

“Hold Up Your Heads”

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(Jeremiah 31:31-34, Psalm 51:1-12, John 12:20-33)
Fifth Sunday in Lent
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Hold up your heads! At the most elementary level – a metaphor for optimism. At a deeper level – an act of faith. So when it requires faith – the assurance of a better day that we can't now see – will we hold up our heads?

On the one hand, there are people with their heads down, critical of our city, our leaders, and our future. In their number are pessimists who believe that the demise of General Motors is the symptom of a pervasive malaise, an indicator that this is the way everything will go on a permanent basis.

On the other hand, there are people with their heads up, looking to the future. Listen, when a city needs a message of hope – we the people of God should lead. We may live on the margins of political power in Dayton, but there is a spiritual power that our city desperately needs and only God's people can provide it: In the ancient liturgy that introduces the sacrament of communion, the priest says, “Lift up your hearts.” And the people respond, “We lift them to the Lord.” This is the primary act of Christian worship – we give our hearts to God and this we cannot do if we have loved something else more. While this may not sound like much to you, I'm asking you to hold up your heads in hope, lift up your hearts in love, and lift up your hands in service.

In *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, there's a description of one of the prisoners: U-81. “Among all the men in the camp with bent backs, his back stood out as straight as a board . . . the old man's eyes were fixed above Shukhov's head at some invisible spot of his own . . . But it was clear that the one thing he wasn't going to do was give in: he wasn't going to put his bread, like everybody else, straight down on the filthy table – but on a piece of cloth, which had obviously been washed many times.” John Arnold says, “Here is a man who knows how to lift up his head above the awful circumstances, the unfairness of his imprisonment, the hardness of his life, a man in the image of God, formed by a long liturgical tradition, surviving and reflecting as in a mirror the glory of a suffering servant.” This is what I mean when I say, “Hold up your heads.”

Those with their heads up work tirelessly to make a difference. There are people sitting in this church who work day and night for the common good. Those with their heads up look to the future instead of the past. Those with their heads up are looking for solutions not complaining about problems.

Let us hold up our heads right here in Dayton. I asked you, in an email, to share the good in Dayton. Here are samples of your responses: The Arcade, built at the dawn of the 20th century is making a 21st century comeback. The University of Dayton and the Miami Valley Hospital are investing one half billion dollars in our city. The quality of our institutions of higher education: Wright State University, Sinclair Community College, and the University of Dayton. And Wright Patterson Air Force Base. And the success of Dayton Early College Academy. And the solid work of the Stivers School for the Arts. Janet Lasley told me about the mission of Chaminade-Julienne High School. “I consider CJ to be the most creative thinking high school of all the Catholic schools.” The opening of CareSource on the corner of

Monument and Main. The work of the North Salem Business Association. The work of Treva Jenkins and Judge Littlejohn to create a farmer's market that unites east and west Dayton. Amy Radachi, "One of our Rebuilding Day projects is for a young single father with two children. The house has no furnace (they heat with a wood stove) and none of the windows open. One of the volunteers who plans to work on the house from CareSource is working on getting a furnace donated."

Brad and Bev Smith told me that their daughter was an intern at Penguin Publishing in New York one summer; she reported that in many meetings she attended, she heard someone ask the question, "What will Sharon Kelly-Roth at Books & Co. think about this idea?" She was startled to learn how much our local bookstore drives publishing in the US.

But, as Christians we have to do more than hold up our heads. We are called to lift up your lives. If we wish to be the means of life to others, of allowing others to take the first step of lifting up their heads, we must be lifted up before the world in self-giving, self-sacrifice.

I'm not sure we are able to hear what Jesus is saying this morning. Michael Card's tribute to his grandfather contains the reading of our text from a North Carolina preacher man (Southern preacher accent). "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.' I hold a grain of wheat in my hand, it is small, and hard and narrow and self-contained and yet at its heart it speaks the mystery of life and that is a powerful thing." Jesus is referring to his own death, but he is also talking about us. We are that grain of wheat. And we are never going to be anything more than a single, solitary, hard, self-contained, shriveled up seed unless we are willing to die. We are God's planting. We are the seed that is to produce the fruit of righteousness and goodness.

At one time, the one institution in America that could be counted on to produce self-sacrificing people was the church. But the church has sold out to the market. I searched the web for organizations that take seriously the call to live for something greater than self-indulgence. I found Teach for America, AmeriCorps, and the Peace Corps.

Teach for America recruits some of this nation's best university students to teach in the most impossible teaching situations imaginable: Danny, Brad and Jeanie Kallenberg's son, is a Teach America teacher in South Dakota working with Native Americans. He gets paid less than "peanuts" and yet he gave of his few resources to help the poor students and their families. This past winter we helped that work with donations.

And the athletic director at George Washington Carver High School in the 9th ward in New Orleans is part of Teach for America. "Three years after Katrina, the school's only context is ruin. Brian Bordainick, a Teach for America teacher, is Carver's 23-year-old athletic director. He has a plan to restore pride in this 9th Ward community. They have plans for a \$1.8 million athletic complex." People said Bordainick was delusional. Well, Bordainick went door-to-door, called on businesses in the central business district, and raised \$200,000 and received a matching \$200,000 from a NFL sports grant. Here's a 23-year-old who doesn't know the meaning of impossible.

Listen to the opening lines of The AmeriCorps pledge: ***I will get things done for America - to make our people safer, smarter, and healthier. I will bring Americans together to strengthen our communities.***

And listen to one of the core expectations of Peace Corps volunteers: Serve where the Peace Corps asks you to go, under conditions of hardship, if necessary, and with the flexibility needed for effective service. One of our church members, Davy Gockel, the daughter of Stan and Libby, serves in the Peace Corps and is in Africa.

Sam Wells tells of the visit of a Teach for America recruiter to Duke University. She said, "I don't really know why I'm here tonight. You are probably uninterested in what I have to say. This is one of the best universities in America. You are all successful. That is why you are here, to become an even greater success on Madison Avenue, or Wall Street, or in Law School. And here I stand, trying to recruit some people for the most difficult job you will ever have in your life. I'm looking for people who want to go into a burned out classroom in Wattas and teaching biology. I am looking for somebody to go into a one-room school in West Virginia and teach kids how to read. We had three teachers killed last year in their classrooms. And I can tell, just by looking at you, that none of you want to throw away your lives on anything like that. On the other hand, if there's somebody here who may be interested, I've got these brochures and I am going to leave them down here and will be glad to speak to anybody who is interested. This meeting is over."

Then an amazing thing happened. All of the students jumped up, rushed down to the front, and fought over her pamphlet, just dying to apply for Teach America.

So, we have this gospel. And I am convinced that it is the power of God unto salvation. And if there's somebody here interested in this opportunity to die to self, come forward during the invitation and I'll be glad to talk with you.

Here are some pictures to hang in your imagination, in that room where you will make the most important decisions of your life: A city on the Miami River rising to new heights; Prisoner U-81 placing his small crust of bread on the clean white cloth in a communist gulag; a Teach for America volunteer raising a million dollars for his school; Davy Gockel working for the Peace Corps in Africa.

Hold up your heads; lift up your hearts; lift up your life to the world that God loves so much.