

SACRIFICES
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19th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

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Isaiah 1:1, 10-20

“What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?” says the LORD. “I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats.”

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The word “sacrifices” is in the Old Testament lesson for this Sunday, and by coincidence this past week we heard a lot about sacrifices—about a young Muslim soldier who sacrificed his life to protect his companions. We heard about his parents who sacrificed their son in the service of their beloved country. And we heard a presidential candidate boast of his sacrifices to create thousands of jobs.

For most Americans, there was no comparison and to pretend so was offensive. But the candidate had a point even though it was made in the wrong tone at the wrong time.

There are many ways to sacrifice that others might live.

To sacrifice is to give up something precious for the sake of others. In that regard, entrepreneurs sacrifice financial security by taking risks in the market place, risks that put them and their wellbeing in jeopardy. Many have lost much.

There are many ways to sacrifice that others might live.

I’m thinking of employers who during the recession sacrificed their own big salaries in order to keep employees on the payroll. I’m thinking of men and women who sacrifice higher paying and less stressful jobs to teach our children in school. I’m thinking of nurses and doctors who risk their health by touching infected bodies. I’m thinking of police and firefighters who put their own lives on the line to protect and save others. I’m thinking of peacemakers who stand in the way of violence. I’m thinking of protesters who stand up and speak out for justice. I’m thinking of parents, grandparents and surrogate parents who sacrifice a life of relative ease in order to raise children.

There are many ways to sacrifice that others might live.

But not all sacrifices are genuine. Some are self-serving.

I’m thinking of fans at sporting events who sacrifice one whole minute of chatter to stand in silence before a gigantic flag to honor our troops and then fall back in their seats to revel in glittering entertainment knowing their children have been spared. As many have noted, *that’s hollow patriotism*. And it’s right up there with *hollow piety* that makes a show of serving God and others, but is actually a sham, a cover up for neglecting real sacrifices that honor God and help others.

And that brings us to the Old Testament lesson for today. It’s a searing indictment of a devout and patriotic people who thought themselves exceptional and favored by God. The indictment comes from the mouth and heart of the prophet Isaiah who in the convention of the time attributes it to “the voice of God.” But make no mistake: it’s from a mortal like us who was in tune with the divine voice in all. As the Psalm for today puts it: *The Beloved has come and will not keep silence; for Divine Love is a consuming Fire, calling forth heaven and earth to the judgment of all peoples.* (Psalm 50, Nan Merrill)

Listen to this.

Hear the word of the LORD, you rulers of Sodom! Listen to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah! What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and fat beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or lambs, or goats or — we might add—dead soldiers.

When you come to appear before me, who asked that from your hand? I can't stand your solemn assemblies. Even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood.

Which is to say, I'm tired of your hollow patriotism and piety. Look at the blood on your hands and come clean.

The prophet continues.

Wash yourselves; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice; rescue the oppressed; defend the orphan; plead for the widow.

Which is to say, look out for the most vulnerable and exploited in your society. That's what pleases me—not gigantic flags, soaring speeches and flowery prayers. Those may be good but not to the neglect of what really matters, namely, cultivating a world of peace, justice and kindness through sacrifice.

Learn to do good. Look out for the most vulnerable and exploited.

And then comes what sounds like a threat but can be heard as the realistic consequences of behavioral choices made by nations as well as individuals.

If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land; but if you refuse and rebel, you shall be devoured by the sword.

Which is to say: don't be selfish and greedy. Learn to do good. Learn and practice the ways that lead to freedom, healing, peace and justice for all.

Or as Jesus put it in the gospel for today:

Relinquish your possessions and privileges and give to the poor and dispossessed. Turn your attention and affection to the neglected. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

By the way, the forthcoming Sunday morning seminar on race this fall will put flesh and bone on white privilege and lead us to deeper learning. Please participate. Let us learn to do good and right.

Relinquish your possessions and privileges. Turn your attention and affection to the neglected

Choices matter and certain sacrifices count. The proper question for a Christian isn't: *What must I do to be saved?* The proper question is: *What must I do that others may be saved?* As Pastor Steve put it in his prayer: *With Christ, I ask you God, save me last.*

It's true: We can keep all we have for ourselves. We can turn our backs on the poor in our nation and the world. We can pour our treasure into one bloody war after another. Or we can follow the way of Jesus, a way that eliminates or mitigates conditions that lead to war and violent conflicts.

We can make the truly supreme sacrifices that promote life in all its abundance. And those, as it turns out, are the sacrifices—whether personal or national—that fill the heart with joy. And that's how we live in the light.