

## HEARTBEATS Staying Connected 4/3/2023

Dear Friends in CHRIST,

***ONE AT ONE*** – *Every day this week beginning on Tuesday, April 4 you are encouraged to pray for one minute at one o'clock. This week, pray for those who do not yet know the LORD. Pray also for those who share the good news with others that they might know the grace of GOD. Ask that the HOLY SPIRIT be poured out into the lives of those who have yet to find the grace that GOD offers to all people.*

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A church I served had a wooden cross that stood on the altar rather than hanging on the wall. The cross was painted gold and had a frame around all the edges. In the sacristy of the church there was a crucifix that hung on the wall. It was somewhat smaller than the altar cross, but I discovered that it would fit nicely inside the frame around the cross. I put the crucifix on the altar cross one year at the beginning of Lent. Several people commented how nice it looked. Others, however, said they didn't like it. When I asked why, those who liked the crucifix/cross combination said it seemed to fit the season of Lent well, that it helped them to focus on what Lent was about. Most of those who didn't like it couldn't really tell me why except for one person who said, "It's too Catholic that way."

So, why do Lutherans usually have an empty cross in the church while Roman Catholics more often have a crucifix (a cross with the crucified CHRIST on it)? Well, neither is right or wrong. It's just a difference of focus.

The crucifix emphasizes the sacrifice that JESUS made for us on the cross. JESUS, who was without sin, took our sin to the cross so that we would not have to work to atone or pay for those sins. HIS death was a gruesome, painful death that we remember on Good Friday. It is important that we recall and understand what that death was all about.

The empty cross has its emphasis in the resurrection. CHRIST is no longer on the cross, nor in the tomb. HE is risen. The empty cross stresses the grace of GOD that includes the forgiveness of sins, but also extends to the unexpected blessing of rising to new life. Again, the empty cross is about grace, and it is also important that we understand this as well.

Roman Catholic theology is steeped in the need to earn GOD'S favor. This is done by attending mass (worship services), going to confession and doing penance (works that pay for one's sins), and other actions intended to offset sins committed. The crucifixion of CHRIST is understood to only remove original sin. All other sin must be paid for by the one committing them. It's an "if/then" situation that seems to say, "GOD if I do this (worship, confession, and so on), then YOU have to do this (forgive me, bless me, love me, etc.)"

Lutheran theology places its stress on GOD'S undeserved forgiveness of all sins because of the death of JESUS. We are forgiven of all sin, past, present, and future. This forgiveness allows us to live without the need to focus on paying for what we've done. Rather, grace frees us to express our gratitude to GOD in service to others. Grace is a "because/therefore" arrangement. Because GOD has forgiven us through the death of CHRIST, therefore we respond to this love by showing love to others.

I like the reminder of the crucifix, especially at this time of year. That's why I think Good Friday is so important. But I live in the good news of GOD'S grace and that's what the empty cross proclaims to us on Easter and every other day of our lives.

In CHRIST'S love,  
Pastor Jeffrey