

The Futility of Sacrifice

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Isaiah 1:1, 10-20

Luke 12:32-40

I'm delighted to bring Christian greetings from Bluffton, Ohio—from First Mennonite Church in Bluffton and from Bluffton University. It is good to be among brothers and sisters in Christ who so clearly share the vision of our denomination and of our district conference to be communities of grace, joy, and peace, where God's healing and hope flow through us to the world. It is my purpose this evening to encourage you in that vision of healing and hope.

But my encouragement is not a matter of optimism and a cheerful affirmation that I'm okay and you're okay and aren't we all just okay! The biblical texts we heard today make it clear that being full to overflowing with God's healing and hope involves risk and controversy and conflict. We know this because we have experienced conflict and controversy and schism in the life of the church. And we know this because the Word of God as we find it represented in Scripture is a divided word, full of conflict and unresolved arguments.

IRRECONCILABLE DIFFERENCES

For example, the speech of the prophet Isaiah that we heard just now is an example of such controversial argumentation. The speech is an attack on God's

people. They are accused, as if in a lawsuit, of breaking the rules and of being guilty of wrongdoing. This is a partisan speech, not a balanced analysis that gives proper weight to different points of view. The other side of the argument also gets a hearing elsewhere in the Bible, to be sure, but somewhere else, deep in Deuteronomy and in Ezra and Ezekiel.

What are the two sides of this argument, found in the testimony of the prophets and priests of the Bible world? Bible scholar Walter Brueggemann describes the argument this way. One side says that God is a holy God above all else, one who demands purity from those who serve Him, and who is offended when God's people get distracted or corrupted by the surrounding world. The other side says that God is a righteous God above all else, who hates exploitation and violence, who requires justice for the poor and the oppressed, and who is angry when God's people act unfairly or with disregard for the last and the least in surrounding world.

In the Bible, these two claims about what God wants most from God's people are not carefully reconciled into a balanced creed. There is only the record of a raging debate that is never settled and that Jesus finds himself in the middle of when he shows up. When purity wins the day, Moses' law wins out over dancing around the golden calf, Joshua leads a successful holy war against the Canaanites, and Ezra breaks up all the mixed marriages, sending the foreign wives away with their children. When justice wins the day, the prostitute Rahab and her family are saved and honored, the foreigner Ruth receives hospitality from Boaz, and the city of Ninevah is saved from destruction.

It is clear that Isaiah is on the side of justice, more than purity. And he makes it clear that a big obstacle to justice is the ritual worship of God through sacrifices and offerings. Worship without ethics, Ivan Friesen calls it in his Isaiah commentary. Sacrifice without social justice.

This evening I want to examine a bit more carefully the critique of sacrifice found in our biblical texts: What kind of sacrifice is useless to God? What kind of sacrifice is acceptable to God? What role does sacrifice play in the reign of God—in the healing and hope that God desires to let loose on the world around us?

SACRIFICE THAT IS USELESS TO GOD

First, useless sacrifice. In the Isaiah passage it is clear that the problem is the way in which piety is a sham for exploitation. To really get at this problem, we need to remember the setting for the first thirty-nine chapters of Isaiah, which seem to originate in the 8th century B.C.E. The tiny nation of Judah—a schism from Israel—is situated between two threatening empires, Assyria to the north and Egypt to the south. Assyria represents the most serious immediate threat, but Egypt represents the bitter memory of enslavement that has always haunted and motivated God's people. Both Assyria and Egypt were empires—expansionist societies that sought to subjugate their neighbors by controlling and exploiting them.

Empires are extra-ordinary concentrations of power that make big things possible: big buildings, big cities, big organizations, big weapons, and big armies. These big things come at an expense, though. People and their communities are

expendable for the empire. The creation itself is degraded as it is subjugated to the profit motive.

The Egyptian empire made slaves out of the Hebrews and ground their very lives into the brick and mortar that built the Pharaoh's skyscrapers. The Assyrians were threatening to overrun Judah and export its inhabitants for cheap labor. Imperial power gathers the labor and innovation of the many for the increasing advantage of the privileged few.

The problem for Judah was that this kind of exploitation was not just an external threat. God's people themselves were acting unjustly toward their neighbors. God's people themselves were neglecting the widows and the orphans. God's people themselves were acting like the pagan imperial powers that surrounded them. But God's people did not even realize their wrongdoing, because all of their sacrificial piety convinced them that they were good God-fearing people. They brought offerings, they observed religious holidays, and they raised their hands in prayer.

Stop it, already! Isaiah pleads. God doesn't want this stuff, can't endure it.

In a book entitled *Empire of Sacrifice*, Lutheran scholar Jon Pahl tells a troubling story of how the United States built the empire that surrounds us through violent sacrifice: the sacrifice of slaves, of Native peoples, of dissenters, of one enemy nation and its people after another. He shows how the pieties of Christian worship have cloaked these violent sacrifices in a shroud of respectable faithfulness. The result is what he calls innocent domination—an imperial nation that does great

harm in the world under the blind assumption of its own purity and goodness. The religion of America cloaks and legitimates the violence of America.

If our worship of God hides rather than reveals our sin, it is useless worship. If our sacrifice of money, time, or even life itself obscures the violence we visit on our neighbors, such sacrifice is useless. And if, to preserve our own privilege and security, we sacrifice our neighbors—those who are called illegal immigrants, those who are called criminals, those who are called homosexuals, those who are called enemies—if we sacrifice the other, we will ourselves be “devoured by the sword.” That is the message of Isaiah to Judah and it speaks to us today.

SACRIFICE THAT IS ACCEPTABLE TO GOD

But, of course, scripture also speaks to us of sacrifice that is pleasing to God. And this is my second point. Sacrifice acceptable to God is described in the Psalm reading from today’s lectionary, Psalm 50. Here, the Psalmist is with Isaiah on the side of justice over purity: “I will not accept a bull from your house or goats from your field; for every wild animal of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills... the world is mine and all that is in it. Do I eat the flesh of bulls, or drink the blood of goats? Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving, and pay your vows to the Most High” (9-10; 13-14).

That states the case pretty clearly. God does not need our meager offerings of dead and burnt up stuff. God already has everything. But, God does desire our gratitude.

Why? Because thankful people realize that they already have everything, just like God. Thankful people don't need more stuff. Thankful people don't need bigger bank accounts. Thankful people don't need more security or more guns. Thankful people don't exploit other people for their own profit. If we are to sacrifice, then let us sacrifice our consuming desires for more.

Thankfulness does not just happen, though. We can't just suddenly turn off the market-generated desires that take us back to the mall or to Amazon.com.

We become thankful people when we become converted to see the world from God's point of view, when we recognize our own sinfulness, and we discover the excessiveness of God's grace. In the following Psalm, number 51, we learn that "the sacrifice acceptable to God is ... a broken and contrite heart." This is the sacrifice of repentance that Isaiah also urges on us. "Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good, seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow" (16-7).

The turning that is required here can be an ever so slight gesture in the direction of repentance, a turning that is joined by the grace and mercy of God flowing into us and through us. Last week, on our way into a restaurant for lunch in Columbus, my wife and I encountered a young woman and a child asking for some money. The woman said she was homeless and needed money to buy food. In these days of recession and slow recoveries, the story is plausible, even though I knew this also could easily be a scam. The heroic thing to do would have been to offer to buy lunch. But I didn't really want to do that, because I wanted to have a lunch date with

my wife and we actually had some important matters to discuss. But I also did not want to refuse any assistance, knowing that I would feel guilty for who knew how long, and there was that poor child, possibly a ruse in a scam, but possibly also hungry and thirsty. So, I did the easy thing and offered her a five-dollar bill, which I thought might go a good way toward a half-decent lunch.

However, as I gave her the money I also did something that I have never done in any of my many previous encounters with panhandlers. I said, "I'm sorry." I'm not sure why I said it. But I think I can say in retrospect what I was sorry about.

I was sorry that I was only giving her \$5. I was sorry that I was not buying her a meal. I was sorry for all the ways that my complacency contributed to her poverty, whether that was the poverty of a lost job or the poverty of an addiction or just plain poverty. I was sorry that I couldn't think of anything else to do.

But being sorry here was not some kind of repentance in sackcloth and ashes. It was not a dramatic turn from my iniquities. Just a twitch, really. I'm sorry, but here's \$5. And now I'm going to sit down for some Chinese.

But that twitch received a response. "God bless you," she said, as I'm sure she says to everyone who gives. Nothing earth-shattering there either. But I was struck that I could not remember the last time I had said to anyone, even as a matter of routine: "God bless you." Nor could I remember the last time someone had said that to me.

"I'm sorry" and "God bless you." These words of regret and grace, uttered as a \$5 bill passed from one hand to another, are signs of the new peaceable, possession-

less world, that God is bringing about amidst our sins and failures and longings and hopes. It is to this present and coming world—the reign of our loving and just God described and enacted by Jesus Christ—that I want turn in the remaining time.

SACRIFICE AND THE REIGN OF GOD

When Jesus Christ was born in the flesh to a poor Jewish teenager over two thousand years ago, he grew up into a world of innocent domination and brutal exploitation. It was now the Roman empire that had enslaved the Jews, an enslavement that was enabled by the collaboration of Jewish politicians like Herod, and bitterly contested by Zealots who sought to build a violent revolutionary movement that could wage bloody war against the oppressors.

Jesus himself was identified with a religious faction known as the Pharisees, which sought a third way—neither collaboration nor revolution, but rather a return to the law and the prophets, to the worship of the one true God, and the living of a holy life, set apart from the world to be a blessing. Although Jesus was clearly a vocal critic of the Pharisees, it is important to remember that he generally accepted the basic premises of this movement—the healing of the world takes place as a holy contrast community based on the law and the prophets prepares the way for God’s just and reconciling action, for God’s recreation of all things in judgment and love.

The argument that Jesus had with the Pharisees was based on the same divisive debate running through the Hebrew scriptures that the Pharisees accepted as their rule book. God wants purity. No, God wants justice. And while Jesus

insisted that he did not come to abolish the law, it is also clear that he sided with Isaiah. When push comes to shove God is more interested in lives devoted to justice than in a pile of stuff in front of the altar, more interested in making room for the last and the least, than in making sure we are unpolluted by the unwashed and imperfect.

In fact, as Luke's gospel shows us, Jesus Christ brings us news so outrageously good, that God's people still have a hard time getting their brains around it. We do not need to worry about possessions anymore, about what we will eat or what we will wear. The new humanity that God is forming right now through the power and authority of Jesus Christ no longer requires weapons or property. The life of this new humanity is not based on self-preservation or capital accumulation, but on the infinite wealth and love of God poured out for the whole creation and given for free to anyone who asks. The sacrifice God requires in this better country, this coming city, is a sacrifice of thanksgiving, a sacrifice of repentance, a presentation of our very bodies as living offerings to the love and mercy of God.

We prepare for this better country, become alert for the unexpected hour of its visibility, whenever we gather as a community of Christ's body and share bread and cup. As John Howard Yoder has put it, "bread eaten together is economic sharing. Not merely symbolically, but also in fact, eating together extends to a wider circle the economic solidarity normally obtained in the family." In other words, when we share bread and drink at the Lord's table we make visible the new world of grace and generosity that is already replacing the dying world of selfishness and

greed. Sharing bread with brothers and sisters in Christ leads to sharing bread with others.

We discover when we share bread, rather than hoard it or eat it alone, that the economy of grace that God offers us is indeed more real than the continuing mirage of global capitalism, with its investment accounts and stock options and insurance policies and devastating crashes. The excessive abundance of a potluck meal is a testimony to this abundance.

For the past two years, my family has participated in a cooperative farm in which sixteen families share the planting and harvesting of a large vegetable garden. For the cost of one trip to the grocery store, our shared work leads to harvests of more food than most of us know what to do with, vegetables on the doorstep, vegetables in the basement, vegetables overflowing the kitchen counter, and boxes and jars full of vegetables for winter consumption.

It was no doubt this experience of undeserved and overflowing wealth that contributed to my response to a homeless woman and her child at the restaurant door in Columbus. "I'm sorry," I had to say. I'm sorry because my abundance really is your abundance too. In our false world of property and salaries and bank accounts and the police, I have a comfortable house and you have a sidewalk. But here's \$5 of the wealth that is really already yours. There is more from where this comes from, an unending supply actually. Maybe the next time, if I am alert and dressed for action with my lamp lit, you'll see more of that infinite wealth that belongs to God and that God offers to everyone.

And maybe next time, it will occur to me to bless you too. For as Paul reminds us in I Corinthians 10, "The cup of blessing with which we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of one bread" (16-17). Amen.