

One day Jesus asked what people were saying about him. Why did he ask? How would they answer? And why did it even matter what others thought? And, by the way, what do others think or say about you? What about your life, would you like your children and grandchildren, your coworkers, and casual acquaintances to remember?

Some time ago, I went to a funeral for a close family friend in Toledo. He had been like a father for me and grandfather for my kids. I saw people I had not seen for twenty years. Everyone's appearances had changed the way time does that, but there was enough familiarity to our shapes that we recognized each other. As others reminisced about my friend 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 are? 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 changes they have made?

In what seems like a lifetime ago, there was 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 even watched it. One day I decided to read the book the movie was based on. I am so glad I did. The author was an incredible writer, and the novel was a powerful, reverent imagining of the intensity of the passion and suffering of Jesus as a man. Sometimes you need to see for yourself before you pass judgement on others.

The author's forward to the book spoke of him being moved to tears as he tried to imagine what it was like for God to live as a man. That gave me a different feel for what I was about to read. 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 each wished 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. What do others see in the person of Jesus, the Messiah?

When Jesus asked what others said about him, his disciples gave all the pat answers one would expect. Miracle worker! Healer! Teacher! Freedom fighter! Finally, Peter shouted "Messiah!" Jesus smiled and said, "just don't tell anyone – yet! And that was not the first or last time he would ask for such patience.

Why he did that was revealed in the words that followed. Having accepted the Messiah title, Jesus explained what that meant. Suffering, death, and resurrection! Peter was mortified and shouted, "NO WAY!" He wanted a freedom fighter not a servant king. He wanted earthly power and might, not foot washing and loving grace. He saw only what he wanted to see and was blinded by his needs to see Jesus' true shape.

Jesus made clear he was to take on a different appearance than most hoped and dreamed for. He would be shaped by the cross and the confines of a tomb. Until his followers saw that reality, there was no way they could fully understand what kind of Messiah he was. And so, he

cautioned silence to keep them from trying to shape him into something he was not. In essence, he was saying, "Don't get my shape wrong!" Peter, like we do so often, wanted to mold Jesus to his expectations. Jesus said the cross is the only shape that defines his purpose and nature of his kingdom.

Our conversation today must begin with a similar perspective. In our world a cross is for a gold necklace or to decorate a place of worship. In Jesus' day it was Rome's answer of death for the most horrific criminals. It announced guilt worthy of capital punishment. Its purpose was to terrify others from committing similar crimes, as 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. And to be honest, we are sometimes embarrassed to talk about that as well! But Jesus wanted that shape to define his love. By being nailed to a cross, Jesus conformed to its shape. In allowing himself to be chained to the punishment and death we deserve; he made clear how powerful and complete his love is for us.

The cross meant death, but Easter changed the cross into a reminder of new life! Peter couldn't see past the heavy burden of a 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 up as a punishment, for Jesus, the cross became the cure!

For those of us who seek to live by faith, Cross bearing is not a heavy burden but a reminder of the call to love God and neighbor alike. A cross reaches out, as Jesus arms reached out to all his children. A cross reaches up and down as God connected heaven to earth. And that image becomes the gift that changes each of us into a new shape that is free to reach out with love for God and those around us.

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.

Like any discipline, this takes practice, and practice makes this more comfortable and 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.

Years ago, a law was passed in Europe that makes it illegal to wear crosses in public jobs. The reason was the cross was considered an offensive symbol to 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, the world should see 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!