

‘Sacrifice of Praise’
Rev. Dr. Ann C. Kemper
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based on Hebrews 7:23-28 and Mark 10:46-52

I’ve forewarned you for several weeks now that today’s worship focus would be on ‘sacrifice.’

Sacrifice is one of those things no one wants to do, but is willing to do for the right reasons.

Our focus today is to think about why the idea of sacrifice is so important to not only our understanding of stewardship, but more importantly, to our relationship with God.

We all claim to have made sacrifices once or twice or more in our lifetimes; each for different reasons.

Whatever the reason, to offer to sacrifice for something (or someone) the reason must be compelling.

How does scripture draw us into a deeper and more stewardly understanding of sacrifice?

In the Old Testament, sacrifice is an offering to God of first fruits. The best of the year’s harvest; an unblemished lamb; the strongest from the herd of cattle.

Sacrifices to God were to be the best of the best. After the best was offered to God out of gratitude, the people managed with what was left and relied on God’s promise to provide.

Years ago I worked for a printing company that regularly printed “Bull Catalogs.”

A group of ranchers would list their prize bulls for sale...well, sometimes it wasn’t the bull they were selling, but the...huh...reproductive fluid.

The catalogs would offer the best of the best. Only the best, strongest, most virile bull would be listed in the catalog.

Those ranchers were not saving back the best of the best for sacrifice...they were saving those bulls for gain...or profit.

Now, don’t get me wrong. Selling items for a profit is one of the cogs that keep our world’s economy moving.

From the Old Testament perspective, there was a mathematical formula that would calculate how much of that profit was to be sacrificed, or offered, to God.

I had a lovely visit this week with some long-time members of Covenant.

In our conversation, the topic of World War II came up...and this long-time member told me that two of his brothers survived the Normandy invasion.

If any of you are history buffs, you know the Normandy invasion began with the D-Day campaign to invade Europe in June of 1944. One estimate said the cost to U.S. forces in that battle alone was over 29,000 lives.

29,000!

If I were to think of the word ‘sacrifice’ in terms of those 29,000 lives I would label it as an ‘ultimate sacrifice’. Indeed, many times when the word sacrifice surfaces it is when the war counts their dead and label it: ‘ultimate’.

That word honors the families who lost loved ones to the greater cause of peace.

We have now two examples of sacrifice. One is about livelihood and the other about life itself.

So what does the Bible say about sacrifice?

First of all, Old Testament or New...God doesn't want us to suffer. We aren't supposed to sacrifice our livelihood so much we are left destitute...we are guided in scripture to sacrifice in order to gain God's favor. That's the Old Testament focus: gaining God's favor.

But something happens to sacrifice when Jesus arrives.

Jesus wants us to sacrifice anything that keeps us from focusing our full attention on God and God's love for all children. (and I mean that in an parental sense as we are all children of God)

God wants us to *trust* God more than we trust ourselves and certainly more than what we trust what money can do for us...and to trust our very lives with God's power to provide.

But does that help us feel any better about the 29,000 soldiers who lost their lives in the Battle of Normandy...or any other soldier who lost their life in battle.

Lives are worth far more than money. That's why we call it an ‘ultimate’ sacrifice. There is no greater sacrifice than to give one's life for another.

You know where I'm going with this...

Frederick Buechner says “to sacrifice something is to make it holy by giving it away for love.”

You see, sacrifice isn't just about giving up...it's also about getting. And what we get for our sacrifice is something truly holy...miraculous.

A mysterious and hallowed exchange that keeps us connected to God in extraordinary ways.

What we receive from the sacrificial act of Christ dying on the cross is God's promise to love us forever through Jesus. The author of Hebrews refers to Jesus as a high priest. In that day-and-age, a high priest was the greatest of all human intercessors:

It was Jesus, who offered the sacrifice for us followers once and for all. Jesus' sacrifice was an act of love; generated out of God's great love for us.

Jesus...who was himself blameless, undefiled and holy...sacrificed himself and therefore transformed love to be shared by all...not a chosen or privileged few...but by all.

It wasn't just Jesus' body that died on the cross... sacrificed once and for all. It was the fatality of disgrace of all human endeavors.

What was sacrificed was human failings to love God completely.

And what better sacrifice than "a high priest, holy, blameless, undefiled, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens."

The best of the best.

What the greatest sacrifice did for us was to move humanity from disgrace to grace.

I want to close our discussion of sacrifice with the final healing story in the Gospel of Mark: the story of Bartimaeus, son of Timaeus.

Today's Gospel reading underscores the broad inclusive nature of God's love sacrificed for all.

A blind man calls out to Jesus for mercy. "Son of David, have mercy on me!"

Jesus asks him the question: "What do you want me to do for you?"

The man wants to see again. No more darkness. No more being separated from living a full life. ... No more sin.

The healing of Bartimaeus wasn't just a simple healing; but a *revelation* of what it means to receive God's loving gift of grace...and to not just accept it and be on our way...but to then out of gratitude make the commitment to follow the promise.

Bartimaeus, the son of Timaeus, became a disciple.

I like to think that many years from that moment, (the hour he first believed) Bartimaeus sat down to compose a sermon to the Hebrews who needed to hear of Jesus' sacrificial act, as the ultimate sacrifice made out of love...and it was that love that birthed grace.

The men and women who sacrifice their lives for a greater cause are children of God who deserve to be honored...and we trust that Jesus has escorted them all to a place of peace. We trust that because we believe in grace.

We started out this lesson series with Gratitude...then we talked about Covenant (or commitment / promise). It is fitting we complete the trilogy with the element that confirms our gratitude and promises to God. Sacrifice.

What makes sacrifice painless is the compelling reason of love. Or maybe a better way to say it is:

What makes sacrifice less painful is love...and it was love that transformed the agony of the cross into grace.

In terms of stewardship and our offerings back to God for the blessings God has bestowed on us is a very familiar adage: God doesn't want us to give until it hurts...God wants us to offer until it feels good.

Giving out of Love, plain and simple, feels good; so good it's hard to see it as a sacrifice any longer.

Indeed, it is grace that makes the sacrifice worthwhile.

Thanks be to God!

Let us pray:

Holy and gracious God, as we approach the throne of grace we beg for mercy...to see again the wonder and compelling reason why Jesus' sacrifice frees us all to live and love.

Guide us as we strive to make this sanctuary a holy place; a spiritual home; a place of refuge and healing.

Inspire within us the strength to sacrifice our hesitation to let go of what feels secure; to give away those things that keeps us from freely receiving your amazing gift of grace.

Trusting in that amazing gift, we bring to you the sacrifice of praise, thanksgiving and joy turning over to you the people and situations we list on our prayer page; the prayers we named out loud; and the tender prayers we keep locked deep in our hearts.

In Jesus' wonderful name we pray. Amen!