

Every year on the Friday before labor day,
I have made it a ritual to watch the movie Rudy,
while eating fish and chips and drinking a Guinness.
I do this because I am a Notre Dame football fan,
and this ritual gets me in the mood for the upcoming college football season.
Notre Dame's mascot,
as most of you probably know,
is the fightin' Irish.
What a great mascot.
The mascot looks like this tough irishman,
with his dukes up ready to fight,
fitting in perfectly with his gruff exterior.
Now there are some other mascots that aren't nearly as intimidating.
Take Syracuse University's mascot:
Otto the Orangeman.
I don't know about you,
but a big fuzzy orange does not intimidate me.
Or how about the Ohio State Buckeyes...
whether it is a type of candy or a nut,
either way,
I would not be scared or proud of it!
Then there is the University of California Santa Cruz's mascot.
Are you ready for this?
The banana slugs.
Get ready,
were coming for ya',
we - are - the - banana slugs!
Once the banana slugs get goin',
there ain't no stoppin' it!
Not exactly something I would take pride in or boast about.
We live in a culture that likes toughness,
respect,
intimidation,
pride and success.
And we love to associate ourselves with these things in our lives.
I must admit,
when I first got accepted into Yale,
I took great pride in boasting about my accomplishment.
I mean,
it's Yale for goodness' sake!
While in New Haven we would crack jokes to tear down the other ivy schools...
"Oh your're from Princeton,

I will talk slower then.”

or,

“So you go to Harvard;

is that in Jersey?”

We like to identify with certain people or objects,
because we think it says something about us.

I am sure each of us has had someone in our life,
or worked at a certain place,

or been maybe even been affiliated with something that we were ashamed of.

We have tried to distance ourselves from those things,

so we might escape the embarrassment that will no doubt take place.

This brings us to our epistle this week.

The apostle Paul,

in his letter to the Galatians states,

“May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything! As for those who will follow this rule-- peace be upon them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God. From now on, let no one make trouble for me; for I carry the marks of Jesus branded on my body. May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers and sisters. Amen.”

St. Paul tells his audience that his desire is to be identified only with the cross of Jesus Christ.

He doesn't want to boast in himself,

or his cultural heritage,

or with all the ways he does a great job of keeping God's law.

No, he wants to be identified only with Jesus,

and specifically,

with the cross of Jesus.

At a quick reading this might seem reasonable enough,

but we must do a little digging to see why this is so astounding!

Recently I read an article about how crucifixion was done in the Roman Empire. Crucifixion was undoubtedly one of the cruelest and most humiliating forms of punishment in the ancient world.

The Jewish historian Josephus said that crucifixion is "the most wretched of deaths."

This form of state terror was widespread across the Roman Empire which included Europe, North Africa and Western Asia.

It originated several centuries before the Common Era,

and continued into the fourth century AD,

when the practice was discontinued by Constantine the emperor of Rome.

One of the main goals of crucifixion,

was to act as a deterrent to future criminals in the Roman Empire.

The punishment was so severe,

and grotesque,

that individuals walking by and seeing the gruesome display,

would think twice before committing a crime against the state.

In the ancient world,
the cross was associated with criminals,
low-lives,
and humiliation.

So for the apostle Paul to say that he boasts,
and takes pride in the cross of Jesus Christ...

to his audience, this would seem utterly ridiculous!

I would like each of us to think of something that is viewed as humiliating,
or embarrassing...

now try to imagine yourself taking pride in that thing.

What if the Jesus died in the electric chair today?

Could you imagine someone wearing an electric chair charm around their neck?

Or what if someone made the sign of the "lethal injection" whenever they spoke about their
faith?

And add to that:

what if they talked about these means of execution with reverence and awe?

We would find this a bit disturbing wouldn't we.

That is essentially what Paul is saying in his letter to the Galatians.

The thing that is so mocked and ridiculed, and causes such hatred,
is the thing Paul was boastful about.

We may not realize this today,
because the image of the cross is more accepted today.

It doesn't shock us anymore.

But,

when you get down to what the cross really means,
it's awful and offensive, isn't it?

The notion that God humbled himself to the form of a man --

and allowed Himself to be hung on the cross,

not because of something he had done,

but rather, to atone for our sins --

this is hard to swallow.

Especially in our day and age.

We are in a highly pluralistic culture,

that says,

it doesn't matter what someone believes,

it is a private matter.

Or,

that all the religions are the same.

The cross of Jesus Christ,

says just the opposite!

Together,

Christ's life, death and resurrection,
state that the only way to find healing and redemption,
is through the cross.

Jesus Himself states,

"I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life,
No one comes to the Father but THROUGH me."

Which means,

through the cross on which He was slain.

You and I have been freed from death
and given new life in baptism.

When we are baptized, one of the things the priest does,
is to mark the forehead of the person with the sign of the cross.

During our prayers and the liturgy,
often we sign ourselves with the cross.

We don't do these things so we can boast that WE do what we're supposed to in church, or,
to earn our way to heaven by acting just right.

Rather, these actions for us serve as constant reminders that our salvation has come at a price:
and that price is our Lord Jesus Christ being nailed to the cross,
where He was hung to die.

Jesus' grace and mercy costs us nothing.

And yet,

it also costs us EVERYTHING!

The cross of Christ does not allow for us to be spectators in this life...
no,

the cross of Christ challenges us to make this world a better place.

HOW DOES IT CHALLENGE US TO DO THAT?

- to stand up for those who are hurting or oppressed...
- to love our neighbors as ourselves
- and even to forgive our enemies.

The cross of Christ should not disappear from our lives,
but rather we should scream of its existence from the mountain tops.

WHY SHOULD WE SCREAM ABOUT IT?

- to tell others about God's love and mercy
- to show others hope that the world could be a better place if more people knew, and accepted, God's love

How do we do this?

Invite your neighbors and friends to come to church to experience the power of the cross.

(And don't invite friends who already go to church somewhere! Try inviting someone who doesn't go to church anywhere. Maybe you get a little nervous about mentioning your faith to them. If you don't know when, or what to say, ask God to give you the right time and the right words.)

Don't be ashamed of the cross,

because Christ was not ashamed of it.

In fact,

he embraced and made it the symbol of our redemption.

I would like to close with a prayer from St. Anselm that is titled, a prayer to the Holy Cross.

“With what love shall I glory in you, O Cross,
when without you,

there would be nothing for me to glory in,
and in eternity I should have the grief and misery of hell.

With what delight will I rejoice in you,
when by you the servitude of hell which I inherited,
is exchanged for the kingdom of Heaven.

With what jubilation shall I laud you,
when without you I faced that future which horrifies me,
even if it had lasted only a moment,
and through you I now expect to rejoice in eternity.

Though now I serve God between hope and fear,
I am sure that if I give thanks, love, and live to your glory,
through you I shall at least come to that good.

So let my glory be through you and in you;
let my true hope be through you and in you.

By you my sins are wiped out,
by you my soul is dead to its old life,
and lives to the new life of righteousness.

I beseech you,

wash me by baptism from the sins in which I was conceived and born,
and cleanse me again from those that I committed after I was reborn,
so that by you I may come to those good things for which man was created,
by the might of the same Jesus Christ our Lord,
who is blessed for ever and ever. Amen.”