

# “Take Up!”

A sermon in the Lenten series

“Listen Up!”—Following Jesus More Closely”

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- Mark 8:31-38 <sup>34</sup>He 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. <sup>35</sup>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.” (NRSV)
- 1 Peter 1:13-25 <sup>13</sup>So then, have your minds ready for action. Keep alert and set your hope completely on the blessing which will be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed. <sup>14</sup>Be obedient to God, and do not allow your lives to be shaped by those desires you had when you were still ignorant. (GNT)
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: To follow Jesus, to “take up” his outlook and advance his purpose, we will find it necessary to make sacrifices in self-centered attitudes and behavior.

There’s a word that’s fallen out of fashion these days. Its *meaning* is noble: the word means to perform a sacred act, to do a holy thing. That’s certainly admirable. But the word itself makes us uncomfortable.

That word is “sacrifice.”

Sacrifice doesn’t evoke a warm and fuzzy feeling. When we hear the suggestion of “sacrifice” we presume a measure of discomfort, denial, perhaps even pain. Who would be eager to sign up for that?

There have been times in our nation’s history when sacrifice was expected, even embraced. I’ve been reading David McCullough’s biography of John Adams, the man who was the first Vice President and second President of our nation.

- Early in his law career Adams sacrificed tranquility and popularity by serving as the defense attorney for the Boston Massacre, defending the eight British soldiers charged with killing five civilians.
- Adams was selected to be part of the First Continental Congress which entailed the personal sacrifice of being away from home and family and his law practice for months at a time.
- Later, for a decade Adams lived in France and England, representing our fledgling nation, again making the sacrifice of being away from his family for years at a time, not to mention the discomfort and perils of the ocean voyages which included one on a sinking ship.

It’s hard for us to realize the magnitude of the sacrifices made by so many people to establish the nation which provides us the lives we so easily take for granted.

The measure of sacrifice was evident in a more recent era, too. To support the massive war effort during the Second World War rationing programs were instituted requiring families to make sacrifices in their customary consumption “... of everything from meat, sugar, fat,

butter, vegetables and fruit to gas, tires, clothing and fuel oil.”<sup>1</sup> Virtually everyone made sacrifices to improve the chances for military success.

Generations of parents have made sacrifices for the well-being of their families. Some have emigrated from another country to start a new life, and later sent for their families to join them. Some have sacrificed certain comforts of daily living in order to be generous in supporting charitable work, or to be able to purchase a home of their own, or to provide their children with a college education, or to be able to assure a financial security in retirement.

Lately, however, the concept of sacrificing has fallen out of vogue. If you choose to make sacrifices today you might be viewed as having been unsuccessful because you’re giving up something that ordinarily would be desirable. We’ve been conditioned to expect instant gratification of our desires, and sacrifice certainly doesn’t contribute to instant gratification. Heck, sacrifice is such a strange concept these days that even the sacrifice bunt seems to have virtually disappeared from baseball.

Yet in theory at least, we worship and serve a God who willingly chose to engage in sacrifice... sacrifice for our sake. But wait – before we beat ourselves up for being self-serving wimps averse to sacrifice, realize that the disciples of Jesus weren’t exactly chomping at the bit to make sacrifices. They weren’t sure they were completely ready to walk away from the familiarity and comfort of the lives they knew.

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This year’s Lenten Worship Series notes that wherever Jesus was, he was “up to something,” and that Jesus wants us to engage the world actively in his name. So in last week’s sermon called “Come Up” we recalled the how the baptism of Jesus gave him spiritual strength to “come up” out of the waters of the Jordan and take on the novel task of spreading the news, person by person, that God loves us and forgives us and encourages us and stays by us through thick or thin. Today’s theme is called “Take Up,” which will become clear in a moment.

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From the gospels this morning we heard a passage in which Jesus says something we’ve heard before. Maybe we’ve never stopped to ask what, exactly, Jesus meant by it. Listen to Mark’s gospel:

<sup>34</sup> [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. <sup>35</sup> 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.”

Now, in that passage did you note the expression “take up your cross”? We’ve heard that many times. Did Jesus say “take up your cross” because it was a phrase commonly used in his day to mean taking on a burden or making a sacrifice? Bible scholars aren’t convinced that the phrase was commonly used back then. But they *are* sure that people knew what the phrase “take up your cross” referred to: the common method of capital punishment used by the Roman Empire. In the First Century A.D. a Roman historian named Flavius Josephus wrote a history called “Antiquities of the Jews.” In describing the religious persecution of the Jews, Josephus noted that “they [the Jews] were whipped, their bodies were mutilated, and while still alive and breathing, they were crucified” (Ant. 12:256). Sadly, to the people of Jesus’ day, crucifixion was an extremely well-known method of execution.

So, by urging folks to “take up your cross” was Jesus warning followers that they were sure to be crucified? Probably not. Did *Jesus* know that he would be crucified? Given that his

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<sup>1</sup> “The U.S. Home Front During World War II” at <http://www.history.com/topics/world-war-ii/us-home-front-during-world-war-ii>, accessed 3/9/2017

world view was contrary to that of the Roman Empire and knowing what they did to people who got in their way, we can presume that Jesus expected it. But for Jesus, what mattered more was his obedience to the God of Heaven and Earth. Jesus was committed to helping the world discover something revolutionary. Jesus wants the world to experience the joy and blessing from being motivated by love rather than experiencing anxiety and resentment when motivated by a hunger for power.

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Now, we know how it is: when you see others with power – power to control, power to determine, power to make choices – and when you *don't* have that power, or as *much* power, there's a little voice inside that says, "You want that. You need that. What will you do to get that?"

But the voice of Jesus says to us, "Sacrifice that hunger for power. Let go of the insatiable appetite for ease and comfort. Deny that desire for vengeance. Take up the cross – bear the burden – that comes from making sacrifices for the sake of friends, loved ones, complete strangers even... even people you aren't particularly fond of. Take up the cross of sacrificing self-interest in favor of genuine concern for others... especially genuine concern for people who don't enjoy the advantages you do."

That's the "cross" Jesus wants us to "take up."

- When we commit to following Jesus, we bear the burden of not always being approved by our neighbors because we stand for compassion when the status quo would squelch it.
- When we commit to following Jesus, we bear the burden of standing for justice even though seeking equal protection and equality in treatment inevitably steps on some toes;
- When we commit to following Jesus, we bear the burden of having a little less money than we could have because we sacrifice some of our assets so that this assembly can gather for worship and fellowship, education and outreach.
- When we commit to following Jesus, we bear the burden of sacrificing some of our independence in order to care for people who absolutely need our help in order to survive in this world.

Within many of our social circles, the concept of "sacrifice" isn't going to win any popularity contests. In our world people aren't standing in line to make sacrifices of their precious time or popular image or social status or finances or reputation or clout...

- they're reluctant to sacrifice for the sake of others...
- perhaps not even for people they know, or even people they like...
- maybe not even for people they purport to love.

But we hear Jesus calling to us... to us. Jesus calls us to make sacrifices – sacrifices that will help the world hear and heed his call:

- his call for all to love God with heart, soul, mind and strength,
- his call for all to love neighbor as we love ourselves.

Let us pray. *Jesus, Our inherent sense of self-preservation makes us wary of sacrificing anything lest that sacrifice makes our life more difficult. Help us see your example and hear your call, inviting us to follow you by denying our self-centered desires, to follow you by taking up the cross, the burden of sacrifice, so the ways of your kingdom will fill the earth. Amen.*