

Thoughts on the Making of a Cross by Jeremy Botts

The cross has become to us a symbol, a sort of sign, but one that is difficult to define precisely. Found in nearly all the ancient civilizations, the cross has likely had many varied meanings. In its abstract simplicity, it represents a coordinate, a connection of vertical and horizontal, earth and sky, the four directions you might travel, or where you are. Scratched and carved into the walls of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem are thousands of crosses pilgrims have made; marks perhaps of their identification with Jesus in the traditional location of his burial. And today, many wear delicate stainless steel emblems on chains around their necks, cleansed of the horror of the event of crucifixion.

In the earliest centuries following Christ's return to heaven, believers found ways to artfully veil the deep mysteries of their faith in symbols not very different from those subjects in the art around them (in order to not attract suspicion by those who might persecute). The cross was not one of these symbols until the fifth or sixth century, except perhaps cryptically in impressions on loaves of bread, or the scales of fish. One of the earliest references to the use of the cross as a visual focus for worship is in the writings of St Willibald (born circa 700AD), who speaks of the custom of erecting a cross as a gathering place for prayer preceding the building of a church. In contemporary churches there has been a trend towards the removal of the cross altogether from the worship space, and its replacement with a screen upon which can be projected an ephemeral pixellated version (which might then dissolve into an animated advertisement!)

It was a tremendous honor then, that Pastor Phil asked me to consider designing and building a cross for this new building. There were obvious precedents to consider, most notably the cross made of beams from Scott and Sally Harrison's barn, and I knew immediately, that it would need to be profoundly solid, and physically heavy. But this cross also needed to be very large, scaled to powerfully engage the wall and surrounding space, and (for me as an artist) to somehow hover in that mysterious space between what we see and are familiar with, and what we know but do not have words to express.

I spent significant time researching historical proportions of crosses: from early primitive forms to contemporary liturgical design for architecture, notably the work of Tadao Ando, whose Japanese aesthetic makes timeless truth powerfully visible and new. The famed San Damiano crucifix (before which St Francis heard the words of Jesus "build my church"), and the curiously specific dimensions God gave to Moses have been overlaid, and the resulting interstices have provided the cross' final form and design. I decided early on that the cross should be made from locally salvaged barn beams, gathered together in a way that preserved the memory of their and our heritage: the faithful, hardworking sensibility of the farmer. The "original" ends of the beams radiate out from the woven center, taking on the appearance of nail holes, weathered... the Carpenter's hands now free to work in our lives!

Martin Luther King writes in his book *Strength to Love*, that "the cross is the eternal expression of the length to which God will go in order to restore broken community." In addition to the wooden beams, I wanted to integrate another visual language as a means to speak to this great mystery. I chose copper, one of the softest, most malleable metals to become a sort of analog representation of our voices, richly patinaed by time and experience, and embedded into the shape of Jesus' life. The positioning and lengths of the individual bars hint at Jesus' presence among us, and absence from the cross.

I hope that you will take the opportunity sometime to come close to the cross, to touch the rough and rugged old oak woodgrain and contemplate the subtle swirls of patinaed copper, for "... we are Christ's body, in which he speaks and acts, and by which he fills everything with his presence." (paraphrased from Ephesians 1:23)

Throughout the entire construction process of the cross: gathering and re-sawing the beams, engineering structural support, and raising and securing the cross to the wall, I was grateful for the help, excellent wisdom and skilled hands of Les Engle, my indispensable collaborator.

