
Church of the Beatitudes United Church of Christ

Just What Is This Cross?

A Sermon by

Rev. Dr. Nancy Nelson Elsenheimer

Scripture: Luke 14:25-27 (The Message)

March 1, 2009

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,

Grumma and Grumpa Nelson lived seven-tenths of a mile down Pontiac Road from our house. At a certain age, we were old enough to ride our bikes down to their house by ourselves. Once there, with their permission, you could ride past their house, to the overpass bridge of the New York State Thruway, right by Butchie's house. That was the best, because then you could coast really fast back down and zoom back past Grumma and Grumpa's house.

Grumma and Grumpa would sit on their porch and watch, not only us bike riders, but it seemed like they also sat out there a lot and watched the garden and the flowers grow. Grumpa had his chair and his pipe. Grumma had the two person slider, plastic seats, and bowl of orange slices candy.

Theirs was a great place to be a kid and explore. We would play in the woods behind their house and there was a path down to the 'crick' (c-r-e-e-k). Winters we would skate on the pond. There was a root cellar stocked with homemade canned goods. And if you were quiet, you could sneak away into Grumma's bedroom and play with the silver pearl-handled hairbrush and mirror, delicately balanced on her vanity, nestled by other little trinkets we were sure were tremendously valuable. Her vanity was one of those furniture pieces with the seat, two raised sides with drawers, and a big oval mirror. A cross hung delicately from a hook or a string somewhere along the side.

Grumma Nelson was 'Anna McCoy' with Welsh and Scottish in her background, and I wondered from where that cross had traveled and what fingers had rubbed it smooth. That cross was jewelry or decoration in one sense, but over the course of its lifetime, it was so much more.

We have begun our Journey to the Cross this Lenten season, spending some time exploring "Just what is this cross?" We began Ash Wednesday to flower this cross with our prayers for ourselves, for others, and for the world. If you have been with us other Easters, you know that that cross transforms into a flower-filled cross on Easter morning, a symbol of new life and hope and resurrection. Any time, during the service or during the week, you are free to write your prayers, and hang them there, joining yours with the prayers of others. Together we share one another's joys and carry one another's sorrows. That cross is going to move forward, and get in our way, and to some, be ugly or silly. Still we are going to wonder together, just what does the cross mean to us? Is the cross life-changing? Is it a symbol of a call for our lives? Is it a voice still speaking? Or, is it something we 'thinking' Christians just ignore, assume, or don't bother much with anyway?

What do our scriptures say? What did Jesus say, or more likely, what did the post-Easter community of followers say about the cross? They were learning how to be disciples. They did not have manuals. They did not have 'crosses' hanging in churches. They had a scant memory and lots of stories about Jesus. We have had the benefit of this scripture and been told or heard ourselves say, "This is my cross to bear in life." "Take up a cross", "shoulder your own cross". And yes: "follow me."

Today it might say: www.jobing.com: Opening in area of discipleship. Difficult, life changing career path. Involves risk and uncertainty. Challenges expectations and assumptions.

Threatens comfort. Hours: long. Pay: small. Benefits: Joy in the unending love of God.¹
Would anyone like to apply?

Again, hear these words in the context of which they were first heard. Jesus did not say them. These are the words of the post-Easter community of followers of the Way. By 70, 80, 90 AD, the people were still under the control of the Roman government. They had staged uprisings, but were always defeated. Their Temple was destroyed. They were still taxed, their economy was dismal, and they remembered back to the good old days.

They remembered back to the stories about a man named Jesus and how he had been able to attract large crowds. This man named Jesus had been able to ignite something in people from all over the countryside. From Galilee to Gaza, from Nazareth to North Phoenix, from Jericho to Jerome, peasants and landowners, taxpayers and tax collectors, fishermen and shipping company owners had been excited about his words.

This man named Jesus had talked about the reign of God that was coming and that it was coming soon. This man named Jesus talked about harsh yokes being broken and a new yoke that would be easy and light. This man Jesus touched people's lives in a way that they felt healed and able to love another day without their fear or their pain.

All they had to do was to follow this new Way.

But then this man Jesus went and got himself killed. Of all things, he was hung on a cross along with some common criminals on the edge of town. Some king he turned out to be! The once glorious movement "initiated by Jesus ended in failure, as many other mass movements did."²

But it did not fail. Who knows why? Who knows how? Somehow, those who had hid behind closeted doors, came out. Those who had mocked and taunted, changed. Those who had sat on the sidelines and said, "It'll never get off the ground," were amazed when they saw it happening. The community organized. The Word spread. The women opened their homes. The men left their jobs, and sometimes their families, because they believed, they really believed, a new way of living together was possible. If they all pulled together, life would be better.

Just like that man Jesus had said, a new family of brothers and sisters that had God at the head, would give them the strength, the courage, and the audacity to hope (President Obama has taken all my best lines).

Luke says to the people, "Sometimes it feels like you are shouldering an unbearable cross, but a new life together can be built."

¹ Rev. Dr. Frederic Jones & the Rev. Dr. Judith K. Jones," *Speak From the Heart*, 2004.

² http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0LAL/is_3_34/ai_n6260528/pg_5?tag=content;coll

How, you ask? Go back and read all of Luke chapter 14. Not only did the followers of the Way have a vision, they also had a program.

-when it comes to turning away from God, what I call 'sin', separating yourself from God, DON'T.

-when it comes to healing, DO.

-humble yourself so you can lift others up.

-you'll be blessed when your banquet table is filled with the crippled, the lame and the blind.

Will it be easy? Well, your family might hate you for awhile. That is part of the cost you have to figure in before you choose this path, this Way. Otherwise you cannot be my disciple.

The word disciple appears two hundred and thirty two times in the four gospels and the Book of Acts.³ A disciple is one who learns from a master, a guru, a Christ, a mentor. In Hindu tradition, the relationship is based on the genuineness of the guru, and the respect, commitment, devotion and obedience of the student. In that relationship both subtle and advanced knowledge is conveyed and the student eventually masters the knowledge that the guru embodies.⁴

Maybe Grumma Nelson was a guru and I never recognized it until now. Without ever preaching the Word, she embodied the Word. That garden she watched grow: it was big enough to feed the whole neighborhood, not just the two of them. Those flowers she tended: they went up and down Pontiac Road, to Ruth Helwig, the women with a thousand cats but who could barely feed herself. Those jars of canned peaches and green beans and tomato sauce found their way into more church suppers than I probably ever knew. I thought my grandparents were poor. Today we all see new definitions of what it means to be rich or poor, and it isn't about money.

Just what is this cross? Arms stretched upward and outward to the mystery beyond and to the whole of the world.

Just what is this cross? An instrument transformed, 'purchased by martyrs' and the lives of prayer, and study, and service.

Just what is this cross? An awful thing, converted into an awesome thing, for it is a sign that sin and death and evil will lose. Love always wins. The table spread before us is living proof. The saints surrounding us are living proof. We are the living proof to the generations who will come after us. "O death where is your victory, O death where is your sting?" Just what is this cross? It is alive. It is us.

Amen.

³ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Disciple_\(Christianity\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Disciple_(Christianity))

⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guru-shishya_tradition