

“The Sacrificial Servant”

John 12:12-16

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Jesus said, “Anyone who holds on to life just as it is, destroys that life. But, if you let it go, reckless in your love, you’ll have life forever, real and eternal.” (John 12: 25, The Message)

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Jesus rode into Jerusalem knowing that his challenge to the principalities and powers of this world and the next was probably going to end in his death. Jesus knew his actions are turning the world upside down! Jesus challenged us all with a new vision of God’s way for this world. Even now, on this Palm Sunday morning, Jesus is inviting us into God’s New Community that sees the world in very different ways.

- A bloody death does not destroy Jesus—rather it glorifies him.
- Crucifixion does not condemn the Christ---but instead judges the world.
- Satan is not victorious when Jesus dies---Evil is defeated.
- And, Jesus when lifted high on the cross does not repulse people. Instead Jesus’ great love draws all people to himself.

Jesus Christ turns our world upside down. Jesus tells us that true freedom comes through the disciplined life. He tells us that sacrificial living is more victorious than being the successful material girl or material man.

We do not see very much about sacrifice on television. The movies don’t treat the subject very often either. We do hear the word sacrifice in athletics. I am sure all four final four coaches challenged their team members to “leave it all on the court” before the games last night. My basketball coach used to yell, “Sacrifice your body on the boards!” He wanted us to be more aggressive rebounding. He would tell us that without the sacrifice of time and effort, we would not be a good basketball team. The sacrifice he talked about was hard workouts on Saturday mornings instead of sleeping in; afternoon running instead of television; and extra Friday evening practices instead of the usual weekend date. Sacrifice was a word he used a lot in connection with a disciplined life that was focused on a goal.

To be a sacrificial servant means that we are spiritual athletes in training. To be able to live as a sacrificial servant following the example of Jesus we must be in constant contact with Jesus.

Jesus said: “Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as a branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me.” (John 15:4 NRSV)

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Jesus is the perfect example of the disciple life focused on God’s goal! The upside down life Jesus is challenging us to live is a life where we chose to live disciplined lives because we are focused upon the goal of building up God’s New Community within the very heart of this present world. We are called to make daily decisions that are sacrificial at the time because God’s values and mission are more important than our personal satisfaction.

C.S. Lewis shares the importance of this kind of daily sacrificial living. (*Mere Christianity*, Touchstone Books, 1996)

People often think of Christian morality as a kind of bargain in which God says, “If you keep a lot of rules I’ll reward you, and if you don’t, I’ll do the other thing.” I do not think that is the best way of looking at it. I would much rather say that every time you make a choice you are turning the central part of you, the part of you that chooses, into something a little different from what was before. And taking your life as a whole, with all your innumerable choices, all your life long, you are slowly turning this central thing either into a heavenly creature or a hellish creature: either into a creature that is in harmony with God, and with other creatures, and with itself, or else into one that is in a state of war and hatred with God, and with its fellow-creatures, and with

itself. To be the one kind of creature is heavenly: that is, it is joy and peace and knowledge and power. To be the other means madness, horror, idiocy, rage, impotence, and eternal loneliness. Each of us at each moment is progressing to the one state or the other.

During this Holy Week, Jesus is inviting you to choose to:

- Let go of instantaneous pleasure so that you might know true joy.
- Let go of immediate ego gratification, so that you might know the joy of a mature and fully alive life.
- Let go of your insatiable wants and celebrate the way God provides for your needs.
- Let go of your fears and insecurities and know beyond a shadow of a doubt that you are safe in the hand of God.

As you are listening to this sermon, Jesus is placing within your heart that which you know you need to let go of in order to grow more like the sacrificial servant Jesus is calling you to be. You might need to let go of an old habit, an old emotion, an old memory, an old relationship, whatever it is, Jesus is asking you to let go of that which is destroying you and grow in your reckless love for God and for God's world!

You might need to confront the greed and fear in your own life and with Christ's help let it go by actually giving to the church a sacrificial offering. Jesus challenges us to be lean, disciplined, spiritual athletes willing to let go and let God be in our lives!

Jesus told his disciples "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." (Matthew 16:24 NRSV) (www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=matthew+16:24)

On this Sunday morning we remember and cherish the decision that Jesus made to set his face toward Jerusalem and walk each step of the way toward the greatest gift of love humanity has ever known. Each step was a sacrificial step. And, with each step, Jesus calls to us to follow!

Sacrifice! One of the early Church Fathers from North Africa, Tertullian wrote, "*The blood of Christians is seed. It is the bait that wins men to our school. We multiply whenever we are mown down...*" The Roman period of Christian history was filled with stories of people willing to die rather than renounce Jesus Christ.

Ever since that time, at certain periods of history, Christians have been called upon to spill their blood as seed. One such martyr in the Reformation period was William Tyndale. Whether you realize it or not, you are still blessed by his sacrifice. William Tyndale died for the sin of translating the Bible from Hebrew and Greek into English. While he was burning at the stake, he cried out a prayer, "Lord, open the eyes of the King of England." Tyndale's prayer was answered by King James I of England who in 1611 commissioned an authorized English translation of the Bible that still bears his name.

If we analyze Tyndale's sacrifice we learn that he lived a life of a sacrifice. In all the little ways of life he practiced a sacrificial life.

- He sacrificed his time, energy, and effort to learn the ancient languages of Hebrew and Greek.
- He sacrificed his safe and secure English pastorate to wander from church to church on the European continent evading the armies of the church who would stop his translation project.
- Tyndale sacrificed his family life, his fortune, and his academic honors long before he sacrificed his life.
- Tyndale lived a disciplined life focused upon the goal of providing common English people a copy of a Bible they could read.

If we were to analyze each of the church martyrs in whatever century we chose, we would find a similar sacrificial lifestyle. Martin Luther King, Jr. decided to give his all to Jesus Christ in a midnight prayer session at his kitchen table several years before a bullet ended his life in Memphis.

Of course you can easily ask why you should do this. What is the goal? What victory can you experience if you accept the life of spiritual discipline? What is the motivation for such sacrificial living?

The only motive that I can give you for seeking to live like Jesus Christ is that motive that Jesus gives you. Jesus actually challenges you to live and grow in God's covenant of love for all the world.

By example and through a direct order Jesus says: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." (John 15: 12-13 NRSV) (www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=john+15:12-13)

Here is our challenge! You and I are called to be sacrificial servants, spiritual athletes of the first order, following the example of Jesus! Nikos Kazantzakis, a Greek Orthodox author, writes about this form of sacrificial living. He challenges each of us as spiritual athletes to sacrifice our bodies and our lives for the cause of Christ.

I put my body through its paces like a war-horse; I keep it clean, sturdy, prepared. I harden it and I pity it. I have no other steed.

I keep my brain wide-awake, lucid, and unmerciful. I unleash it to battle relentlessly so that, (with) all light, it may devour the darkness of the flesh. I have no other workshop where I may transform darkness into light.

I keep my heart flaming, courageous, restless. I feel in my heart all commotions and all contradictions, the joys and sorrows of life. But I struggle to subdue them to a rhythm superior to that of my mind, harsher than that of my heart – to the ascending rhythm of the Universe.

The Cry within me is a call to arms. It shouts: "I, the Cry, am the Lord your God! I am not an asylum. I am not (just) hope and a home. I am not (only) the Father nor the Son nor the Holy Ghost. I am your General!

"You are not my slave, nor a plaything in my hands. You are not my friend, you are not my child. You are my comrade-in-arms!

"Hold courageously the passes which I entrusted to you; do not betray them. You are in duty bound, and you may act heroically by remaining at your own battle station.

"Love danger! Love what is most difficult! That is what I want! Which road should you take? The most craggy ascent! It is the one I also take: follow me!

"Learn to obey. Only he who obeys a rhythm superior to his own is free.

"Learn to command. Only he who can give commands may represent me here on earth.

"Love responsibility. Say: 'It is my duty, and mine alone, to save the earth. If it is saved, then I alone am to blame.'" (from The Saviors of God: Spiritual Exercises)

Ride on, General Jesus, Ride on and we will follow!