

A month or so I preached a sermon exploring the concept of sacrifice. It was not one of my more successful efforts. Bryson was so irritated she went home early and even Michael Lucas said he didn't follow my train of thought. I am not going to revisit that sermon today, but I was struck by the phrase "do not rely on dishonest sacrifice" in the first reading from Sirach. The book of Sirach was written just about 200 years before Jesus. It was not included in the Hebrew canon of scripture but was read by the early church. Just as it did not make it into the Hebrew canon, it did not make it into the A list of scriptures that became the New Testament but is high enough on the B list that we listen to it occasionally, like today, but do not use it as the basis of doctrine.

So there is no doctrine of dishonest sacrifice.

Yet Jesus' parable in the Gospel reading does I think give a great picture of dishonest sacrifice. A highly religious person is making his sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving – but what is he thanking God for? For himself and his innate superiority! This is a prayer born in ego, which is exactly the opposite of the prayer or sacrifice that God desires.

I think we all get our egos muddled up in our prayers, our hopes and desires. I don't know whether the average person ever really finds more than glimpses of the place beyond ego where there is just the soul naked before God. I know that many of my prayers have mixed motives and one of them the motives is often ego because my ego wants control, my ego wants things to go my way, my ego wants to be important and make things happen. My ego wants you to love my sermons – every one!

As I walk my pilgrimage towards retirement, I am realizing the extent that my ego is tied up with St. Benedict's being "successful". There is an old planning document from the time when Judy Stevens was rector, written by Art and someone else called "From Yurt to Cathedral". It was a statement of their hopes for the church. We still don't have the yurt but I have dreamed of us being a cathedral. Not architecturally, but in our

place in the community – a center of the community, a place for spirituality, for education, for the arts.

And at times we have been all those things. And I have been proud.

I confess to having thanked God that our church was better than that other church down the street, across town, in another place. I confess to having been proud that we were not like other people.

It is such a balancing act, isn't it? Being grateful for all that we have and at the same time not comparing ourselves in an ego-based way with other people who seem to be quite deluded.

Perhaps the antidote to ego and judging others is staying in touch with the basics. That we are here to love God with every bit of ourselves and to love our neighbors as ourselves, guided by the Holy Spirit. This church is God's work, not mine, not even ours. It is God's work and our part is to discern how God is calling us and to get on board, to play our part in what God is doing. And that may be in a yurt or a cathedral, in a laundromat or a thrift shop. It may be a glorious educational program or a soaring choir, or it may be a nondescript group of people dedicated to following God's lead together. As the psalm said, "Happy are they who dwell in your house! they will always be praising you. Happy are the people whose strength is in you! whose hearts are set on the pilgrims' way."

Our happiness is in having our hearts set upon God's way rather than being successful in the sight of the world or in the sight of our own egos.

Last week, as is our custom on the third week of the month, we heard only two readings. Later, the Parish Council took time to reflect on the one we missed. It was the story of how Jacob was alone at night down by the creek and there wrestled with a man. They wrestled all night and we are told that as day was breaking, the man told Jacob that he had been wrestling with God and had prevailed and he was given a new

name, a new identity, Israel. Jacob the trickster who had tricked his brother out of his inheritance and who had himself been tricked out of the wife he loved, became Israel the patriarch. Jacob persisted in wrestling with God through the time of darkness, and was changed.

This congregation has persisted. There was a dark time when the cost of moving and renovating the church had created such a debt burden that the diocese told us we should close. But the vestry persisted. Soon after I started being your priest we drew up plans for possible closure. We agreed that we would call in a real estate agent if money in the bank went below a certain level. Less than a month later it went below the trigger point. But we broke our own rules, and we persisted.

We persisted because we believed that God was calling this church into being. And God is still calling us into being today and tomorrow.

God's blessings to us are great. We give thanks for all that each of us receives here and all that each of us is able to contribute and create here. St Benedict' is a remarkable community with a remarkable story.

And that story is far from over. God is persisting. God is persisting in creating the reign of God in our midst.

Remembering that is key to avoiding a dishonest sacrifice. When we bring our sacrifice to God – our sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving, the offering of our life and labor in gratitude it is an acknowledgement of our dependence on God and our desire to contribute all that we have to the great work that God is doing. Which in human terms may look very grand or not very special at all. Our offering becomes a dishonest sacrifice when what we offer is tied up in ego, is to do with self importance or with how things look.

God actually loves the self-important Pharisee just as much as the generally despised tax collector. God loves us with our egos and our mixed motives. God loves us when our lives are going well, and when they are not. God loves us when we persist and also when we give up.

My honest sacrifice is given in response to that love. When I make my offering of my time, my energy, my money to God freely without strings and expectations I give an honest sacrifice. Remember the sacrifices of the Hebrew people were offered to God on the altar and burned. They literally went up in smoke. But when I give my offering with all kinds of expectations and ego attachments, it is headed fast into the dishonest zone.

Fortunately, God can handle mixed motives. God knows that my ego is still very active and that my prayers have mixed motives. God knows I want to be in control and to be successful in the eyes of the world. Part of me is with the Pharisee thanking God for who I am, but more of me knows that it all comes from God, that all good things come from God and that God persists in loving and being active in God's creation. And that everything we turn over to God will be blessed.

As Sirach said, "Give to the Most High as he has given to you, and as generously as you can afford. For the Lord is the one who repays, and he will repay you sevenfold."