



The New England Church Pulpit

New England Congregational Church UCC
Aurora Illinois

THE OLD CROOKED CROSS

April 26, 2015

Mark 8.34-36

Jesus called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?"

Tao Te Ching 73

*Fill your bowl to the brim
and it will spill.
Keep sharpening your knife
and it will blunt.
Chase after money and security
and your heart will never unclench.
Care about people's approval
and you will be their prisoner.
Do your work, then step back.
The only path to serenity.*

Lao Tzu

When I first came to New England Church nearly 29 years ago, I thought that the cross in the center of the Tiffany Rose window was crooked. Each time I came into the sanctuary, it drew my attention and for weeks I stared at it, wondering if my eyes—or my mind—were playing tricks on me. I sat in various pews, trying to hold a steady plumb against the vertical to see if the cross was really crooked. When I asked others if they noticed it, I learned that the Jobbins family, who donated the window 80 years ago, had discussed the issue many times at their Sunday dinner table, with debate by various members of the family taking both sides of the issue.

The cross has been a symbol of the Christian church for two millennia. It is a symbol of triumph, a symbol of hope that life is not overcome by death, a reminder that death does not have the final word, a reminder that the destructive power of sin has been overcome by divine grace. It is the archetype of good triumphing over evil, of Easter life from Good Friday death. The cross had not always been a symbol of hope, for as a tool of a cruel death used by the Roman government in the 1st century to execute criminals, traitors and insurgents it was an instrument of hatred and corrupt power. Jesus, perceived to be a threat to the system because he empowered the sick and infirm, the women and children, the outcasts and enemies, was murdered on the cross, along with thousands of others, to keep power in the hands of the government. But as the followers of Jesus encountered him after the resurrection, it, ironically, became a symbol of freedom and life.

I don't think Jesus intended to go to the cross, contrary to traditional theology that maintains that God sent Jesus to die there as a ransom for sin. He prayed fervently to be delivered from it, but forced with the choice of violence and power, he chose death for the cause of justice. In that sense, he chose it willingly. And though his death initially brought fear and disappointment to his followers, it ultimately empowered them to embrace peace rather than violence, love rather than coercion. He could have skipped town or escaped into the hills, but he chose to die for what he believed to be truth.

When Jesus began to see the course of action he must take, his followers, particularly Peter, had second thoughts about what this was going to mean for his disciples. They, too, would be implicated and perhaps strung up on a cross themselves. And it caused them more than a moment's pause. His entreaty to follow him was fine until he mentions, in passing, that he's choosing to die rather than fight.

Peter objects. He rebukes Jesus for talking this way, and thinking irrationally. "This isn't what God's power is about...giving up", he says. "This isn't the marking of a Messiah...acquiescing to political power. This isn't the quality of a leader...talking about dying." This isn't the way to fight political oppression and injustice...giving in. And what did Jesus say? Jesus rebuked Peter for his evil thoughts. 'You do not know the ways of God,' said Jesus. "You only know the way humans think and reason.' And herein is the entire gospel in a nutshell, for this is the good news: the world as God would have it is built on radical love and peace, not force or obligation. "Follow me" began to take on a new meaning.

In the chapel of the seminary I attended was a cross, which isn't unusual in a religious institution. This cross, however, was not perpendicular as most crosses are displayed. It was horizontal, engraved with the words Jesus spoke to those who wished to follow him: if you want to be part of the world as God would have it, take up your cross and follow me." This horizontal cross was a reminder that daily we are to pick up the cross, and walk.

That horizontal cross was a reminder of the story of Jesus healing the paralytic who had been confined to his mat on the public street begging for money and acceptance, all of his life. When Jesus said, "take up your mat and walk," he imposed no behavioral or ethical demands on the man before or after he healed him. He didn't say "You can be healed if you'll agree to live a righteous life." He didn't say, "I'll make you walk if you'll walk around all day telling people about me." All he said was 'take up your mat and walk.' Do you think that man thought of carrying his mat as a moral obligation, as something he ought to do, as payment for his good fortune? I suspect that picking up that old mat on which he sat and begged for his living would have been a delightful and freeing experience. Now he could carry that mat and walk proudly with it on his shoulder rather than beneath his feet, for now he was a free man.

Take up your mat and walk; take up your cross and follow. Taking up our cross is a choice we make when we opt for integrity over popularity. It is a choice we make when we stand with the less fortunate when society ignores them. Taking up our cross and following is a choice we make when we align ourselves with what is right, with liberty and justice for all, even if it means being in the moral minority. To follow with the cross that is shaped to our own body and soul is to embrace God's way of doing things at the expense of our own comfort; to stand for what is loving and kind, inclusive and life-giving. Taking up the cross means standing beside the person everyone else teases knowing you, too, will be teased and mocked. It means choosing tough love over easy living.

The cross, and the shadow of guilt it is supposed to cast, has often been used to condemn rather than uplift; a dark foreboding of our eternal demise if we do not accept Jesus's death as the substitution for our sin, without which, we cannot know God. I have long since abandoned that interpretation of the cross, and on Easter Sunday, I saw another more positive image of the shadow the cross casts. As I was driving out of the parking lot, I glanced back at the church for some unknown reason to see a stunning image on the west side of our building. Luckily I know how to take a picture with my cell phone, and snapped the picture you see below, because it was for me a symbol of all that was good about the cross. The sun had cast a broad, wide shadow of the skinny metal, the flat ends of the metal arms now artistically angled. As I watched, the sun, continuing its appointed orbit in the sky, caused the shadow of the cross to change with each passing moment. Here, I thought, was a reminder that the light of God casts its eternal power on an ancient symbol of death, giving life in a unique and large and artistic way out of our skinny, modern attempts to follow Jesus to bring justice, liberty and peace to our world.

After hearing that the donor family had also thought the Tiffany cross crooked, I devised a more reliable plumb line against which I could measure its vertical correctness, eventually deciding, that indeed, it was crooked. When we had it releaded and set in new tracery a few years ago, the cross was straightened up. Aesthetically and artistically it is more pleasing now, but theologically I think the old crooked cross has something powerful to say. The cross is not a symbol of obligation to Jesus' death but a symbol of our freedom like the mat of brokenness we are invited to pick up and carry; bejeweled to speak of extravagant love; casting a shadow that shifts and changes with the movement of divine insight; and crooked enough to be in solidarity with us as we are and as we can become in light of a holy love.

This is the blessing of the old crooked cross. Amen.

–Gary L. McCann



PASTORAL PRAYER

Creator of all life—of physical substance, of existence, of energy, of humans, of quarks, of spirit of joy—we say offer our prayers in silence and with words to remind ourselves that the whole universe is yours. As part of this creation, we have been endowed with certain inalienable gifts of choice, reason, and feelings for the purpose of living faithfully on this earth and tending the garden of mind, of love, of friendship as well as the soil we walk upon.

We grieve that our freedom has resulted in our making a shambles of this world. Our greed and selfishness have trampled upon the earth, leaving behind dead bodies, twisted minds, and hatred of both exploited and exploiters. We have rendered some of your creation extinct, and we have jeopardized many others because of our apathy.

Even now there are wars and rumors of wars, and hostages taken in the name of religion. There are those of us who are hostages to lies and evils that further the cause of injustice and brutality in the name of freedom. And though we believe you to be ultimately in charge, you have given us the freedom to choose how we will live, and often our choices are deadly.

We bring before you today those reeling from the devastation brought by the earthquake in Nepal. Give to survivors all that they need for this day and the days ahead for building and rebuilding their future. Give peace and wholeness to those today who are faced with difficult illnesses and unknown futures even as you bless those who are homebound, in nursing homes, those grieving the loss of loved ones and those distraught for the evils that plague them.

As we journey through this Easter season, open our minds and spirits to the joy that can be tapped by friendships with others, even those with whom we disagree. Open our ears that we may hear beauty in our diverse world; open our eyes that we may see peace amid our differences. Instill within the hearts and minds of leaders of all countries the mission of peace, that the carnage of war will be averted, that arms which would otherwise hold guns may hold each other as sisters and brothers of the same God and the same world.

To that end, we offer our words as reminder of our own commitment to peace in your name. Amen.