

The Perfect Sacrifice

Spring Training Series # 6

Luke 23: 44-49

04-05-2009 Sam Jones Memorial United Methodist Church

Introduction

In baseball games, a manager may signal a batter to execute a sacrifice bunt or fly. A **sacrifice bunt** typically advances a runner from first to second base to put him in scoring position. A **sacrifice fly ball** to the outfield allows a runner on third base to “tag up” and score. Statistically, a sacrifice bunt or fly does not count as a time-at-bat. The batter sacrifices himself in order to advance a runner for the greater good of the team.

I. Holy Week

Today’s sermon is entitled “*The Perfect Sacrifice.*” Our Lenten Worship Series entitled *Spring Training* has used a number of images and metaphors from the game of baseball. We have spent the past weeks spiritually preparing for the events of Holy Week and Easter. Major League baseball teams finished their last exhibition games last week and are now prepared to open the season. We too are completing our preparations for this holiest of weeks in the Christian year.

According to the church calendar, today marks the beginning of **Holy Week** which rehearses the last days of Jesus’ life. Throughout the week, Christians recall Christ’s words and deeds during his final hours in Jerusalem.

On Thursday night, we will partake in the Sacrament of Holy Communion in remembrance of Jesus’ Last Supper with the disciples. Then Jesus went to the Garden of Gethsemane where Judas betrayed him. Judas’ treachery set into motion a series of events that toppled the disciples like dominoes. Each betrayed, denied, or deserted his Lord.

At noon on Good Friday, we will gather in this sanctuary to recall Christ’s crucifixion. We follow Jesus to the foot of the cross with the words of the Apostles Creed echoing in our ears: “*crucified, dead, and buried.*”

This morning the church begins the journey of Holy Week on ***Palm/Passion Sunday***. Palm Sunday recalls Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem. The crowds cried, “*Hosanna!*” and threw cloaks and branches on the road to carpet the King’s parade. It is a joyful celebration that recalls the parade into the City of David.

But the cheers turned to jeers. The cries of “*Hosanna*” became screams of “*Crucify!*” The parade into Jerusalem ended as a death march out the city gates.

Today is also known as Passion Sunday. “*Passion*” refers to Jesus Christ’s suffering, crucifixion, and death. Frankly, it is not something we like to dwell upon. Over the years, I have realized that most church people do not even attend Holy Week services. They skip straight from Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday, from palm branches to lilies, from victory to victory, with little thought of the events of what lay in between.

However, faithful believers are challenged to walk the *Via Dolorosa*—the *Way of the Cross*—following in the footsteps of Jesus. Along the way, we recall the height, width, and depth of God’s love for us. Today we are invited to accept God’s **perfect sacrifice** at the cross.

II. Sacrifice

The **cross** stands at the center of the Christian faith. Crucifixion was a barbaric form of execution used by the Roman Empire. It was designed to both kill the convicted and deter others from the crime. Persons in good physical condition could last for days on a cross. The final cause of death was normally suffocation from the tortured body's inability to raise the diaphragm any longer.

The church took a hideous means of execution and tempered its graphic image. We sanded the wood and covered it with gold. We inscribed the crossbeams with symbols. And now the cross adorns our altars and serves as a jewelry accessory.

However, the cross signifies the sacrifice of God's own Son. While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. The Lamb of God was sacrificed for the sins of the world.

Both the Old and New Testaments are heavily influenced by the Jewish theology of **blood sacrifice**. Now there's a toe-tapper topic for a Sunday morning sermon! Frankly, it is not a subject that engages a 21st century audience. In many ways, the imagery offends our sensibilities.

A survey of the Hebrew Scripture, however, reveals how central the sacrificial system was to the Jewish people. Entire Old Testament books are devoted to explaining the details of Temple worship and animal sacrifice.

The practice began on Passover when the angel of death "passed over" the homes of the Israelites. They slaughtered a lamb and painted their doorways with its blood. In the wilderness, Moses ordered the tabernacle constructed according to God's instructions. The tribe of Levi was set apart to serve as priests of the sacred space. The portable temple provided a place where the priests made sacrifices for the sins of the people.

Later Solomon built the Temple in Jerusalem that became the central focus of Jewish worship. A system of individual and corporate sacrifices undergirded the Hebrew religion. People made sacrifices of fruits, grains, and offerings as signs of repentance, thanksgiving, or praise.

Hebrews 9: 22 sums up the theology of the sacrificial system: "*In fact, the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.*"

Such words and concepts may seem foreign to us, but they are more familiar than they might first appear. The Gospel stories are heavily influenced by such imagery. Our worship continues to reflect this sacrificial understanding.

When the elements of bread and wine are served in Holy Communion, we hear the words: "*The body of Christ given for you*" and "*The blood of Christ shed for you.*"

In our hymns, we sing about the "*lamb of God's*" sacrifice for our sins:

- ❖ *What can wash away my sin? Nothing but the blood of Jesus.*
- ❖ *There is a fountain filled with blood, drawn from Emmanuel's veins,
And sinners plunged beneath that flood lose all their guilty stains.*
- ❖ *Just as I am without one plea, but that thy blood was shed for me.*
- ❖ *My hope is built on nothing less, than Jesus' blood and righteousness.*
- ❖ *Victory in Jesus, my Savior forever,*

He sought me, and bought me with his redeeming blood.

According to John's gospel, Jesus was crucified as the Passover lamb was sacrificed at the Temple. He took our sin and death upon him as God's perfect sacrifice.

III. The Perfect Sacrifice

The Biblical story is humanity's story; the Biblical story is our story; the Biblical story is your story and my story. Even if we had never heard the story of Eden's Garden and the forbidden fruit, the reality of original sin resonates within our hearts. There is something radically wrong with the human condition.

So God acted once and for all by sending his Son into the world. John 3:16 is the gospel in miniature: *"For God so loved the world that he sent his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."*

During Christmas, we heard the story of Jesus' birth. The prophets gave him the title "Emmanuel" which means "God with us." One ancient church father wrote: *"God became what we are so that we might become what God is."*

During his three years of public ministry, Jesus proclaimed: *"The kingdom of God is near—repent and believe in the gospel!"* Through his preaching, teaching, healing, miracles, and signs, Christ shared God's love with the world. According to God's plan laid down since the foundations of the earth, Jesus willingness went to the cross for the salvation of humanity.

We could spend a great deal of time talking about the significance of **Christ's crucifixion**. Theological words with deeply significant meaning could inform our discussion: ransom, sacrifice, atonement, propitiation, expiation, redemption, deliverance, substitution, and salvation.

But there is another word that summarizes the gospel: **grace**. Grace is God's love freely given to his people. It is not something we earn or merit. God is love. It is our heavenly Father's nature to love his children. Even when we do not love him back. Even when his son was nailed to the cross.

Jesus said to his disciples: *"My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command."* Then true to his word, Jesus laid down his life for each of us. A free gift but a costly gift. Free grace but not cheap grace.

Jesus Christ was the **perfect sacrifice** for the sins of humanity. The entire history of the cosmos turns on the hinges of the cross and the empty tomb. The prophet Isaiah wrote about God's *"suffering servant:"*

*"He was despised and rejected by men,
a man of sorrows and familiar with suffering.
Like one from whom men hide their faces
He was despised, and we esteemed him not.
Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows,
Yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him and afflicted.
But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities;*

The punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; And the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”(Isaiah 53: 4-6)

The story began at Christmas and ended at the cross. But that’s not quite right. It began in the Garden of Eden and will end in the Kingdom of God. But that’s not quite right either. It began in God and will end in God—the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End.

IV. The Place of the Skull

During seminary, I traveled to the **Holy Land**. Scholars call Israel “*the fifth gospel*” because the geography dramatically shapes the Scriptural story. A tourist cannot turn around in the Holy Land without bumping into some Biblical site where someone did something. But you quickly learn to take many claims with a grain of salt. Certainly there are sites that can be identified with a fair degree of accuracy. Others are more conjecture. When one hears the phrase “*the traditional site*” of an event, it is code for, “We’re not sure where it happened, but this looked like a great place to sell postcards to tourists!”

For example, there is no one but TWO different sites in Jerusalem that are identified as the place(s) where Jesus was crucified and buried.

The more modern site is named “**Gordon’s Calvary**,” named after the British general and amateur archaeologist who discovered it. Jesus was crucified at *Golgotha*—which in Latin is translated as *Calvary* Both words literally mean “*the place of the skull*.” Working from this description, Gordon located a rock formation outside Jerusalem that does indeed resemble a human skull. In a nearby garden, he unearthed an ancient garden tomb just like the one described in the Gospels as Jesus’ burial site.

The more traditional site for the crucifixion of Christ is “**the Church of the Holy Sepulcher**.” Since the fourth century, Christian pilgrims have visited this sacred site. “*The place of the skull*” has a different meaning. Underneath the site of the crucifixion is an ancient cave. One tradition claims this was the final burial place for Adam. When Jesus of Nazareth was crucified, his blood ran down the cross, seeped through the rock, and covered the skeletal remains of First man.

I cannot say if the legend is fact or myth; but I can say that the story is theologically truthful. Paul called Jesus “*the second Adam*” who undid the sin and death that the first Adam introduced into the world. In Romans 5: 15, Paul wrote: “*But the gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died by the trespass of the one man, how much more did God’s grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many!*” We sing the hymn:

*Alas and did my Savior bleed and did my sovereign die?
Would he devote that Sacred Head for sinners such as I?
Was it for crimes that I have done, he groaned upon the tree?
Amazing pity! Grace unknown! And love beyond degree.*

*But drops of tears can never repay the debt of love I owe.
Here, Lord, I give myself away; 'tis all that I can do.*

Conclusion

When our children were toddlers, we played a familiar game with them. We would ask, "How big are you?" And they learned to stretch out their arms and answer, "This big!" Later we changed the game, and we would ask, "How much do I love you?" And they would stretch their arms out as wide as they could and respond, "This much!"

This week we ask God, "How much do you love me?" And we are reminded that Christ spread out his arms on the cross and answered, "This much."