**Power of Sacrifice**

**By Jeff McDowell**

**3-17-24**

**Horseheads First UMC**

**5th Lent**

**Sermon Theme:**

The first message of Christ is one of suffering for a cause. And although many people have done this in human history, only Jesus was the begotten Son of God. His sacrifice on our behalf was necessary for the new covenant between God and humans to take place, where the ***law of God is written on our hearts.*** Jesus died so that we might live, cleared of sin, with God. Now for the twist: we are to follow him in his suffering so that we can follow him in his glorification! In this world we sacrifice like Christ when we choose his path. People will push away our message of salvation, speak evil of us and even sometimes cause us physical harm merely for a message from God. But we must be bold in sharing the hope that lies within us and embrace the life, like Jesus, that embraces suffering now to gain joy forever. The power of sacrifice is just this: suffering for the cause of other people’s eternal life is worth it. Do not be afraid to share God’s love in tangible ways. The world is counting on you!

**Jeremiah 31:31-34**

**31**The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. **32**It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband,[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Jeremiah+31%3A31-34%09&version=NRSVA#fen-NRSVA-19724a)] says the Lord. **33**But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: ***I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts***; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. **34**No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, ‘Know the Lord’, for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

**John 12:20-33**

**20**Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. **21**They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, ‘Sir, we wish to see Jesus.’ **22**Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. **23**Jesus answered them, ‘The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. **24**Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. **25**Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. **26**Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honour. **27**‘Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say*—“Father, save me from this hour”*? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. **28***Father, glorify your name.*’ Then a voice came from heaven, ***‘I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.’*** **29**The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, ‘An angel has spoken to him.’ **30**Jesus answered, ‘This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. **31**Now is the judgement of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. **32**And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.’ **33**He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

Sermon start:

What is the poem written by Emma Lazarus on the *Statue of Liberty*? In part it reads:

From her **beacon-hand**

Glows world-wide **welcome;**

her mild eyes **command**

The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.

“**Keep**, ancient lands, **your storied pomp**!” cries sheWith silent lips. “Give me your tired, your poor,Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me,**I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”**

This is a message inscribed by France on their gift of the statue to America. America was the land of the immigrants welcoming all to its shore. At our best, we welcomed the troubled, imperiled and downtrodden, to rise up and start a new life.

It could be a message from the Christian church to the world: Come, as you are, **even the weak and despised ones.**

Oh yes, there is a power in life we naturally tap into: the power present in us when we are well, strong, young and looking with fresh eyes at the world. Optimism takes us places no amount of wishing can take us.

Jesus came to give a message, but ***it is opposite*** of that message of power.

It is a message of strength rising out of *human weakness* and God using the tired and downcast people to make a difference in the world.

It is the story of Israel, though they frequently forgot they were strangers and sojourners in the land. True Jews in the day of Jesus, who remembered their heritage in God, were those who truly brought hungry and wandering strangers into their homes and fed them, and gave them a place to stay.

The Bible tells us that at times, Jesus felt as if he had no real home here on earth:

*“Foxes have dens, and birds of the sky have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.” (Mt. 8:20)*

What is suffering to you? If you read extensively, you know that most if not all plots of fiction and nonfiction books alike have to do with the struggles of life, the pain and difficulty of making a living and enduring the suffering it brings. Suffering in this world is wasted, but many times we wonder how it really helps us.

When we are young and have *not had to* endure much difficulty (if this is our experience) we are surprised if some negative comes into our life. We are not expecting illness or injury or loss of income or death of a parent or sibling. We are wide-eyed and open minded. We are positive in our outlook until… until something comes into our lives to change that. It might be bullies at school or tragedy in the family. It might be war or famine or death of a loved one.

Our mindset changes with every struggle and yet, there is still hope deep somewhere within our hearts that God is real, that God cares for us, and that God will somehow make it all right for us.

That is a statement of faith.

Jesus was only here on earth for 33 years. He was young. He was raised in the faith by a working-class family, brought to the Jewish synagogue, taught by the Rabbi and by his parents Mary and Joseph, all the while coming to the knowledge that he was different, he was holy, he was blessed, and he was the only Begotten Son of God! And so, although he was tempted in every way that we are, he lived without sin. So why did he have to suffer? If Jesus was perfect in all his doings, why couldn’t he have overcome all the pain of this life on earth?

Because Jesus’ suffering was written into the plan of salvation.

Thousands of years before Jesus of Nazareth came to earth, the prophet Isaiah told the world what Messiah would be like, and that scroll ***does not read like a Savior.***

***3****He was despised and rejected by others;
    a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity;
and as one from whom others hide their faces
    he was despised, and we held him of no account.*

***4****Surely he has borne our infirmities
    and carried our diseases;
yet we accounted him stricken,
    struck down by God, and afflicted.****5****But he was wounded for our transgressions,
    crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the punishment that made us whole,
    and by his bruises we are healed.*

This passage is called the “Suffering Servant” of Isaiah’s writings.

The first message of Christ (Christ Means Savior) is one of suffering for a cause. And although many people have suffered in human history, only Jesus was the begotten Son of God. His sacrifice on our behalf was necessary for the new covenant between God and humans to take place, ***where the law of God is written on our hearts.* Jesus died so that we might live, cleared of sin, *fully with God.***

In today’s gospel reading (gospel referring to the books of the bible which tell the story of Jesus: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John), John recites the words of Jesus talking about himself.

*‘The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.****24****Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.****25****Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.****26****Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honour.*

There it is again: The Suffering Servant! And He asks us to also suffer!

Excuse me? Why would the one who came that we might have life now want us to hate it? That seems counterintuitive, to say the least. OK, he doesn’t really want us to hate living; he doesn’t want us to despise ourselves and run around beating our breasts and ringing our bells and calling ourselves unclean. What he wants is for us to *hold our lives lightly,* to *hold ourselves lightly.* It is not all about us, despite what advertisers what us to believe. It is about something bigger than us. It is about giving ourselves over to a larger truth, a deeper reality, a more profound life than the one we find at the end of our noses and fingertips. He wants us to extend our reach, just like he is about to extend his.

The first line of the book Forty Days of Purpose by Rick Warren reads: “It’s not about you.”

 **“Focusing on ourselves will never reveal our life’s purpose. If you want to know why you were placed on this planet, you must begin with God”.**

In fact, Jesus says that very thing. “Where I am, there my servant will be also.” Where he is when he says that is looking at giving his life away for something bigger than his own flesh and blood. And that is exactly where he wants us to be—living beyond ourselves, living more deeply, living through surrender, living through giving ourselves away, living through service. “Whoever serves,” he says. We can find our lives by holding them lightly enough to lose them - not always physically.

You know that something really profound is going on when you lose track of time, lose track of yourself because you are wrapped up in something beyond you. It might be art or beauty; it might be nature in its wonder and majesty, in its terror and power; it might be in the love and laughter of a soul friend; it might be the tears shed in sympathy with someone you call brother or sister. But *you can lose yourself if you learn to let go, to hold yourself lightly.*

Lets talk about sacrifice: our *sacrifice for the good of another.*

This can be demonstrated with the love of a mother and father. When their child is born, nothing can stand between the child and their safety because the parents are there. If you want to really poke the bear, try taking that baby away from Mom and you will have a fight on your hands! It is the protective instinct to the point of laying down your own life to save your child.

As your child grows, you will do anything for them. You will give until it hurts. You will pray for them daily. When the child moves away from home, your parenting instinct remains. This is sacrificial love. You give all you have to ensure the care and well being of your son, your daughter.

In a sense, this is how it is with our Savior. He rescues us from harm, the ultimate harm: death itself. When we as a human race moved away from God we sealed our own fate for God cannot look upon sin. Sin is the opposite of walking with God.

It is like darkness and light. Darkness is nothing. Light is protons moving. Darkness is a vacuum. God cannot live in a vacuum. But God brings light, and in relationship with God all darkness has to flee.

Sin = darkness in that it is a move away from God’s light. God cannot live in that darkness so we needed a away to return to the light. Jesus came that we might be light, and the “light shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot extinguish it.”

In this world we sacrifice like Christ when we choose his path. Jesus said to take up our cross daily if we want to follow him. A Cross = suffering.

People will push away our message of salvation, speak evil of us and even sometimes cause us physical harm, merely because we carry a message from God. This is part of the suffering.

Others whom we love will reject the message of Christ outright, and this is another part of our Christian suffering. And still others will persecute us and in some situations, some countries, some governments, put us to death.

But we must be bold in sharing the hope that lies within us and embrace the life, like Jesus, that embraces suffering now to gain joy forever. The power of sacrifice is just this: suffering for the cause of other people’s eternal life is worth it. Do not be afraid to share God’s love in tangible ways. The world is counting on you!

Be bold and live as though your life was held securely in God, through faith in Christ.

Be bold and live, offering up your own freedom to God so you can be free from the penalty of sin.

Be bold and give sacrificially in the name of Christ until it hurts. Then you will know that you are following Him at all costs. He is Savior and has suffered once for all time and for all people. This Lenten season, give up your right to decide everything for yourself, and live for Christ. Amen.