

# Redeem This

a sermon for Coming of Age

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Word has drifted in from out there in the hinterlands that the theme we've been wrestling with this month has been a challenge. Some say it's been harder to think about redemption than it was to think about sin. I've wondered why and come to some tentative conclusions. I don't think I need to spend much time on why it may be easier for us to think about sin. After all most of us spend significant amounts of time planning, engaging, regretting, or confessing our sins. But most of us shy away from a word like

redemption. It seems so fraught with ways of thinking most of us rejected long ago.

Orthodox Christianity teaches that Christ died to redeem us from our sins. The Christian call that we be born again in Jesus by taking him into our hearts is based directly on the notion of redemption by suffering. Jesus suffered and died on the cross so that we might, by loving him and accepting his leadership, be saved. We don't believe in redemption by suffering. We've seen the many ways that notion has been yoked to the forces of oppression. We've

seen how it has been used over the centuries to keep women and slaves in their place as well as to glorify violence.

We don't deny the suffering. But neither do we tell ourselves or God forbid our neighbors that suffering is an indication of God's love. These familiar words from the third chapter of John sum up the doctrine of redemptive suffering. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." We don't believe in the exclusive divinity of Jesus. We believe and I'm quite sure he believed that each and every child is born whole and holy;

that every child, even you, is a child of God, born one more redeemer.

Here is how the great Unitarian philosopher, Ralph Waldo Emerson spoke of what we might call redemption by joy. It's taken from his Divinity School Address. The language is dated but listen carefully. It's worth the effort.

*The divine bards are the friends of my virtue, of my intellect, of my strength. They admonish me that the gleams which flash across my minds are not mine, but God's; that they had the like and were not disobedient to the heavenly vision. So I love them. Noble provocations go out from them, inviting me to resist evil; to subdue the world and to Be.*

*And thus, by his holy thoughts, Jesus serves us, and thus only. To aim to convert a man by miracles is a profanation of the soul. A true conversion, a true Christ, is now, as always, to be made by the reception of beautiful sentiments. It is true that a great and rich soul, like his, falling among the simple, does so preponderate, that, as his did, it names the world. The world seems for them to exist for him, and they have not yet drunk so deeply of his sense as to see that only by coming again to themselves, or to God in themselves, can they grow forevermore.*

Emerson is saying that only by leaving behind the notion that we will be saved by something from outside ourselves and then by coming to know that in us, which whole and holy

that in us which is itself redemptive will we, as he said, “grow forevermore.”

There are moments in our lives when past and future disappear when time seems to stand still as though we ourselves stand at the threshold unable to step through the door. Adolescence is, for most of us, just such a time.

Nothing seems clear, we alternate between displaying that deep insecurity which masquerades as bravado and dissolving into puddles on the floor in depression and self-doubt. Every grown-up I know can remember it. Every youth I know is to some degree caught up in it. Both the prejudice and the

unreasonable admiration, which shape relations between youth and adults grow out of that state of mind Florida Scott Maxwell describes so well in The Measure of My Days.

*Some uncomprehended law holds us at a point of contradiction where we have no choice, where we do not*

*like that which we love, where good and bad are inseparable partners*

*impossible to tell apart, and where we, heart-broken and ecstatic, can*

*only resolve the conflict by blindly taking it into our hearts. This used to*

*be called being in the hands of God. Has anyone better words to describe*

*it?*

The title of today's sermon, Redeem This, began as a working title, a little in-house joke. But when the time came to go to press, Kerri Meyer, who knows and loves most all the youth who come of age here, suggested strongly that we let it be and see how it played out. As is so often the case what began as a simple, somewhat sarcastic, little joke, became a dazzling invitation to engage some deeper implications.

Let's try it on. The worship team, including all the associates, was gathered for one of our quarterly planning sessions. We had sketched out four services on redemption.



As we began to think about redemption as a theme for coming-of-age I started to laugh. Janne asked me what I was thinking and I somewhat sheepishly suggested we call the service, Redeem This. I was thinking of the families who, in the midst of all the angst and contentiousness of adolescence, force their ninth graders into coming-of-age with the promise that if they make it through the ceremony they don't ever have to go to church again. It's as though, I thought to myself, what those parents, right out at the edge of their patience, wondering when if ever their family will finally

return to normal, shove their kids right up to the threshold and say to the church, “redeem this.” Sometimes we do.

Now let’s try on some other ways to understand the phrase. It could be a plea, or a confession. Kids, we’ve made a mess of things. Even our beloved church falls far short of what we want it to be. We beg of you, redeem this. Take up our unfinished work. Make this a place where everyone is really welcome. Make this a church which touches people’s hearts just as much as it opens their minds. Make it a church, which offers more than simply an escape from orthodoxy. Redeem it, make it yours.

The hebrew word usually translated as redemption, *go'el*

appears, when read in context in the scriptures, to mean,

quite literally, to buy one's back family from slavery.

Redemption then asks more of us than we would like to give.

It's no wonder we don't want to think about it. Last Friday

ten Unity teens spent the night on the street in Minneapolis

as participants in a program sponsored by Plymouth

Congregational Church intended to awaken compassion and

help us understand the lives and needs of homeless youth.

Look around you! We have neighbors, neighbors who in the

eyes of God are members of our family, living on the

streets...*The foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but*

*the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head."* Open your eyes

friends, look around, redeem this.

This series of services began as the Christian Holy Week

begins each year, with Palm Sunday. Then Easter came and

once again we asked how we might practice resurrection. Just

as we have rejected that suffering is ever evidence of either

favor or of judgment we likewise reject the notion of the

bodily resurrection of Christ. We look instead to the

redemptive power of what one might call the resurrection of

the disciples who, despite their failings, despite the fact that

they betrayed their beloved teacher over and over again, rose up from the mire of their guilt and grief to take up the work to which he had called them. That's what it means to practice resurrection. That's what it means wake up to the fact that you actually are one more redeemer.

“Sweetcakes,” God said, “who knows where She picked that up, what I’m telling you is, yes, yes, yes.” Yes, we love you just the way you are. Yes, we love the vision of who you yet may be. And yes, we know and pray that grace and joy will be your good companions as you grow forevermore.

May it be so and amen.

