

*Lent 2, Year B*

*March 1, 2015*

Today is the fifth and final Sunday in our five-part sermon series to focus on our *Building to Serve* campaign. On this day, what we have called “Commitment Sunday,” many of us will bring in our commitment cards after having prayed for weeks, “Lord what do you want to do through me?” It is another exciting day in the history of our parish! The assigned theme for the sermon today is Generosity and Sacrifice.

Sacrifice is a centrally important word in the Christian faith. We believe that Christ’s death was the sacrifice that brought forgiveness to all people and brought reconciliation and restored order between God and humanity. Some theologians have said that sacrifice pulses in the very heart of God as God’s love flows out to create and sustain the universe.

Yet sacrifice is not a very popular word in our culture today. Perhaps it is just misunderstood. We have competitive ideologies and beliefs that work very hard to discount and diminish the concept of sacrifice. We have certain beliefs that guide our actions and our attitudes. Some beliefs we cite as if they are found in the Bible, though they are not there.

I was reading about that on the internet this week. There was a list of some of those *faux* Bible statements. Like “God helps those who help themselves.” That statement is nowhere found in the Bible. It conveys a sense that we are all supposed to be self-reliant without any sense of our need for God—or our need to give and receive help to and from one another. The concept of “sacrifice” is inconsistent with that belief (unless we strain its interpretation to mean personal sacrifice so we can get ahead). This statement instead puts it all on me and my efforts.

The other extreme, and another competing belief with sacrifice, is to talk about the “unconditional love of God.” That may sound more Christian to some of us, but again that phrase is not to be found in the Bible. That may surprise some of us because we have experienced the deep love of God in our lives. We are grateful for God’s forgiveness and we know that God’s love is not dependent on our being perfect or even good. And that’s all true.

God’s love (the Hebrew word is “*chesed*,” often translated into English as “loving-kindness”) is deep and broad and continually surrounding us. We would not even exist without God’s love. But there is an important distinction between the reality of God’s great love and belief in “God’s unconditional love.” Let me explain: God is not co-dependent. God is not a doormat. God is not indifferent to how we live (“Live and let live” is also not to be found in the Bible). God has a spine. And God has a plan and purpose for reality that God calls us to participate in; and God’s call involves sacrifice.

Now to be clear-- God loves us because that is who God is. We cannot and do not need to earn God's love. But God's love is not passive. God's love does change us if we open our hearts and our lives to God's presence—God's love is irresistible. And that loving transformation will result in sacrifice. That is what we hear in the Gospel lesson appointed for today. Jesus calls his followers to participate in his sacrifice.

Now that may make some of us feel uncomfortable. What does sacrifice look like? What will we be asked to do (especially in the context of a capital campaign!)? I can tell you this—I am not God and I cannot begin to tell you what sacrifice will mean for you in the context of your lives. But here are some things for all of us to consider when we consider the centrality of sacrifice in our Christian faith and practice.

First, sacrifice always begins with gratitude for what others have done for us—for how others have sacrificed and continue to sacrifice for us. Of course that gratitude begins with God and the fact of our existence. In some way that we can never fully understand, God has sacrificed God's perfection in the Holy Trinity in order to bring less than perfect things into existence. But God is willing to sacrifice divine perfection in order to create a world where freedom, love-- and sacrifice— can flourish even in the midst of our imperfection. And for that, we should have full and grateful hearts toward Almighty God.

That gratitude for what others sacrifice for us can be extended to people, too-- like parents and other family members who gave up (and continue to give up) big and little things in order to bring us into the world and take care of us when we were children. I don't know of one parent who has not sacrificed quite a bit in order to love and care for their child or children. Things like sleep, date nights, buying something we want (like the latest electronics or a nice vacation). Parents give up those things and more (you're welcome); and we all would do it again because of the joy and the deeper understanding of sacrifice that parenthood provides.

The list of gratitude for the sacrifice of others extends to people like military personnel and first responders, medical staff and teachers, clergy and social workers; day-to-day heroes and heroes in the moment; people who sacrifice their lives for the good of others. It is hard to see video of the firefighters running into the burning buildings on 9/11 without feeling deep gratitude for their sacrifice.

So be grateful. And so our gratitude does not slip into mere sentimentality, we need to join our gratitude with prayer. The simple and regular practice of prayer orients our hearts and our lives to the God who sacrifices for us-- and calls us to sacrifice, too. Over time, as we offer prayers like the one for the *Building to Serve* campaign—"Lord, what do you want to do through me?"—we will learn from the Spirit what sacrifice means in our lives, too.

Next, in order for our prayer to become real, they will lead to sacrifice in the form of tangible action. Specifically, it could mean making a larger financial commitment than we expected to do before this campaign began. I know of folks who have changed their original planned pledge after praying during this campaign. Sacrifice often starts with our money because our core identity is so tied up with wealth and income and what we can do with it. What better sacrificial action can we take with our money than offering it back to God through the ministry of the church?

Sacrifice also means active involvement in our church and in our world. There are many competing activities and ideologies that are offered to us on many different platforms from the virtual to the real world. They call us to do many different things for a variety of reasons (and many of them are good). There are real choices to make about where our loyalty is placed. Sacrifice is made up of the outward choices we make daily and over our lifetimes if we are to become, as Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans, “a living sacrifice.”

As we consider the example of those who have sacrificed for us, as we take part in daily prayer, and as we develop our own personal commitment, we can decide with God’s help what sacrifice means for us. Maybe we will volunteer as a Sunday school teacher for little children or to be a church treasurer. Our prayer-directed sacrifice might inspire us to ask Sylvia Cardona how to be a mentor for kids at risk. Sacrifice may mean we rearrange our schedule to practice on Wednesday evenings so we can sing in the choir on Sunday mornings. Sacrifice may mean we actively lobby our state legislators in order to pass a bill to help sick children. Or it may mean that we take part in a prayer vigil for someone facing execution.

The list of what we can do as a sacrifice is long. There is so much that needs to be done in order to help bring God’s love and justice—God’s sacrifice—to completion. What God requires of us is our sacrifice-- to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Jesus. That is the way that we all can experience the love of God in all of its fullness. Amen.