

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

September 14, 2025

How do we approach the cross?

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Beloved by God, my siblings in Christ, grace to you and peace from God our Creator and our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Much has been made this past week about political violence. In fact, one particular act of political violence has led to nonstop headlines and the full engagement of the outrage media machine. In the face of this wall-to-wall coverage I would like to point out that political violence occurs daily in the world...it occurs daily in this very country. But for some reason the day-to-day, humdrum political violence that occurs so very frequently, just doesn't receive the same coverage or outrage as this one recent act did.

You may wonder what I'm referring to. Well, every death due to lack of food and water in this country is an act of political violence. How so? Well, since we produce more than enough food to feed everyone in this country that means any hunger in the US is a result of political will (or its lack). Every person who dies of exposure because they do not have shelter...in a country with over 15 million homes sitting empty¹...those deaths are a result of political violence too. Then there are marginalized communities. Communities of color, LGBTQIA+ communities, disabled communities, indigenous communities, women, the poor, the prisoner, the oppressed...they all could write volumes on the political violence perpetrated against them.

In the same week that this one act has seized media attention, a neo nazi opened fire on a school in Denver²; fourteen Palestinians, three of them

¹ <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/EVACANTUSQ176N>

² <https://www.denvergazette.com/2025/09/11/here-are-5-things-evergreen-school-shooting/>

children, died of malnutrition while over two hundred Palestinian civilians were murdered by Israeli forces³; twenty-four Ukrainian civilians were killed in an airstrike on their village by Russian forces⁴; more than fifty people were killed in protests in Nepal⁵; sixty-eight people in DR Congo have contracted Ebola⁶; multiple people are dead and hundreds wounded as fighting continues between the RSF and SAF in Sudan⁷; at least eighteen students were killed in an airstrike on their school by Myanmar's military⁸...

I could go on. These are my notes from about ten minutes of searching around on Google news. And all of these occurred in the last week. Did you hear any coverage of any of them? They were all acts of political violence too. Whether through an intentional act of political will or a deliberate lack of political will, all these deaths could have been avoided if there was any sort of desire to do so by those in power.

It's enough to despair. My wise wife suggested I invite a moment now to breathe. The news is heavy. It's hard. Breathe. Do not be afraid, our Christ reminds us...again and again he reminds us. Do not be afraid, Christ is with us. We can face these hard things. We can sit for a moment with the weight. For today is Holy Cross Day, a day to sit with heaviness, solemnity, and reverence. Reverence for the pain. Our pain. God's pain.

Holy Cross Day is the reverencing of a symbol of political violence, and sitting with that too. Sitting with the ultimate exercise of violence against one who simply preached love and liberation. Reverencing Christ's pain too.

³ <https://www.aljazeera.com/tag/israel-palestine-conflict/>

⁴ <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c1jz08j8313o>

⁵ <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c0q71jplqq0o>

⁶ <https://www.cidrap.umn.edu/ebola/suspected-cases-dr-congo-ebola-outbreak-rise-68>

⁷ <https://www.msf.org/attacks-across-darfur-sudan-leave-nearly-100-wounded-msf-facilities>

⁸ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/9/13/students-among-18-killed-in-myanmar-strike-on-rakhine-schools-armed-group>

Crucifixion was reserved by the Roman Empire for rebels and traitors. It is a heinous means of death. And the Romans made sure to utilize the shock value of this torture to the fullest. Those crucified were always crucified near a major thorough fare, to maximize Imperial terror over the local populace.

Incidentally, the Jewish historian Josephus reported that at some point in Jesus' childhood the Roman Empire slaughtered some 2,000 residents of the nearby village of Sepphoris as punishment for rebelling against Roman rule (and taxation).⁹ It is quite likely that Jesus witnessed crucifixions and the remains of the crucified at an early age. Think too of lynchings in our own history. Crowds of white people, sometimes with a carnival feel in the air, gathering to murder a black person; often leaving the body hanging as a warning to others.

The cross our savior died on is an act of political violence. The cross we honor today is a symbol of torturous death at the hands of Empire. How do we approach this cross? Most of us here this morning...from a position of **deep humility**. Understanding that we still stand as beneficiaries of systems of privilege and luxury denied to most people on this planet. Systems that largely exploit the global south.

How do **we** approach this cross? Knowing that is draws us to the very people our systems exploit. The cross calls us to solidarity with those harmed by Empire in particular. And I know it can feel hard and we don't like to face our complicity in these systems. But it's the ultimate act of freedom. Working together to end these violent systems is the ultimate act of love.

How do we approach this cross? With all of us. With all of our experiences. Those of you here carrying wounds from the patriarchy. Bring that to the cross. Those carrying burdens of self judgement and rejection. Bring that to

⁹ Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 17:295

the cross. Those of you with scars from racism, sexism, exploitation, unfair expectations. Bring all that to the cross. We gather there together.

We approach the cross with reverence because it bears the world's pain. We touch it with love, knowing it will hurt us too. But also knowing, it's the only way to heal. We have to sit with it. With it all. We have to acknowledge it. See it. Admit it. Even to ourselves. And we sit with it...together...at the foot of the cross.

And we say, no more. No more hate. No more self hate. No more bigotry. No more homophobia, no more transphobia, no more racism, no more exploitation. That's not God's Kingdom, that's not God's Will. Instead...love. The sort of love that ends Empire. The sort of love that calls for justice. The sort of love that just **loves one another**.

Doesn't that sound amazing? To just love one another? To let go of the things that would divide us? To be willing to sit with one another in each other's pain and love one another enough to want to end one another's suffering? Doesn't that sound like the Kingdom of God? The Kingdom of love enough to reverence one another's pain, to learn from one another's experience, and to love enough to want to end suffering everywhere.

That is why we reverence a symbol of political violence...extreme violence. To end it. I wonder if we should worship the noose while we're at it. To love it to its end. For that is what we're doing, centering the cross, the world's suffering, **until that suffering ends**. We worship the cross...still today...and until that day when God's Kingdom comes and God's Will is done. We worship the cross until that great day when we can worship in God's presence. For then suffering will be no more, for anyone. Pain and grief will be no more, for anyone. For that is what love wants, that is what love insists on...justice. Justice for all. Justice for God so loved the world. Amen.