not like that. The couples this summer were all delightful, the families easy to work with, the services tasteful—so nothing here to embarrass anybody who, may have been involved with one of them somehow.

Anyway, back to my story. One of the weddings this summer. The ceremony had just ended. The guests had all been ushered out. And the wedding party had now returned to the nave for pictures. Now typically the first picture taken after a wedding is the happy couple, with me, the preacher, and that's what we were getting set to do. The bride. The bride, she was standing here, and the groom was right here, and they were beaming of course. And I was right here, between them, with a smile on my face, just like this. And I kept smiling, juuust like this, while the photographer pointed and aimed, and pointed and aimed, and how long is this going to take anyway when all of a sudden. All of a sudden. The photographer puts the camera down, and runs. Runs past us up to the altar, grabs the cross, and pushes it a few inches off to the side. The cross is what, brass? Lovingly polished by our altar care committee, it's shiny, it reflects, and heaven forbid that there's any kind of unwanted reflection in a wedding picture, oh my stars. And as the photographer walked back down to her camera, I could hear her muttering—half to herself, half out loud—muttering “Oh I should have known. This is a Lutheran church. In a Lutheran church, there's always a cross in the middle.”

Dear friends in Christ, I want to know. What does it mean to be people, who always have a cross in the middle. Huh? What does it mean, for instance, when you're in a dating situation, how do you handle yourself? What are the limits, do you know them? Can you stick with them? What

does it mean to have a cross in the middle. At work, by now you know how to cheat. By now you know how to skate by with as little effort as possible. Well? In the lunchroom, by the water cooler, you know how to play the gossip game. In conversations with others you know how to spin the truth to always make yourself look good somehow. In your marriage, you know what buttons to push to get even when you're angry—but we are people with a cross in the middle, so what does that mean? When you have been treated unfairly. When life loads on too much, much too much for you to handle. When you get a pink slip, or a scary diagnosis, or a tragic phone call in the middle of the night—what does it mean then to be people with a cross in the middle? Or, far less dramatic maybe—Sunday morning, you can sleep in or you can get up and come to church, well you have a cross in the middle, don't you? What does that mean?

The cross can be comforting, the cross can be annoying. It can be comforting: Because of Jesus Christ who died on the cross and then on the 3rd day rose again from the dead—because of the cross of this Jesus Christ, when faced with grief; we have a source of hope. When faced with hardship, or sadness, or despair, if the cross is in the middle then we have an anchor. We have a rock. We have the promise of help from God Himself, and a peace beyond all merely human understanding. Whatever is around me, with the cross in the middle I stand firm—I in the Lord and the Lord in me—whatever happens in life if the cross is in the middle for me, I am safe and sound in my Savior. The cross, is comforting that way.

But let's face it. The cross can flat out be annoying too. It places limits on our behaviors, and sets a watch on our mouth—because the cross is in the middle of your life, habits must change, and sins must be repented, and grudges must be released, and language must be cleaned up. There are expectations in dating situations, there are expectations in the workplace, and at the water cooler, there are expectations placed on you by God Himself when at home with the wife and kids. For that matter, there are expectations on Sunday morning too, expectations about your presence in this house of worship. A cross in the middle of your life is the joy and the hope of the Christian faith in this world, and in the next. But the cross of Jesus Christ is also your calling in

life. There are expectations that come with having a cross in the middle. And it can be annoying.

Unless. Unless. Unless of course you grab the cross, and push it a couple inches off to the side.

You know, I bet, if right now I ran up to the altar like the photographer did, and physically pushed that cross off to the side? You would have a cow. You would have a cow! And yet, what do you do in your life every single day? When faced with any sort of expectation from God you don't happen to like very much. When faced with any sort of expectation from God that cramps your style or interferes with whatever it is you got going, well what do you do? You grab the cross, and you push it off to the side a few inches, and do whatever it is you want. That's called sin, by the way, pushing God out of the middle of our lives, putting ourselves in the middle instead. That in fact is the essence of sin.

But the essence of God so to speak is love and mercy, and that brings us back once more to the cross. In the mercy of Almighty God, Jesus Christ was given to die for you on that cross, and on the 3rd day to rise again. To those who believe in Jesus Christ, He gives the power to become the children of God, and bestows on them the Holy Spirit. God's love for you is not vague, it's not merely a warm fuzzy feeling or a faint light off in the distance. God's love for you is real, and it's tangible, and concrete. God's love for you is a cross, and an empty tomb, stuck right there in the middle. And may it remain there always, unto life everlasting.

In the name of Jesus Christ we pray, AMEN.