
Church of the Beatitudes United Church of Christ

Reflection on the Cross

A Sermon by

Rev. Dr. Nancy Nelson Elsenheimer

Scripture: Isaiah 58: 9-12

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Church of the Beatitudes United Church of Christ
555 West Glendale Avenue • Phoenix, Arizona 85021
602-264-1221 • info@beatitudeschurch.org
www.beatitudeschurch.org

♯ God is still speaking,

Like Christians around the world, tonight we begin a journey. Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of Lent, as the days lengthen and as we look toward Easter, the day of new life, of resurrection, of new hope. This year in Lent we are going to call it a Journey to the Cross and explore in a variety of ways what the cross, that cross, this cross, means. Is it more than decoration? More than jewelry? What does it demand of us, call out of us, empower us to be and to do?

That cross sits far away today. Over this journey of the cross it is going to come closer. It is going to move. All throughout Lent, beginning tonight, you will be invited to hang your prayers on the cross. What is now bare will blossom with prayers. What blossoms with prayers will, if we wait for it, blossom with flowers. Your prayers, for yourself, for others, for the world are welcome here.

Together we trust, we hope, that God hears our prayers.

Together we trust, we hope that we bear one another's burdens and share one another's joys.

Together we trust, we hope that our lives will be born again and even our love for God will be born again in a new and powerful way.

That cross is now far away and will be moving closer. At some point in time, it will get in the way. It is already in the way for the choir.

In a world that cries out, "But what is in it for me?" that doggone cross says, "When I give myself away to others, I get back so much more in return."

Is that not part of our discernment of what God is calling us to be and do?

At Church of the Beatitudes we come from a lot of faith traditions: Baptist, Catholic, Lutheran, Nazarene, to name but a few. We consider ourselves to be 'progressive' Christians, whatever that means. We take the Bible seriously, but not literally. The story of Jesus is true to us, not in every detail but in the bigger picture, to show us a way to God and a way that God showed God to us.

Many of us come from faith traditions where Lent and Ash Wednesday, were nothing special. Many of us come from traditions where Lent and Ash Wednesday meant everything: ashes, fish on Fridays, giving up Brussels sprouts, taking on something new, Lenten coin folder. Could Lent be about giving back, not about giving up?

Every Sunday morning at our 10:30 service of worship in the Chapel we do communion. Every Sunday. People are invited to come forward and take the bread and dip it in the cup. Many come and somewhere in the process, many, not all, make the sign of the cross, and I know there is a special comfort and meaning for them in that. The Disciples of Christ faith tradition, while they do not make the sign of the cross, have communion at every service or it is not 'worship'.

It was interesting to read about the sign of the cross. From the 3rd century on, 'never leave home without it'. On the forehead. Or over the torso. Up, down, side to side. And left to right, or right to left? To some it is a prayer. A Hebrew T or a Greek X, both letters in the names for God and Christ. One finger, then two to represent the human and divine natures of Christ, then three to represent the Trinity. The sign of the cross has evolved, become layered with meaning, as the Christian community tried to discern how they were different, how their way was The Way, The Truth and The Life. Open your Bible to the part where Jesus

says, “observe 40 days of Lent. Make them about sins and repentance. Whip yourselves into guilt and shame and crawl into a hole.”

I don’t think you will find that chapter and verse.

Rather I think we might have heard Jesus say, “Remember God’s presence in your lives. When you think God has abandoned you, remember. When you think you are lost and alone, remember. When you think there are hurdles too overwhelming that you will never overcome them, remember. The pain you feel now will be transformed. The suffering will be transformed. The darkness will be transformed.”

God said it through Isaiah to the people so long in exile. God said to them through Isaiah, “Come home. Work with me. Stop gossiping. Quit blaming. Be generous. Move out of the shadows into the light. I will show you where to go. In your emptiest places, oh my, I will give you a full life.”

Tonight we take on a physical mark, one that will be washed away by the morning, but one that is a reminder of our connection to God, to a community of faith, to a life not centered in self, but centered in a life that was about self-giving.

The life of Jesus that was about healing. The life of Jesus that was about righting wrongs. The life of Jesus was about compassion, about sharing, in good times and in bad. The life of Jesus was about restoring old ruins, rebuilding and renovating, making the community livable again for All the People.”

Do you think we are called as Christians to make the world livable again, for all the people?

A cross on our foreheads, made of ashes from the palms of last year’s triumphal Palm Sunday and from the written prayers of our Women’s Feel the Spirit group, and a healing oil.

And water: An opportunity to wash away all that is behind us and start afresh, start on a journey, symbolically done by dipping our hands in water and handing our hands over to another. “I can dry my hands myself.” Of course you can.

But what does it mean to hand ourselves over to someone else? To allow them the gift of serving us? Holding us, if just for a moment, a gentle touch, in an often too cruel world. And to receive a blessing. We are on a common journey. We are not alone. Others before us, others behind us. We never walk alone.

When you are ready, come. Come to place a prayer on that cross.

Come to receive a mark.

Come to be washed and blessed.

There is no correct order.

You don’t have to do any of the above. You can sit and sing and pray for yourself and others right where you are. That would bless me and all of us just as much.

Our hymn says it the best, “Won’t you let me be your servant, Let me be as Christ to you...”