

“Inside-Out”  
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St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky  
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II Corinthians 5:20b – 6:10

In college, I pledged a fraternity. It’s not what you might think. We weren’t anything like John Belushi’s frat in the movie Animal House. Yes, we did regrettable things, worthy of repentance, as all young men sometimes do, but on the whole, it was a positive and productive experience. This shy boy from the country learned how to come out of his shell in a brotherly community of trust and common purpose. We were serious about academics and outreach in the community, and we never hazed a pledge – never.

However, during that pledge period, there are things you have to do to prove that you’re really committed. You learn the history of the brotherhood and what its symbols mean, somewhat similar to how a faithful Christian strives for biblical literacy and an appreciation of the sacred mysteries. But, of course, we had to do a few silly things, too, and the one I remember best is the one I’m most grateful for.

From time to time, we pledges had to wear our fraternity shirts inside-out all day long. The point wasn’t to humiliate us by making us look ridiculous. After all, 30 other guys were doing it, so it wasn’t that embarrassing, and it wasn’t about being noticed either. Other frats and sororities also did inside-out day. It wasn’t anything special. You saw it on campus all the time. Instead, the point of this exercise was mild discomfort.

You see, the shirt had three Greek letters stitched on the front. They were brand new and very stiff. So when you wore it inside-out, the edges of the letters, especially the pointy parts, chaffed a little – not enough to hurt or cause harm. It was just enough to be annoying, and this irritation was designed to instill a sense of humility and perspective.

You see, pledges felt proud to wear their shirts. Those Greek letters declared acceptance and inclusion and belonging. The purpose of those itchy inside-out days was to make you focus on the fact that the outward appearance meant nothing if there was nothing happening inside. Being a pledge involved change, and real change is uncomfortable, because it alters your priorities and forces you to view the world from a different perspective. Change almost always introduces new commitments and responsibilities, and sometimes change requires sacrifice.

We normally think of sacrifice as giving up something for something else, and that's true to a certain extent, but this type of sacrifice has a transactional quality. It's more of an exchange than a pure sacrifice. For example, you might sacrifice eating certain foods to lose weight and feel better. That sacrifice has a benefit, and there's nothing wrong with that. In fact, honoring the body that God has given us is noble and necessary. But a pure sacrifice involves letting go of something, whether it be a habit or an attitude or a possession or even a person, with no expectation of return.

It's a big difference in motive, and that type of sacrifice can be intensely uncomfortable. Just ask Paul. He and his companions underwent veritably every form of suffering you could imagine. The list Paul offers is long, and while some items, like enduring riots and beatings and imprisonments, rarely if ever happen to us, we've all experienced hardships and sleepless nights and afflictions.

Paul and his partners were also terribly misunderstood. They were portrayed as imposters, despite their authenticity, as obscure unknowns, when in fact they touched many lives with the Gospel, and as a sad little group, even though their days were full of rejoicing. I think we can all relate to that. Everyone has felt at some point a little misunderstood and

underappreciated by those around us, and this can cause us to feel lonely and isolated and disconnected.

But like Paul, we too can endure, if like him we humbly embrace the grace of God and receive the fruits of the Spirit – powerful gifts like patience, kindness, genuine love, truthful speech. These are offered to us by God freely. There’s nothing we can do to earn or deserve them, nothing we can do to pay God back. But paradoxically, they do come at a cost, namely the sacrifice of anything and everything that acts as an obstacle to these gifts being active in our lives.

Now you might be thinking, “This isn’t a pure sacrifice. Yes, Paul gave up a lot, but as a man of faith he had every reason to expect a return, which he got – all these wonderful gifts of grace that helped see him through the tough times.” You could go even farther and say, “Paul went to all of this trouble because he knew that Jesus died for him, forgave his sin, and reconciled him with God, which means everlasting life. So in a way, Paul got the goodies well before he made any sacrifices, much less pure ones.” Those are good objections, and I’m glad you thought of them, but here’s the crucial point.

Paul could have done nothing or just a little when it was convenient. He could have stayed at home, satisfied that he was safe, grateful to be sure, but not quite grateful enough to hit the road and take the abuse. “Somebody better suited to that kind of work can do it,” Paul could have easily thought, but for some reason, Paul couldn’t be content with being an armchair disciple, so he went.

He went and left everything else behind, sacrificed it all, with no guarantee of a return, because for all he knew, nobody would listen to him. He could have made a perfect fool of himself, expending all that energy for nothing. But he went, because of his faith in the power of

God. That's what motivated him, not the possibility of praise or fame, and only that divine power can make of a person's life a true sacrifice.

Yet we often don't notice this power, and when we do, we often resist it, because it's frightening. You'd be crazy to think it's not scary. So what we try to do is raise a shield of sorts, an outward armor that keeps God at bay. We want God in our lives, but not in our personal space. We know enough to know how disruptive God can be if we really let Him in, but when we do this, we really cheat ourselves. Sacrifice does bring hardship, don't deceive yourself about that, but sacrifice gives joy, freedom, and peace – not as payback, but as an intrinsic part of what sacrifice is. Pure sacrifice doesn't have to be a bereft experience to stay pure.

But of all the many things we might sacrifice to God as we embark on this Lenten journey, what pure sacrifice can we offer? Most of our Lenten disciplines bring tangible benefits. Watch less TV, and you'll find other, more fulfilling things to enjoy, like reading or time with family or service in the community. Eat less and exercise more, and you're going to feel and look better and get back into those skinny jeans that have been sitting in your closet. Often, it's the anticipation of those benefits that motivates us through the discomfort. This doesn't invalidate the worth of these pursuits. They're honorable and please God. However, maturity in faith comes from pure sacrifice, but what could that be?

Care less about what other people think of you. Care less about what other people think of you, not in a superior sort of way, but in humble obedience to Jesus. Now that doesn't seem like much of a sacrifice. We'd all like to escape the trap of worrying about what our neighbors, co-workers, classmates, and fellow parishioners might think of us. What could be more wonderful? We wear ourselves out trying to figure out if we said or did the wrong thing, or

failed to do the right thing. It's exhausting wondering how we measure up in other people's eyes. But much as we might complain, we compulsively strive to fit in and feel accepted by keeping up appearances, because we value the opinions of others as a way of helping us define our identity. We hope to garner approval and praise and acceptance, and to a certain extent, this is natural.

God created us to live in community, and other people do shape our identities. Our parents and our peers, our friends and our enemies, leave their stamp on us, whether we want them to or not. We respond to their influence by either conforming or rebelling, and each of us influences everyone we meet. For this reason, we need to give regard to kind compliments and constructive criticism, and take some cues on how to live from those we respect the most. We need to care about what some people think some of the time. It's a part of what it means to be human. But it easily gets out of hand.

When we care too much about what others think of us, we care too little about God. Again, let's look at Paul. That man did not care what others thought about him or said to him or did to him, even when it was awful. He didn't care, because he was obsessed with following Jesus

Now none of us can be Paul. You can only be you, and I can only be me, all of us both flawed and glorious. But when we let go of caring too much about what people think of us, it gives us room to find out who we really are by making more room for Jesus to be active in our lives, changing our priorities and perspectives, calling us to sacrifice what just might be the most dangerous sin out there: the desire to belong wholeheartedly to anyone but God.

When we focus on what others think, we invariably work hard to create a façade, to put up an outward appearance that we think might be appealing to them. We expend so much effort

on this that we neglect our relationship with God and the interior work of growing our souls in the rich soil of God's grace and love. And when we allow that to happen, we're strutting around with Greek letters on our chest, hoping that somehow those impressive symbols of belonging will help us get by.

This is just what Jesus railed against. He wasn't saying never pray in public. He wasn't saying don't receive ashes as a sign of penitence and fasting. He was warning us not to get caught up in exterior appearances in a vain quest to get what we think we need from anyone other than God. Jesus doesn't want us to be an empty, hollow shell. He wants us to be full with his fullness, to do things for the right reasons with pure motives. Jesus doesn't want us to depend principally on people's opinions of us to have a meaningful life, because only dependence on God can give us that.

There will be some discomfort, a little stick and scratch here and there, but humility brings wisdom and peace, and ironically protects us from those who try to humiliate us. Letting things go makes our load lighter. God's happy to carry our baggage, because he knows just where to put it. Redirecting our energy away from the fancy façade toward the inside empowers us to live into our pledge, the baptismal covenant, and go forth, anchored in God's love, to do justice without mercy not judgement, without expectation of return, without a care in the world what people might think. Amen.