

When Paul wrote to the churches he had founded, he typically spent part of the letter talking about theology and then turned to its practical application. In this morning's reading from Romans we heard the beginning of his practical section. "I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God-- what is good and acceptable and perfect."

Recently a friend asked me, "What do we sacrifice?" and I found myself at a loss. One of those "can't get there from here" questions. The reason I couldn't quite get there is that the term sacrifice needs a lot of unpacking and in the sense that I think she meant it, I'm not sure that we are asked to sacrifice.

The dictionary gives two common uses of sacrifice – first, to give something up, as in "they sacrificed everything so she could go to college" or secondly to make an offering to a god. It comes from the Latin words *sacer* which means holy and *facere* which is to make. So to sacrifice is to make holy.

The ancient Hebrew people, like other peoples of the ancient Near East, used sacrifice a lot in their relationship with God. We tend to think of this primarily as making atonement for their sin, but sacrifice was often an offering of thanksgiving, or a way of connecting with God through offering him a meal. In Exodus 29 there are instructions for a daily sacrifice of lamb, flour, oil and wine, described as a pleasing aroma, a food offering presented to the LORD.⁴² "For the generations to come this burnt offering is to be made regularly at the entrance to the tent of meeting, before the LORD. There I will meet you and speak to you;⁴³ there also I will meet with the Israelites, and the place will be consecrated by my glory." (Ex 29:41b-43)

It makes sense to feed your god. We all know that hungry people have more of a tendency to get angry and to act without much thought. A well fed god is a happy god. Sacrifices were not offered just to put things right between human and god but to keep the god in a good humor.

In Jesus, God turned the whole sacrificial system on its head. Instead of humans providing a lamb without blemish as a meal for their god, God provided a lamb without blemish as a meal for his people. The crucifixion is absolutely about sacrifice, but for centuries we've been confused about who was sacrificing what, and why.

We have seen it primarily as Jesus sacrificing his life as an atonement for our sins. For some reason, God was so angry at my sin that he had to be appeased and only death could calm him down. But instead of demanding that I personally die, he became human and died in my place so that he could stop being mad at me. That really doesn't make sense to me. We expect adult

humans to have at least some ability to self-soothe. Could God not have calmed himself down about my sins without resorting to child sacrifice?

The crucifixion was certainly a sacrifice for Jesus. He gave up his life because that was the only way to continue his mission. He could have changed his mind and walked away from the path that he was on, but that would have been a complete loss of integrity. It would have been a mockery of everything he had been teaching through his words and his life. As the Christ, he could have called on angels to save him and no doubt the temptation to do so was very great. But he didn't. He sacrificed his life. Because that's what it took for us to be able to see that the sin matrix is like the Emperor who had no clothes. His death and resurrection prove two things – that sin is actually powerless and that even when humanity does its absolute worst, God still comes back loving us.

It was a sacrifice for Jesus in the sense that he gave up something precious for something else. He gave up his life for his mission. He gave up his life in obedience to God. It wasn't the only sacrifice he made. Once a month in place of the creed, we use the early hymn from Philippians 2 and we remember that we trust in "Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross" (Phil 2:6-8). For Jesus Christ, the incarnation was a sacrifice. He let go of what it meant to be God and allowed himself to experience the limitations of humanity. Let us be very clear. This is sacrifice as in giving up something important and precious for another person or cause. "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whosoever believed in him should not perish but have everlasting life." (John 3:16) God so loved the world that he sacrificed his Son... this is not God taking up a knife and killing his son to appease himself. It's the other kind of sacrifice.

In Jesus, the sacrificial system came to an end because Jesus showed us the love of God manifest among us. Jesus showed us that we don't need to keep God well-fed in fear that he might get angry and punish us. Jesus showed us that God is not a tiger in a cage who we have to treat carefully and feed regularly lest he get out and come after us. No, Jesus showed us that God wants to be with us. Just as in the Garden of Eden we are told that God walked in the garden with Adam and Eve in the cool of the evening, so God wants to walk with us today. Isn't that wonderful image? The cool of the evening. When the day's work and busyness is over, in the quiet time when we might pour a glass of wine and sit down on the deck to enjoy the sunset, God longs to be with us.

In Jesus, God provided the lamb for the meal of peace between humans and God. So we don't have to keep slaughtering innocent lambs. This is the other meaning of sacrifice - killing something and offering it as a meal to God whether for thanksgiving, for atonement or for general maintenance of good relationships. In the eucharist we receive God into ourselves through the bread and wine which become for us the Body and Blood of Christ. This is the sacrificial meal but let's be very clear, we are not sacrificing Christ. That was a confusion of the medieval church. We are not offering a sacrifice to God of bread and wine. Instead, we bring the bread and wine which God's creation grew and human hands made, as a symbol of our thanksgiving. God transforms them, in a mystical way which we could debate for days, into the spiritual food that we need. It is God who has brought the food for this sacrificial meal. It is God who meets us here in the bread and the wine. Unlike the ancients who made a meal and invited God, we are invited by God to participate in the meal which is the Body of Christ broken for us.

And what do we bring? We bring our sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving. That's why we call it eucharist - Eucharist means thanksgiving. We come to God with our praise and thanksgiving.

But wait, those of you who are still awake will have realized that I wandered from my original text, because Paul isn't even talking about the eucharist. Paul wrote, "I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God-- what is good and acceptable and perfect." This is the thumbnail of the Christian life. Get this and the rest falls into place.

"Present your bodies as a living sacrifice." I don't think Paul is distinguishing here between body, mind and spirit. We actually can't separate them. So to present our bodies is to present every part of ourselves. "Present your whole self as a living sacrifice." This isn't about burnt offerings, this isn't about blood sacrifice. He is not suggesting that we lie down on some altar and let God slit our throats. God wouldn't want that anyway.

A sacrifice is something that is made holy. Remember your Latin, *sacer* and *facere*. To make holy. "present your whole self as a living making holy." This is about surrender. It's about making God and God's mission the center of our lives instead of our own demands and desires. It's about choosing to live Gospel values instead of the values of the little ego which wants to be the center of everything and is always looking out for number 1. God doesn't want to slit our throats, God wants us to flourish and live with joy in the Body of Christ, so surrender to God is not a fearful thing. It's actually what we were created to do.

We were created to live in loving relationship with God. We were created to be at our most joy-filled and vibrant when we are participating fully in the reign of God. And so, paradoxically, when we present our whole selves to God as a living making holy, that is when we are most fully ourselves. And surprising things happen. Because our God is a God of surprises. Our God is a God who turns our systems upside down.

The only thing our God asks us to let go of – to sacrifice – is our false beliefs. The idea that God is a dangerous caged tiger out to get us if we stop paying attention, and the idea that we can run our own lives without dependence on the one who is the ground of Being.

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