

For the Ordination and Consecration of
Gregory Harold Rickel
as Eighth Bishop of the Diocese of Olympia

God who loves us, you always delight to reveal yourself to the childlike and lowly of heart, grant, we pray you, that following the examples of Francis, Clare, Louis & Elizabeth we may count the wisdom of this world as foolishness, and know only Jesus Christ and him crucified.

Both here and in all your churches through out the world, we adore you O Christ and we bless you; because by your Holy Cross, you have redeemed the world. Amen.

A blessed Holy Cross Day (transferred!) to you all!

When Constantine became a Christian, his mother, Helena, traveled to Israel to the places where Jesus had lived and died. Most importantly, she wanted to find the place of his crucifixion, burial and resurrection, and her intent was to build churches on these sites.

The story is that these holy places had been preserved by local pagans who built their own shrines on the places that had been holy to the people who had been there before, so she was able to locate them and replace the shrines with Christian churches.

The most prominent of these that still stands (although it has been destroyed and rebuilt several times) is known today as the Church of the Holy Sepulcher and it houses what scholars still believe may be the places of Jesus' crucifixion, burial and resurrection. It was originally completed and dedicated in 335 and the anniversary of that dedication is celebrated on Holy Cross Day.

Holy Cross Day is also a day when we celebrate the victory of the cross in a way that isn't possible on Good Friday. It's a victory celebration, remembering the victory won by God through Jesus' death on the cross and its celebration of the glory of the cross itself.

The glory of the cross.

Glory? Glory is this wonderful service: banners, streamers, mobiles of the tongues of fire, hymns, anthems and flowers, and the amazing people of God. *Glory of the cross?* Well we say it but do we really mean it? Paul speaks of the glory of the cross in a culture where even using the word *crux*, or cross, was offensive; where death on a cross was meant to shame and demean as much as it was to kill, much like a lynching is in our own time.

The glory of the cross. In the last six verses of Paul's letter to the Galatians, he completes his argument against the traditionalists who insisted that Gentile Christians must be circumcised – that is, marked with the sign of the covenant of Abraham – that is, made Jews before they could become Christians.

But the marks of the law count for nothing, Paul says. “Look instead,” he says, “I carry the marks of Jesus branded on my body, so quit making trouble.”

There are some disagreements on what Paul’s “marks of Jesus” are. The Greek word Paul uses is *stigmata*, which has a special, specific meaning for us that comes from this very context. I must admit I didn’t remember before I started studying this text this summer that there is some controversy over what this means. I don’t know why I wouldn’t have assumed controversy, but I didn’t.

All this time, I believed that Paul’s hands, feet and side were marked, miraculously, with the signs of the crucifixion, as were the hands, feet and side of other saints. Francis of Assisi received the *stigmata* three days after Holy Cross Day at Mount Alverna, two years before his death. They are painful and need bandaging and care, for they often bleed.

But, as I said, I have discovered that there are scholars who say that this is not what Paul was referring to, and in fact believe that this reading of the text can lead to an unhealthy mysticism. Is there anything that can’t?

Perhaps the marks were scars from his scourgings and shipwrecks and beatings: marks of his persecution – the persecution followers of Jesus, of the way of the cross, could expect to receive. This would be a forewarning to all Christians – look at what is ahead.

This interpretation makes sense in the context of the passage as Paul uses it to silence the troublemakers. What ordinary scars of the law could have any more significance than the scars of persecution?

Another writer suggested that perhaps the marks are really brands. Masters used to brand their slaves. He wasn’t clear, but this writer must mean spiritual brandings. Whatever it was for Paul, the question remains, what is that for us? Of course it is almost always a spiritual branding.

“Each newborn servant of the crucified,
bears on the brow the seal of him who died.”¹

Before today’s service, the bishops sealed the ordination certificate with a seal of their diocese. Those who don’t wear a signet ring or carry a seal of the diocese, mark the wax with the sign of the cross.

When we anoint the sick, they are marked with the sign of the cross. When deacons read the gospel, they mark the gospel book with the sign of the cross. When we receive absolution or a blessing, our hearts are marked with the sign of the cross. Most significantly at baptism, the

¹ Hymnal 1982 # 473 “Lift High the Cross” words by George William Kitchin (1827-1912, alt. Michael Robert Newbolt (1987-1937))

brow of “the newborn servant” is marked with the sign of the cross. When we are thus marked, we are sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism; having died and risen with Christ, we have died to ourselves and risen to new life in Christ.

We have become new creations.

Something like Helena’s churches—new creations on the sites of pagan shrines, which were originally the sites of holy places.

Each of us bears scars from the world which has hurt or broken us; from ourselves and our own sinfulness. Or, as the New Zealand Prayer Book puts it, “in the hurts we absorb from one another.” Christ longs to make new churches out of us, remaking those scars into glittering stained glass-window signs of God’s redeeming love.

Richard Jensen tells a story Allen Nelson² (you may know it, but it bears repeating). Nelson was a businessman who visited Soweto in 1978. He was there to advise American companies on ways to make a positive difference in apartheid South Africa.

He was a churchgoing man, and so he thought that, considering his mission in South Africa, he might be called to visit a black church. He asked at his hotel for directions to such a church and the concierge directed him to one about five blocks away. Nelson invited a friend and the two of them walked to the church. As he walked he became more and more conscious of what he was trying to do. As he walked, he saw the signs around him: “Whites Only.” “Coloreds Only.” Signs of the laws that separated white from black.

He grew more and more nervous and anxious with each step, but just as he was about to turn back, they arrived at the church. Allen Nelson chose to walk through his fears and entered the church. They had arrived early and no one was there. They picked two seats and sat down. One by one the congregants arrived and no one sat next to them. No one even sat near them. In fact, when the congregation had all arrived, there was a complete circle of empty chairs all around them.

Allen Nelson’s fears began to build again, to drown out his hopes that a new creation was possible beginning in God’s church; his hopes that he could ever make a difference.

Before the service started a woman stood up and started to sing “Amazing Grace.” Nelson said

² Richard A Jensen, Lectionary Tales For the Pulpit, (CSS Publishing Company, Inc. Lima, OH) pp. 81f.

her voice was the most beautiful he had ever heard; so beautiful that as she began the second verse, he could not resist the impulse to join his voice to hers. There they were singing, black and white together, in 1978 Soweto.

Then an old woman slowly walked forward from the back of the church. She touched him. “Jesus,” she said softly. Then Allen Nelson broke the law. He embraced her. They wept. And the barriers were broken, people gathered round on every side. Hope defeated fear. Love defeated evil. Light defeated darkness.

Allen Nelson carried the marks of Jesus branded on his body. So did the unnamed woman. So did the congregation.

Earlier in this last chapter of the epistle the church in Galicia, Paul summed up our life in Christ by saying, “Bear one another’s burdens.” (Galatians 6:2) It’s a simple way of saying, “Die to your silly self-centeredness; die to your paralyzing fears and self-protection; die to your pursuit of happiness or any other fleeting goal. Seek joy for others. Forgive. Let God’s Grace move your Spirit.” *These* are the marks of Jesus we are to carry on our bodies.

It is easy to look for these marks on our new bishop. It would be easy for a new bishop to think he has some special call to bear the wounds of Christ – the *stigmata* themselves. But they belong to each of us and to all of us together as the Body of Christ! In and through our baptism, we become one with Christ in death and new life. In and through our baptism, we carry the mark of Jesus on our brow. In and through the Body of the Christ, through all of us together, God is building a new creation on pagan sites which were once built on holy sites. But as we die to our self-interest, as we let go of our fears and our self-protective habits, as we forgive as we have been forgiven, as we bear one another’s burdens and the burdens of a dysfunctional world, then Christ will again be lifted up and once again it will be a cross of victory! And all the world will begin to see and know God’s love and

“the Lord once lifted on the glorious tree,
will draw, as promised, all the world to thee”³ . . . to God’s own self.

Greg Rickel, we welcome you, a brother in Christ and a companion on our journey. We invite you to bear our burdens and we pledge to bear yours. Help us heal the wounds of our world. Help us forgive one another and to continue to forgive one another. Help us grow in grace, so that we will all be held together in Christ’s open embrace.

³ “Lift High the Cross” v. 3.