

MEDITATION

Last Easter, my pastor asked me to give a brief talk on “what the Cross means to me.” I have always been a visually oriented person. I love the way things look: a vase of flowers placed in precisely the right spot on a sidetable, a few shells piled on the kitchen windowsill, the arrangement of a poem. While I may not remember the name of someone I’ve just met, I will have a catalogue of other information: the

brittle light above the pines. It was so cold that the water in the horses’ trough had frozen over, unusual for the coastal counties. As I went to get an axe to chop through the ice, I noticed a yard chicken, a hen, perched near the trough, with several biddies tucked under her wings. I was impressed with how she had turned her face and frail body of fluff into the icy wind, her wings outstretched and, it seemed to me,



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shape of the person’s smile, looks of strain or wariness, the color of his or her eyes.

The way things look can give great pleasure. Or inflict the worst kind of pain—that which we carry inside and cannot forget. Vision is one way that God uses to speak to men and women when they don’t want to or cannot hear his words. We clap our hands over our ears; he turns our hearts into eyes that see, eyes that we cannot shut at will.

So what comes to mind when I first think of the Cross? Always, always, I see arms. The outstretched arms of Jesus. Arms that, 2,000 years later, still yearn to engulf the timidity and anguished fears of humankind, still yearn to welcome and embrace. Someone else might first think of the pain that Jesus suffered. Or the way he was mocked by bystanders. Someone else might think of the vertical position of the cross, reaching up into heaven and descending into the dark unknown of death.

But when I think of the Cross, I first see an image of Jesus’ arms stretched in an endless circle. We don’t run to those arms for as many reasons as there are people: We are proud. We are determined to run our own lives. We are full of doubt and squint-eyed disbelief. But those arms remain eternally outstretched, ready to take us in with all of our turmoil and confusion.

When I think of the Cross, I see the arms of Jesus. And I hear him saying, in Matthew, “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings.”

One cold night years ago in North Carolina I went outside to check on some animals then housed in my father’s small barn. There was a full moon shining down in bright,

PICTURING THE CROSS

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my faith, this visual depiction of Jesus’ care for me.

But it struck me that those chicks had come to the hen. I don’t know if she chased them around the yard first,

if some came more willingly than others, or if some were still out there half-frozen. (There were a few late arrivals perched on top of her wings.) I only know the chicks I could see had allowed themselves to be gathered up and protected. They had quit fighting what they had no control over in the first place and said, “You do it, Mom.”

And there is Jesus, dying a slow and terrible death, with his arms pulled wide. He could have been stoned, like Stephen. But then, to protect himself, his arms would have been pulled in to his chest. Or he might have been beheaded, like his cousin John. But then his arms would have been bound behind his back. Instead, Jesus’ arms were stretched taut, leaving bare his heart. Even when he could no longer physically hold them out, his arms were held in place by the nails.

When I think of the Cross, I see the outstretched arms of Jesus. And I think of my own need. For when all is said and done, I am unable to fend for myself. Like those barnyard biddies, I need to come in out of the cold.

When I think of the Cross, I think of the collective need of the church to open its arms—in forgiveness, and in acceptance, fully aware of our faults and deep imperfections. Only when we open our arms as Jesus did, go to him and each other as he comes to us, will our internal eyes be filled with light. For only Jesus can wipe clean the lens of our soul. **CI**

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