

Sunday October 20, 2024

Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 24

Meditation: Sacrum Facere

Sacrum facere. It is the Latin root of the English word ‘sacrifice.’

I was thinking about sacrifice this week. I was eleven when my parents separated. The law at the time was that my mother was entitled to the clothes she was wearing at the time the decision to divorce was made, and nothing else. The rest of the clothes in her closet and dresser, the house, the children, everything belonged to the husband, whose income had paid for it all. Things were tense in the house while my father lived in the den. There were lots of fights. The police were called on more than one occasion. There were wild accusations made on both sides. Finally my father moved out, but he was not happy. He left four children in the care of their mother..... with absolutely no income and no financial support from him. We went from upper-middle class to welfare overnight. We ate a lot of homemade soup, and oatmeal, and powdered milk. I remember one day mom was at the butcher shop asking for bones. The butcher asked her if they were for the dog. She knew what he was asking. If they were for soup, there would be a charge. If they were for a dog, then they were free. Right then and there we got an invisible dog. In addition to that lie, mom made other difficult choices so we could eat. One of them involved selling some of her clothing, including her winter coat. That winter, all she had to wear outside was an old, thin trench coat. I know she was cold all winter, but her winter coat had helped feed her children. Mom made many sacrifices for the benefit of her children over the years.

I think about the sacrifices that parents make for their children. They sacrifice sleep, especially when their children are infants. When they are teenagers, they often sacrifice being popular with their child in favour of teaching their child important lessons, like limits (otherwise known as rules) and the consequences of breaking the limits. Can you think of other things that either your parents sacrificed for you, or you sacrificed for your children?

Both of the scripture lessons that we read this morning talk about sacrifices. One talks of the sacrifices that priests ought to make on behalf of the people, and on their own behalf as well. Many ancient civilizations made blood sacrifices to their gods. Sometimes the sacrifice was about appeasing the god for the transgressions of the people. Other times it was to curry favour with the god and have the god look kindly upon them and send the spring rains, or a bumper harvest, or success in battle. The ancient Israelites were no exception. The temple that Solomon built in Jerusalem was built as a place to offer blood sacrifice to God to restore the relationship between sinful people and God.

When I worked at IBM, we had a summer student from Ethiopia one summer. At the end of the summer we, my family, took Fikre out to an Ethiopian restaurant for supper. We sat at a round table that was barren. After we ordered, a large round tray was brought and placed in the centre of the table. In the middle of the tray was several layers of round flat bread, sort of like giant tortillas. Around the perimeter of the tray was a variety of dishes that ranged from cooked goat to vegetables. To eat, you tore a piece of the bread off and used it to scoop up some of the goat or vegetable or whatever. Ethiopian tradition teaches that once you break bread (or tear bread) together, you will never be enemies. Further, the way to reconcile enemies is for them to share a meal, to break bread together.

This is what is behind the roasting of the animals slaughtered at the altar in the temple in Jerusalem, and in other cultures too. Literally, people are preparing a meal to share with God. They are inviting God to come to the table and for them to be reconciled.

Many still believe that the ultimate blood sacrifice was Jesus' death on the cross. In the second lesson, Jesus is quoted as saying, "The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many." I believe that Jesus is saying that it is his life, given to the service of vulnerable and marginalized people that is the ransom or sacrifice he makes, and not his crucifixion.

Over the years I have met several people in the dental and medical fields who have travelled to countries drowning in poverty to provide health care and compassion to those in need. Some have provided nursing care. Others have provided dental care. Still others have offered their services as surgeons to help with things like cleft palates and other disfigurements. Who do you know that has given their life in service of others?

Sacrum Facere. A better translation of the words is 'to make holy.' Jesus lived to serve, to teach, to heal, to liberate, and so on. It was Jesus' life that was made holy, not his death. That is what James and John failed to grasp. That is what we fail to grasp. They sought their own prestige, and Jesus tells them they got it wrong, we get it wrong. It is a life of service to others, especially the marginalized and vulnerable, a life of struggling for justice and righteousness for all, that God calls us to. People and justice and righteousness were his passion, not his death on the cross.

Those health care workers, in offering compassion and comfort and healing made their own lives holy. Every time we offer comfort, or food, or healing, or a listening ear to a friend in crisis, or.... Every time we do that, we make our lives holy. Go, and make your life holy this week. Sacrum facere.