

There are different badges that I've worn, or wanted to wear, during my life.

- When I was a child, I liked to wear a little **tinny-like-metal star**, that I pinned on my chest. I would wear a leather looking plastic belt strapped to a leather looking plastic holster containing a plastic and metal six shooter, and I was the sheriff. I was the boss. I was the keeper of law and order. I felt good about myself.
- I was never a participant, but often an admirer, when we had **Boy Scout** Sunday at church and I saw the guys come in with their **merit badges** sewn onto a sash. Each badge was a sign of their accomplishments. I was not a Boy Scout, but on that Sunday, I wanted to be. I wanted to have all those badges of success.
- In Junior High School, the ones who were “in” all wore **Nettleton-tassel-slip-on shoes**. They were the badge (even though worn on the feet) of being from a family that could afford such a trophy. I got a knock-off pair. They were (fake, of course) alligator skin tassel-slip-ons. They didn't fool anyone. Instead, they became a badge of the fact that my family wasn't affluent enough to buy the real Nettletons. I was a wanna-be, not a real “in” person.
- When I was in High School, the really cool guys, wore white cardigan sweaters with a great **big red letter P** sewn onto them. It was a sign that they had played enough quarters of football or enough minutes of basketball or enough innings of baseball, to be recognized as important in that sport. They had “lettered.” Later on, they came up with a “Letter” that had a band instrument clearly pictured on it. I got one of those, but never wanted to put it on a sweater. Having

“lettered” in band was not a sign of being cool. It told the world that I was a geek. It was fine until they put that little band instrument sign on the bottom bar of the letter P to show that I hadn’t really lettered; I was only in the band.

But I grew up. I got over the need for those silly badges. I was sophisticated now. I didn’t need to participate in those silly childish games.

- The **successful lawyers** in town drove **Mercedes Benz-es or BMW’s**. I couldn’t. I could barely make payroll in those early years of solo practice. I drove a used American-made car. I said that I was supporting my country. I didn’t fool anyone, even myself. I didn’t make as much money as those successful lawyers who represented corporate clients and worked in firms. Someday, by golly, I would get one, I said.
- I remember one particular year going to annual conference, when I was a layperson. (This custom actually went on for several years.) A group of preachers who had graduated from a particular seminary all wore **white leather shoes** on one day of conference. They wanted the world to know that they were graduates of that seminary. I told myself they looked silly; they looked like they belonged in a marching band. Later on (after I was a preacher who had graduated from a different seminary) they changed their custom from white-shoe-day to a day when they all wore the same color sport coat. I still said that they looked silly. But, I could tell that they all felt pretty smug about the fact that they had gone to that seminary. And they liked to show it off.

Were there badges – badges of success – that you’ve seen, or that you’ve worn during your life? That’s a rhetorical question; I **know** that there are.

Are there **still** badges of success that we wear, or want to be able to wear?

Are there **still** badges of success that others wear, that we

do not,

cannot,

will not,

maybe make fun of,

or maybe make fun of outwardly but secretly wish we were able to wear, also?

Today, we put on a smudge badge.

It’s a sign of failure, in a way. It’s a sign that we are going to die. A sign of our mortality.

It’s a sign of something that we most usually fight against, a sign of something that we will fail to conquer. We **ARE** going to die. We **ARE** going to lose this battle.

Today we wear a smudge badge. It’s a sign of failure.

And yet! And yet, it is **NOT** made on our forehead (or wrist) as an “**X**” – the sign of rejection.

No, it is a smudge sign of the **CROSS**.

The cross – once a sign not just of death, not just of failure, but a sign of shameful death and failure.

We wear a smudge of a cross, as a badge of losing and yet, by God's Grace, a sign of that loss being turned into victory.

It's a smudge that is a sign of ultimate failure – ***one that even Jesus prayed in a garden that He could somehow escape.***

It is a sign of something that Jesus **so did not understand** that He cried out, ***“My God, why have You forsaken me?”*** when he submitted to the shameful failure and death that we today wear as a smudge on our foreheads or wrist.

Jesus did not understand, then. He had to voluntarily submit and go through, in order for the mystery to be revealed ***even unto Him.***

And so, we, too, wear the smudge badge of failure, that we might not understand. We mostly spend a lifetime looking for badges of success, so it might not make sense to us, either, why we would choose to wear a sign of failure.

When we leave this place, we have a choice to make – do I wear this smudge badge or do I wipe it off? It's a tough choice, and one for which there is not right or wrong answer – but a good struggle for you to go through.

In days gone by, it was a sign of being a Christian, which was a badge of success. Being a Christian used to mean being in the club where winners gathered. In today's world, that is not always the case.

Today, being a Christian in some places is mistaken for being a judgmental, harsh, and mean-spirited person who wears their smudge

badge with the pride of success. They are better than the people without smudges, whom the smudge-wearers look down upon. Sometimes we wipe off our smudge badge, because we don't want to be confused with being one of those kinds of people.

Sometimes we wear the badge as a stand-up-symbol for not a judgmental, harsh, or mean-spirited person – but simply in touch with the fact that we are going to die, and yet not fail.

We put on a smudge badge today – as a sign of failure, that God once long ago ... and still today ... turns into a victory. And ***just like Jesus before He endured it could not understand and wanted to avoid it*** – we, too, cannot really understand ... not until, like Jesus ... we simply submit and allow God to reveal to us, during this Lent season, how victory comes through submission, through discipline, through reliance upon God to accomplish.

We put on a smudge badge today – that is unlike any of the other badges we have ever worn or ever hoped to wear. It is a sign of a failure. But it is a cross and not an X. It is not a sign of rejection, but of mystery wrapped up in love.

We put on a smudge badge today. We don't really understand it, at all. But we do it anyway. And it is a beginning.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
AMEN.