

## Sermon 3 – “A Living Sacrifice”

Rev. Susan Pendleton Jones

### Scripture

Romans 12:1-2

*I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.*

Matthew 16:24-26

*Then Jesus told his disciples, “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 will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?”*

**Theme: Following Jesus in all that we do requires sacrificial living.**

### Introduction

At the beginning of each new year, those in the Wesleyan tradition usually pray the following Covenant Prayer:

I am no longer my own, but yours.  
Put me to what you will, rank me with whom you will;  
put me to doing, put me to suffering;  
let me be employed for you, or laid aside for you,  
exalted for you, or brought low for you;  
let me be full,  
let me be empty,  
let me have all things,  
let me have nothing:  
I freely and wholeheartedly yield all things  
to your pleasure and disposal.  
And now, glorious and blessed God,  
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,  
you are mine and I am yours. So be it.  
And the covenant now made on earth, let it be ratified in heaven.  
Amen.

If we pray this prayer and really mean it, then we are entering into very scary, but exhilarating territory, offering everything in our lives up to God. It is a prayer of ultimate trust.

Several years ago a friend of mine lost his job. His wife responded that as hard as it was for them to think about the future facing such uncertainty, she remembered that they had prayed this prayer at the beginning of the year. “If we really meant it when we prayed it, then we shouldn’t really be surprised. We’ve gone this far in turning everything over to God, so we have to keep going. We have to trust and obey.”

Jesus invites his disciples to “take up your cross,” so we have to ask ourselves what implications this “cross-taking” has for how we live our lives each day. For Jesus, the cross meant obedience, suffering, sacrifice, and courage in the face of evil. More than 2,000 years later, it is still a call to live a “cruciformed” life, one that is “cross”-shaped and marked by a willingness to sacrifice, serve, and even embrace suffering. We should always be wary of seeking out suffering for its own sake, just as we ought to avoid telling others to “take up their cross” and piling on to suffering they may already be enduring. At the same time, we acknowledge that suffering will produce endurance, endurance will produce character, and character will produce hope. (Romans 5:4)

If we are not grounded in the renewing, rejuvenating, life-giving rhythms of Sabbath rest and worship, then it is very difficult to live sacrificial, self-giving lives. We need balanced rhythms of work, rest, play, and worship to stay healthy, so that we can “take up our cross and follow.” In Genesis, chapters 1 and 2, God sets the pattern. God ends the work of Creation, surveys all that He has made and pronounces it “very good.” God doesn’t keep on tinkering. Sabbath represents the fact that we must come to a place of peace with how much we can achieve and then leave the rest to God. Sabbath reminds us that our work is not about us. Our work is about God’s will through us.

## UNPACKING THE SCRIPTURE

We also take up our cross every time we gather for communion. Before we come to the Table of our Lord we often pray a communion litany based on Romans 12 where Paul invites the followers of Jesus to become “living sacrifices” before God: “We offer ourselves in praise and thanksgiving as a holy and *living sacrifice*.” This phrase echoes the obedience of Israel’s sacrifices in the temple—a fragrant offering to the Lord. And just to remind us that this obedient, sacrificial living is not our doing, the verbs become passive in the next sentence: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds so that you may discern what is the will of God.” We are not to *be* conformed, but to *be* transformed. This is God at work, shaping, molding, forming us into His image—as *Imago Dei*.

When we allow our minds to be transformed by God, this transformation can spill over into our daily life. The Apostle Paul spells it out in Romans 12:9-18.

Live humbly, not thinking more highly of ourselves than we ought  
Love genuinely  
Persevere in prayer  
Extend hospitality to strangers  
Bless those who persecute you  
Take no vengeance; repay no one evil for evil  
As far as possible, live peaceably with all.

These are not things we can do alone. We need a community of grace—which Paul calls the Body of Christ. This community has many members and one body, one Body and a wide variety of gifts. Some have the gift of teaching, others prophecy, encouragement, generosity, or compassion. When we live into these gifts, our lives are shaped by patterns of grace rather than conformed to the structures of the world.

## MAKING THE CONNECTIONS

We humans seem to be hard-wired to ask questions from our own perspective, from a vantage point that keeps us in control. Even the ways we read Scripture tend to do this. We come to a text—or a Bible Study—thinking “What am I going to get out of this?” The better question might be: “What is this text going to get out of me?” How will I be challenged to live, work and think differently? Will I become vulnerable, open to surprise? Will my assumptions be put into question? Will I stay in my comfort zone?

The best way I know to follow Jesus is to let his Word speak back to our lives, to journey with him, to learn from him, to risk, to sacrifice, to follow the pattern of His life in our own daily work. He was **taken, blessed, broken and given** for the sake of the world. This is the pattern of the Church. In baptism and communion, we are taken, blessed, broken, and given. Henri Nouwen suggests this pattern for our lives in his book *Life of the Beloved*.

- To be **TAKEN** is to be chosen by God. Claimed through baptism—buried and raised to new life in Christ—we discover who and whose we really are, the beloved children of God. Remember the voice from the heavens at the baptism of Jesus? “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”
- As God’s beloved, we experience his **BLESSING**. The word bless means to “speak well of,” “to call forth the good in the other.” It is hearing God’s “yes” upon our lives. To offer a blessing is to create hope for a new reality. Jesus does this in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5. In the first eight beatitudes Jesus paints a picture of the Kingdom of God, of the world as it ought to be, saying “Blessed are **those**.” Then he finishes the beatitudes and he says: “Blessed are **you** when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad.” There is a deep connection between sacrifice, even suffering, and being blessed.
- We must be willing to suffer – not eager to suffer, but willing. “Taking up our cross” means we will know what it means to be **BROKEN**. When we visited Africa several years ago, we attended a Mass for the Ugandan martyrs—Christians who were burned alive in the late 19th century because of their faith in Christ. We may not know that kind of suffering in our own lives, but we do know brokenness. So we listen to the voice of the One who continues to call us “Beloved” and sends us out to a broken world with his blessing. The light of God’s love and grace can enter through the broken places in our lives and in the world to bring healing and wholeness. Toward the end of Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved*, Sixo describes a woman he calls “the 30 mile woman.” He would walk that far each way to get to spend time with her because “She take the pieces that I am and she give them back to me in all the right order.” We do this for others when we place the brokenness of their lives under God’s blessing.

- The forgiveness of Christ and the community of the Church heals our brokenness. Then, as forgiven and reconciled people, we can **GIVE** ourselves for others. This sacramental hospitality invites us to take what we have and put it under God's blessing – and to discover the abundance of God's provision. Jesus feeds 5000 hungry people by taking, blessing, breaking and giving five loaves and two fishes, just as later he feeds those same disciples gathered with him at the table with the bread - taken, blessed, broken, given. And he continues week after week to feed all who come to the table to receive His body—taken, blessed, broken, and given.

Christ “bids us come and die” so that we might be re-formed and trans-formed in his image, taking seriously our baptismal vows of dying and rising with Christ. Early in his ministry Jesus bids the disciples to “come and follow,” but after the resurrection he says, “Go and tell.” Because we follow the pattern of His life—of being **taken, blessed, broken and given**—we can embody a “sacramental hospitality” to others—to offer God's blessing to a broken and hurting world and invite them to join with us each day on the Way.

## ILLUSTRATIONS AND STORIES

- In her Pulitzer prize-winning novel, *Gilead*, Marilynne Robinson tells the story of a minister nearing the end of his life who is writing his memoirs. It's a story of adventure and pain, of grace and sacrifice. He tells about a young man named after him who has let the family down again and again. Though disappointed at every turn by this young man, the elderly minister seeks him out before the younger man boards the bus to leave his hometown. The minister offers the wayward young man a blessing right there at the bus stop: “Lord, bless John Ames Boughton, this beloved son and brother and husband and father.” Then he writes: “I would have gone again through seminary and ordination and all the years intervening for that one moment.”
- The first teaching Jesus does in Matthew's gospel is to offer a blessing to his listeners. In the beatitudes in Matthew 5 Jesus blesses the poor in spirit, those who mourn, those who are meek, those who hunger and thirst. Not quite what we would expect when we think about being blessed. We often equate blessing with material abundance – but when Jesus paints a picture of blessing it is of those who come to him with nothing to offer except their empty, outstretched hands. Several years ago our family stood at the site where tradition says Jesus spoke these beautiful words. When you stand on the top of the hill, the valley below forms a large, natural amphitheatre that overlooks the Sea of Galilee. It is pristine, pastoral, serene. It feels like sacred space – totally different from the gaudy tourist sites in Bethlehem and Jerusalem – the places that supposedly mark exactly where Jesus was born and died. Here, by the Sea of Galilee, there is a sense of peace - and you can begin to get a glimpse of the kingdom of heaven that Jesus was describing in these words. To me, his words still seemed to linger in the air, waiting for other expectant ears centuries later to be blessed by God.
- The hymn “Take My Life, and Let It Be” is based on Romans 12:1; a poetic reminder of a life given over as a “living sacrifice” to God:

Take my life, and let it be consecrated, Lord, to Thee.  
 Take my moments and my days; let them flow in ceaseless praise.  
 Take my hands, and let them move at the impulse of Thy love.  
 Take my feet, and let them be swift and beautiful for Thee.

Take my voice, and let me sing always, only, for my King.  
 Take my lips, and let them be filled with messages from Thee.  
 Take my silver and my gold; not a mite would I withhold.  
 Take my intellect, and use every power as Thou shalt choose.

Take my will, and make it Thine; it shall be no longer mine.  
 Take my heart, it is Thine own; it shall be Thy royal throne.  
 Take my love, my Lord, I pour at Thy feet its treasure store.  
 Take myself, and I will be ever, only, all for Thee.