***THE PRIEST ~~OFFERS~~ IS THE SACRIFICE***

John C. Peterson

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Staunton, VA

October 24, 2021

Texts: Amos 5:21-24 and Hebrews 6:13-20; 7:20-8:1

As some of you may recall, a few years ago as we were completing the expansion of the church that included the Great Hall, we debated what to do with the courtyard that lies behind the chapel in the center of the building. Several suggestions were offered, including the one we adopted: pouring a concrete patio and adding chairs and potted plants to create a place for quiet reflection or for a class to meet – a space that was beautifully updated this summer. The more creative solution for that space came from Grif Bonham who suggested, “I think we oughta plant grass and put a goat in there to keep it mowed; and if we needed an animal for a sacrifice on short notice it would be right there.”

 If you read through the Old Testament, animal sacrifices and offerings were pretty commonplace. There are specific instructions for offering to the Lord unblemished lambs, rams, sheep, and bulls as sacrifices of well-being, and goats as sin offerings. The animals were to be the cream of the flock, the best people had to offer, for nothing less than the best was appropriate as an offering to the Lord. They were given to the priests to be slaughtered on the altar of the Lord as expressions of gratitude to God or for repentance of sins. In the New Testament such sacrifices were still being made in the Temple. Recall Jesus driving out those who were selling sheep, doves, and cattle to traveling pilgrims who needed an animal to offer as a sacrifice to the Lord. The blood of animals was spilt on the altar of the Temple again and again in symbolic gratitude to God and in repentance of sins. That may seem like a barbaric practice from long ago and far away, but just 30 years ago a man in Louisiana was raising a herd of pure red heifers to be offered on the altar of the Temple in Jerusalem at such time as it might be rebuilt. The frightening thing about that plan is that in order to rebuild the Temple, the Dome of the Rock, a Muslim holy place, would first have to be destroyed and, no doubt, a long and bloody war would have to be fought. It is hard to imagine that any sacrifice would be pleasing to God under those circumstances!

 We gather here today with no animals in hand, except a few stuffed animals, and to my knowledge none of those are being offered as sacrifices this morning. We have no altar upon which to make sacrifices anyway, just a communion table where sacrifices are not offered ***by*** us, but gifts – bread and juice – are given ***to*** us. We have no priest who presides – just Sarah and me. So it has been in Presbyterian churches for a long, long time. What then happened to the animals, the altar, the sacrifices, and the priests?

 What happened is Jesus – Jesus the Messiah, the crucified and risen Lord, the lamb who takes away the sins of the world, the high priest for all seasons of our lives. What happened is redemption, mercy and forgiveness, not through a ritual sacrifice by a priest at the altar, but redemption, mercy and forgiveness through the sacrifice of Christ upon the cross. We don’t need to make any further sacrifices on an altar in atonement for our sins, for Christ has made that sacrifice for us; he ***is*** that sacrifice for us! As Tom Long describes it:

[*Jesus] placed on heaven’s altar the deepest possible sacrifice: his own life made perfect through suffering. In other words, he brought as an offering to God nothing less than the fullness of the human condition perfected by his own obedience*.[[1]](#endnote-1)

His death has redeemed us in a way that is more powerful and enduring than any sacrifice we can offer. He made that sacrifice, not because we somehow deserved it or earned it or were so good, but solely because God so loved the world in all its brokenness and with all its imperfections. For, it was while we were still sinners in desperate need of redemption that Christ died and was raised for us.

At this communion table where we gather as a family of faith, we remember that sacrifice. We remember his body broken and his blood shed as we take, eat, and drink in remembrance of him. We come, not to offer a sacrifice, but to remember one. The altar has been replaced by a communion table, for there are no more sacrifices to be made; there is only the ultimate sacrifice to be remembered. At this table we gather, in unity with one another, with the saints who gathered here before us, and in some mystical way with the risen Christ, to experience the grace of God by sharing the gracious gifts of God. Here no sacrifices are offered except our prayers and the sacrifice of our lives dedicated to the one we call Lord. Here we remember the sacrifice Christ made to break the power of sin and to restore us to right relationship with God.

 We do bring tithes and offerings into this space, but no sacrifices. We offer to God gifts freely given from the work of our hands in gratitude for our blessings; rarely are they live animals, though one of my seminary professors did have a woman at the door of a church in West Virginia tell him, “*Pastor, I put two chickens in your car for your Sunday dinner*,” for which he was most grateful until he found two ***live*** chickens in the back seat! The gifts we bring reflect the coinage and currency of the culture in which we live. They represent the fruit of our labors brought, not to buy God’s good favor or to atone for our sins, but to express our thanks for what God has already done for us and to be instruments by which we may continue God’s holy work in the world.

 Long centuries ago, the prophet Amos made clear that God wants much more from us than ritual sacrifices and was not really interested in any sacrifice from the hands of unrighteous people. You heard it in those caustic words from the prophet this morning:

*I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the peace offerings of your fatted beasts I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.*

The sacrifice God wants from us is not some animal or even our worship and songs; what God really wants is for us to pursue justice and righteousness, to bend our wills to God’s control in order to let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. The psalmist suggests that a broken spirit and contrite heart are what God desires, a sacrifice of our wills to God’s will. It is not the kind of thing you can lay on an altar; it is the kind of thing that demands from you humility and obedience, time and effort, compassion and commitment to make justice and righteousness a reality day after day.

 That is not easy work – much harder than handing over a pigeon to a priest or dropping a coin in the offering plate. As theologian Marcus Borg reminds us:

*[T]he prophetic voices of the Bible are about economic justice and fairness – changes in the system as a whole – and not primarily about charity to individuals.[[2]](#endnote-2)*

To work for justice and righteousness is not just to be nice to people and avoid injustice. It is to fight injustice in all its ugly forms. It demands from us sacrifice and risk; as Ogden Nash writes: “*Never befriend the oppressed unless you are willing to take on the oppressor*.” We are called to befriend and defend the oppressed, to take on the oppressors, and to work for change in the systems that perpetuate injustice. The Matthew 25 initiative across the Presbyterian Church is one such effort; it identifies two such places for us to work for such change: structural racism and systemic poverty. Acting alone change in such powerful systems seems impossible, but acting as the Church, working together to fight the enduring legacy of injustice that those systems perpetuate, makes possible the impossible as we live into that call from the prophet Amos. That call is for all of us, as disciples of the risen Christ, to offer ourselves as what Paul calls “living sacrifices” to God.

That explains the absence of sacrifices and an altar here, but what about the priests? The answer is twofold. First, the writer to the Hebrews tells us that Jesus is the eternal priest who makes intercession for all of us. There was a time when the priest was the mediator between God and humankind, offering sacrifices for the people and lifting to God their prayers. But as we heard, no further sacrifice is needed since Christ offered himself. And that same Christ invites us to pray directly to God without any mediator or intercessor apart from him. He alone is the priest who intercedes for us, and he calls us to be priests to one another: to pray with and for one another, to care for one another, to serve as instruments of God’s redeeming grace to one another. This priesthood of all believers is that holy office to which we all are called, a priesthood we enter in baptism. My calling as pastor is no greater than was my calling as attorney, and no greater than your calling as teacher or student, doctor or nurse, architect or acrobat, parent or grandparent. We all are called to serve God with the gifts with which God has blessed us, to serve one another in that priesthood of all believers as faithful disciples of the risen Christ who alone is high priest over us all.

 It is a priesthood that has no ornate vestments, requires no extensive training, is recognized by no specific title, and requires from you no sacrifice except this: *Love God with all that you are and love your neighbor as yourself.* Do this my brothers and sisters, my fellow priests, and then *justice* ***ma****y roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream –* through us! Amen

1. Thomas G. Long, *Interpretation: Hebrews*, John Knox Press: Louisville, 1997, p.89 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Marcus J. Borg, *Convictions*, HarperOne: 2014, p.183 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)