

Sacrifice.

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Micah 6:6-8

Hebrews 13:1-16

Let mutual love continue. ²Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. ³Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured. ⁴Let marriage be held in honor by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled; for God will judge fornicators and adulterers. ⁵Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, ‘I will never leave you or forsake you.’ ⁶So we can say with confidence,

‘The Lord is my helper;

I will not be afraid.

What can anyone do to me?’

⁷ Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you; consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. ⁸Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever. ⁹Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings; for it is well for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by regulations about food, which have not benefited those who observe them.

¹⁰We have an altar from which those who officiate in the tent have no right to eat. ¹¹For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned outside the camp. ¹²Therefore Jesus also suffered outside the city gate in order to sanctify the people by his own blood. ¹³Let us then go to him outside the camp and bear the abuse he endured. ¹⁴For here we have no lasting city, but we are looking for the city that is to come. ¹⁵Through him, then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name. ¹⁶Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.

The word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

I want to tell you about a friend of mine. His name is Richard. We met during my very first week of work as an ordained pastor. That week my new congregation was participating in an annual mission week that brought together different churches in the community called “Gatekeepers Work Camp”. From 7:00 am – 4:00 pm, Monday through Friday, adult and youth participants were split into different teams and each team worked at repairing the home of an elderly or disabled individual. We ripped out floors and replaced subfloors. We roofed. We tiled. We installed appliances. We took down wall paper and painted. We scraped shutters and pressure-washed vinyl siding. We built entire sheds and took out

thickets of juniper bushes. It was during this week that I met a man named Richard Joyner. And there's nothing that bonds you like that kind of work. Richard and I couldn't have been more different. He was an older, African-American male. Triathlete. Former military. Single, with no children. Born, raised, and now living his life in eastern North Carolina. The one thing Richard and I had in common and still have in common is that we are pastors. Since that hot week 7 years ago, Richard and I have developed a friendship and realized that we have a lot more in common than just both being pastors.

But I want to tell you a little bit more about Richard. He is the head chaplain at Nash UNC Healthcare during the week, but on the weekends, he pastors a tiny little church in the rural community of Conetoe, North Carolina. Spelled "conetoe," pronounced Ka-neeta, it is a community of about 600 people. In 2015, Richard was nominated for and selected as one CNN's 10 heroes of the year. He was featured on their website and in a primetime awards show and it was really amazing. The reason Richard was nominated as a hero of the year is because of the program he created and fostered within his congregation that combined his awareness of healthcare and his Christian faith. Conetoe, where he pastors, is in a food desert. There aren't really any grocery stores there, the poverty level is high and so people depend on the gas stations in the area to provide their food needs. Can you imagine getting your week's groceries at a gas station? That's what people in food deserts have to do. Over the years, Richard noticed that this lack of food availability was affecting the health of his parishioners. People were being diagnosed with diabetes left and right and dying way too young due to improper nutrition. His congregation was literally located in the middle of miles of farmland, but that land wasn't owned by anyone in his congregation and it didn't grow things that came back to feed the community. So, Richard went about procuring land in that small community that he could turn into a church farm, managed by the youth of that community. You see, not only was Conetoe in a food desert, it had a major gang problem and there was nothing productive for teenagers to be involved in. So, Richard recruited and, along with his brother who had a lot of knowledge about farming, taught these kids how to grow vegetables, how to manage the land, and how to cook with fresh produce. He also introduced bees into the mix and several young people in his program are now certified beekeepers and they sell their honey all over the state and it helps to fund scholarships for youth in their community and the needs of the farm.

So, Richard is great. He is a servant. He is a pastor who loves his people. He is creative and attune to the whispers of the Holy Spirit. And he has chosen to be my friend. And for that, I am thankful and I am a better pastor. A few weeks ago, I got a call from Richard in my office here at Westminster. He was calling to check in and say hi. We talked about the farm project, things happening in the hospital system, Richard's new gig as a city councilman, and even his past visits here, to Greenville, South Carolina. And then, the conversation turned to a new topic. Something we had talked about before. We began to talk about the difference between the white church and the black church. And rich churches and poor churches. And big churches and small churches. You see, I've always served the bigger church. The more privileged church. The city church. The

white church. Richard, although he exists in a different world sometimes because of his job as a chaplain, or his notoriety as a past CNN hero of the year, or now with his new role of City Councilman, has always served the rural church. The poor church. The tiny church. The black church. The church that doesn't have a million-dollar budget, the church that barely has a \$25,000 budget. Richard said, "Mary Kathleen, your people give out of their abundance. Their overage, their capital gains. And they are generous. But my people give out of their poverty. Out of their scarcity. Out of the last \$20 in their bank accounts. My people understand what it means to sacrifice."

Whoa. That hit me hard. Richard went on to say that, of course, all gifts given with pure hearts were welcome and blessed by God. And I agree with that sentiment. But there is something there. Some really powerful truth, maybe even truth that's hard for me to swallow, to what Richard said. And I think that truth extends beyond black and white and rich and poor and rural and urban. That truth revolves around understanding sacrifice. Sacrifice. Our word of the day, the title of our sermon, brings a lot of ideas and images to mind... a lot of conflicting ideas and images to mind. On the one hand, like me, you might have the song, "My Sacrifice," by quasi Christian late 90's rock band Creed resounding in your mind. Or, the "ultimate sacrifice" that some in our armed forces give in service to country.

And let's admit, I'm sure some of us are thinking about sacrifice in a more general sense. The sacrifice of time to help a friend. The sacrifice of one's own wants and needs in order to parent a child. The sacrifice of luxuries to save money for a new car or a home renovation project, or a vacation.

But I'd like us to specifically think about sacrifice as a Christian discipline. Sacrifice as a way of enacting and living out the faith of Christ. Sacrifice as the kind of behavior that is described in the book of Hebrews. Sacrifice as a way to bless and honor Christ who is our king. Sacrificial living in response to the grace we have received from the hand of God. Sacrifice that COSTS us something. To do that, we will walk through the passage we read earlier from Hebrews and parse out exactly what it is talking about and what it means for us as 21st century Christians.

If you look at those first 16 verses from Hebrews 13, I think you can split them up into three sections. Verse 1-4, and the first half of first 5, offer the hearer concrete ways to live sacrificially in response to the great sacrifice we received in Jesus Christ. These are, by no means, the only ways to live a sacrificial life, but they are good and concrete starting points, for the Christians of the 1st century and for Christians like us.

Love one another.

Show hospitality.

Have compassion for those in tough situations.

Value, respect, and work hard at marriage.

Resist the temptation to be obsessed with money.

Sometimes, when you read Scripture, you realize that not much has changed among people of faith. Love for neighbor is still paramount, the foundation of all. Hospitality continues to be the mark of true faith – entertaining all as if we are entertaining someone

who is holy. Remember the time Abraham and Sarah were hoping and praying and wishing for a baby? The next visitors they had to their home were representatives of God, telling them that their hopes would come to fruition. Visiting, praying, and caring for those in prison has ever been a hallmark of God's people. Joseph, one of the 12 sons of Israel, spent time in prison, as did the Apostle Paul. Don't just think of those people, the book of Hebrews says, put yourselves in their shoes! And, of course, marriage. The covenant between two individuals that mirrors the covenant between God and his people. If marriage doesn't require sacrifice on the regular, I don't know of any other relationship that does. And finally, that beast that tempts us all, money. Money is necessary provide what we each need, but it isn't to be worshipped.

Needs and wants are very different. Money should never be allowed to be in control. Contentment with what one has is the key to living well. These acts of service and sacrifice that the author lifts up are not unusual or foreign to us, but each of them costs us something. We must take something away from ourselves and give it to another. Time, privacy, desires, comfort, security, wealth.

The second half of verse 5 through the end of verse 14 are the second "section", if you will of this passage before us and they encourage the hearer in sacrificial living. So, you have ways to live sacrificially and encouragement in that living.

*Remember + imitate your leaders
Christ is the same yesterday, today...forever
Stand firm in the face of falsities
Our hope is everlasting*

Our text gets a little bogged down in this section, specifically in verses 10-13, but their main message is that **we can because Christ did**. Not being a church that has a symbolic altar and not living in a society like so many were in ancient times, that sacrifices animals to please the divine, these verses can be a bit hard to swallow and understand. But that's what they are harkening back to – the times when animals sacrifices were offered in the temple. As the Eerdman's Bible Dictionary reminded me this week, "Rituals such as sacrifice evolved to help concretize the manner in which the deity {God} was truly present in the human community."¹ Sacrifices were a tangible way to connect with God. Remember when Jesus was dedicated to the Lord at 8 days old and his family brought "a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons"? That's what they were doing. Offering an animal sacrifice to appease God and to mark a significant moment in the life cycle of the individual. In that instance, Jesus' parents were involving God in the life of their child. Verses 12 and 13 harken back to Jesus' sacrifice on behalf of all of humanity on the cross and speak to a new truth back then that is a concrete reality now that Jesus is forever our tangible connection to God. And while at first glance they might be confusing, one of my favorite Biblical scholars, Frances Taylor Gench offers us some clarity. These verses, she says, "suggest that our Christian pilgrimages are not to be confined to holy spaces – to the safety of the sanctuary. Rather, we are to follow Christ 'outside the camp' into all the secular spaces of our world where we may well invite the world's hostility and share

¹ Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible, 1148

Christ's suffering as we embody God's intentions for human life."² Basically, we can and we should and God will go with us because Christ did.

Verses 15 and 16 are the third section, providing a final instruction by specifying the type of sacrifice God desires. A sacrifice of praise. In this day and age, in the day and age of the early Christians to whom the book of Hebrews was addressed, it costs something to claim Christ. Christ as Lord over and above all others. Christ as the king of our hearts and minds and actions. Christ as the sacrificial lamb who encourages our own sacrifices. As N.T. Wright says about these verses, "This, rather than endless dead animals, is the sacrifice that God really wants. God wants people who will name the name of Jesus, in prayer, worship and testimony, even if it COSTS them dear. Their witness will bear fruit. And the common life of the Christian community, the life of generous-hearted fellowship, is itself in that sense a 'sacrifice', and acts of worship. God is delighted with it."³

When I think about my friend Richard, I have no doubt that God is delighted with the sacrifices he makes and the sacrifices his community makes. One thing I didn't tell you about Gatekeepers Work Camp (remember that mission week where I first met Richard?), is that Richard's church members – youth and adults – would wake up extra early the week of Gatekeepers to work the farm. And then they'd come to town to participate in the mission work for a full day, and then go back to tend to the farm in the evening. That week every year, they sacrificed for the good of others...as a way of living out their faith in Christ. So you have that. Also, I've worshipped with them several times on Sunday mornings. One of the last times I worshipped with them before moving to back home to South Carolina was the Sunday in August when they blessed the backpacks of the children in their community. That Sunday, during the offering, they passed the plates multiple times because, they said, the first time they didn't get enough. They didn't get enough in that first pass to fill the backpacks with school supplies that the children needed and to buy the new tractor that the farm needed. So, they kept passing. And people kept giving. Out of their scarcity. Out of their poverty. And while that plate was passing and while people were giving, they were singing and praising and worshipping. They sacrificed and it cost them something and children were provided for and people were fed and God was pleased.

So, the question I have for myself today, the question I have for you today is this – do we, do you and I, understand sacrifice? Do we live it out as a Christian discipline? Are our sacrifices of praise to God COSTING us something? If not, they should be. That's the message of this passage from Hebrews. That's the example my friend Richard and his people offer. Y'all, I believe that we can, because Christ did. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

² Gench, "Hebrews and James", 75

³ Wright, "Hebrews for Everyone", 175