

Lent 5B: John 12:20-33  
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## Altered at the Altar

Five years ago, I joined the 30 million or so other Americans who came out for the opening weekend of the movie, *Avengers: Endgame*. I was thrilled along with everyone else to see Captain America, Spider-man, Thor and the other heroes take on Thanos, the “big bad.” And, like the other fans, I was awed when in the final battle Tony Stark, the superhero known as Iron Man, sacrificed himself to save the world. It was hard not to be moved, as Stark’s sacrifice signified not only the conclusion of a story arch that ran through the 22 Marvel movies before it, but was also the culmination of character arch of the man Tony Stark. Stark, in case you are not familiar, began as a thrill-seeking, womanizing billionaire who thought only of himself, but over the course of his adventures and the tragedies he endured, he’d grown to the point where he was willing to give himself up for the sake of others. It was truly impressive.

But as powerful as this scene was for those of us who’d watched all the movies, fact is, Stark’s death is but one example of a long-standing literary trope known as the ‘heroic sacrifice.’ We see the same trope at play in Spock’s sacrificing himself for his crew in *Star Trek: The Wrath of Kahn*, in Neo’s surrender to the machines in *The Matrix*, in Gandolf’s standoff in the *Fellowship of the Rings* and in Will Turner at the end of *Pirates of the Caribbean*. It’s a rare person who is not impressed by these selfless acts, who doesn’t feel a little bit larger, stand a little bit taller after seeing these noble heroes make the “ultimate sacrifice.” We feel the same way about real-life heroes like the men on the *Titanic* who gave up their seats on the lifeboats for others, the soldiers who stormed the beaches at Normandy, and the first responders on 9/11. And as much as we don’t want to die ourselves, we know Hemingway was right: “A coward dies a thousand deaths, a brave man only one.”

And so when Jesus tells us, “Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life,” we figure we know what he’s talking about. He’s talking about sacrifices like these, about how glory, *true* glory comes not from being the strongest or most attractive or having the biggest bank account, but from sacrificing yourself for others. The ‘moral’ is then we should live lives of sacrifice too, giving ourselves up for others.

As admirable as such an ethic may be, we have to recognize there’s nothing specifically “Christian” about it, and nothing about it we can really call “good news.” Indeed, glorifying self-sacrifice *for its own sake* can lead to some pretty unhealthy expectations of ourselves and others. More fundamentally, though, it shows a misunderstanding about what ‘sacrifice’ really is.

To see this we must trace the development of sacrifice in the Bible. (Stick with me here, I promise it’ll be worth it!)

Now, when it comes to sacrifice, most of what we Christians know has to do with the Temple in Jerusalem and the sacrifices Jews offered there for their sins. But the practice is older than that,

going back to Genesis, to the sacrifices made by Cain and Abel, by Noah after the flood, by Melchizedek, by Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Those sacrifices had little to do with sin or atonement, and more to do with drawing close to God. For, by offering up something costly, something valuable—a ram or goat or bull—the sacrificers were honoring God, showing that they understood God to be the greatest good, the highest reality, and through making their sacrifice, they sought to participate in that good, to share more fully in God.

How that works, the whole logic of it, is pretty foreign to most of us, I know, so it may be helpful to consider the story of Abraham as an illustration. When God calls Abraham, you'll recall, it is to leave his family, his country and the wealth and comfort of his father's house. After he leaves, the first thing he does is build an altar where he makes a sacrifice. And he does this three more times over the course of his wanderings. What is he doing here?

On a symbolic level, Abraham is taking the best he has, the best he can do and lays it on the altar, ritually handing it over to God, the ultimate source of his being and wealth. He's lifting the sacrifice from its normal use (as food, wealth) and offering it up to a higher purpose, God's purpose. He's elevating the sacrifice, raising it to God, and at the same time relinquishing his claim over it, giving it over to God, to see what God will do with it. Abraham does this over and over again, and each time he learns a little more about God, about what is expected of him, acquiring a deeper insight into God's ways: "Is this the way of God," he asks, "or is it just for my convenience?" With each sacrifice, he adjusts his sights, reorients himself, hones his view of God and God's promises, letting go more and more of his illusions about himself.

The process culminates at the altar at Mount Horeb. After living a life of repeated sacrifices, relinquishing more and more, Abraham is asked to sacrifice what he holds most dear, his beloved son, the very blessing God promised him. It's a horrible request, unthinkable, an impossible ask, but Abraham submits. That's when he receives his final reorientation, where God's will is made clear, and where the purpose of sacrifice is laid bare. God, Abraham learns, does not desire human sacrifice. God, the *real* God, in contrast to the petty idols and demons that everyone else worships, does not demand the death of innocents. Our God is not some bloodthirsting tyrant, but instead a God we can trust to provide all our needs, as is shown by providing Abraham a ram to sacrifice instead.

This story, anthropologists say, explains why Israelite religion has never had a history of human sacrifice, even as all the peoples around them did. That may be so, but that doesn't take away from the deeper lesson we learn about sacrifice here. Namely, that our seeking God's blessings should never come at the expense of others, our well-being as a people never comes as a result of sacrificing other people. If sacrifice is to have any spiritual benefit, it must come from ourselves. We must give up something *of ourselves*, something *we* hold dear, not something that is another's.

That's an important insight in itself, a momentous step in our understanding of sacrifice. But, as Abraham's descendants, the Israelites, came to know God better, they learned that even this did not quite get it right. Sheep, goats, and bulls, as symbols of one's wealth, one's life, aren't what God is after. In fact, they can be a way of subverting the purpose of sacrifice, treating the act of sacrificing as more important than the greater faithfulness it is supposed to bring about. As those

holy critics, the prophets, insisted, God does not desire sacrifices but *sacrifice*, the letting go of our self-will. I mean, you can sacrifice a sheep without really sacrificing your sinful ways. But *that's* what sacrifice is about—relinquishing those ideas, those desires, those behaviors, that lead us away from God, so that we can share more fully in God and God's goodness. So here you have another step, the further stage of development: the insistence that sacrifice change us, that we be "altered at the altar."

That brings us to Jesus and the "wheat grain dying, losing your life so you can gain it" teaching. If the logic of sacrifice is to offer up, give up something so as to share in God, then the only sacrifice that matters is the sacrifice of ourselves, the dying to self, Jesus calls it, that leads to new life. But unlike animal sacrifices, this sacrifice, the sacrifice of self, is not one that is burnt up, consumed on an altar but is instead poured out, emptied for others. Jesus makes this point in reference to a wheat grain. "Unless a grain of wheat dies and is buried, it never becomes more than one grain. But if it dies, it bears much produce." He is of course talking about himself, about his self-sacrifice, and how his death, like the grain that is sowed, will produce much blessing, many redeemed souls. But the way Jesus talks, it's clear he intends for us to follow in his footsteps, to share in this way of life—sacrificing ourselves up to God by giving ourselves out to others, serving others as a sacrifice to God.

Now, again, it's easy to see this in terms of our common understandings of sacrifice. We readily sacrifice things we value for things we desire more. We sacrifice time to earn a degree or learn a trade. We hand over our wages for the good of our family. We forgo career advancement in order to raise children. We pay taxes, a kind of sacrifice, to pay for public goods and send our bravest to war to defend the country. This is to say, we are familiar with sacrifice. And here Jesus seems to just be commending an extreme version of that, encouraging us to make the "ultimate sacrifice."

But to take it that way is to misunderstand Jesus' words. It ignores their context, the context of the biblical tradition of sacrifice. This whole tradition insists that the purpose of sacrifice is not glory or honor or any good that we might seek for ourselves. Rather the good that we seek is God, the aim to learn his ways and to share more and more in him, in his goodness. It is in this context that we have to approach Jesus's words about "giving our lives."

For, the question is not *whether* we sacrifice or even *how much* we sacrifice, but rather, what are we sacrificing *for*? What are we giving our lives for, giving them to? Jesus' point is this: If we sacrifice to the altar of the self, if we give our time, our money, our attention, even our lives to the gods of wealth or power, status or fame, if all we care about is ourselves and getting and keeping all we can, then we lose it all in the end. We will live cramped, pathetic lives, even if it's in a huge mansion, dying alone, forgotten. On the other hand, if we sacrifice ourselves, if we surrender our will to God's will, if we increase ourselves not by getting more but by caring for others, then we will be "living large," our lives will overflow with goodness, and we will "bear much fruit," that is, we will have an outsized impact on this world, on others, because what we are sacrificing to isn't just ourselves, our family, our tribe, our even our country, but God, who takes and transforms our offerings, turning us and them towards larger, more lasting purposes.

Here we see the “good news” in this reading. The good news is not the glorification of heroic sacrifice, as I said. The good news is rather that *it is through sacrifice that God saves us*. That’s true in that we are saved by Jesus’ sacrifice of himself on the cross for our sin. But it is also true that we are made right with God through sacrifice, *our* sacrifices to God. Not in the sense of earning our salvation, mind you. But in that sacrifice itself, the act of giving ourselves up to God, brings us into closer relation to Him. For when we put on the “altar” the best we have and the best we can do, knowing that even our best is not good enough, and we say to God “see what you can do with that,” that is when, like Abraham, we are changed. We begin to learn more of God (God reveals himself), we are brought back into line with God (God justifies us, like we would justify the margin on a paper), and we become more in tune with God’s ways (God turns us outward in service to others). It is through sacrifice, then, giving our most precious things, *giving ourselves*, to God, that God is able to fix us, to change our hearts, to draw us more fully into God and God’s mission.

As we approach the end of Lent and Jesus’ final days, we marvel not at a superhero’s great feat, but at the shameful death of a humble man, recognizing in that death both a sacrifice for sin and a model of godly life. God uses both to save us, to draw us back to him. We needn’t choose one way over the other. Likely we need both, if we are to come to the fullness of life God intends for us. So today we give thanks that, through sacrifice, Jesus’ *and* our own, we are drawn into the glorious mystery that is life with God. Amen!