

August 27, 2017  
Romans 12:1-8  
Matthew 16:13-20

Living AND Sacrificial

On Monday, like many of you, we watched the solar eclipse. We made a big thing out of it. For breakfast, we had eclipse pancakes. For lunch we ate eclipse pizza. And for snacking later, there were eclipse Oreos on hand. We looked at a big picture book about space. We did coloring pages with pinholes to catch the shadow of the moon passing over the sun. And we watched the eclipse coverage on TV. At 1pm we started keeping track of the moon's progress, and now the sun looks like it has a bite taken out of it. And now it looks like a Pacman. And now it looks like a banana. We watched and we watched. And it got darker. And cooler. And it felt strange and otherworldly. And then, slowly it started getting lighter and warmer. And things started going back to normal. And in no time at all, it was "Now What? And, is there anything else to do? And can I go ride my bike?" Just like that, the eclipse moment had passed. It was like Christmas Day at 2pm, after all the build-up and the build-up and then suddenly, the magic stuff is all done. And OK, so what? What are we supposed to do NOW?

Having faith and being the church together can feel like that sometimes. There are these spiritual moments that are cosmic and spectacular. Moments with an otherworldly Jesus who does otherworldly, exciting things. And then there are other moments when it's just plain difficult to hang in there. Or it's boring to keep up the routine. Or it's bothersome to love our neighbor. And we wish there was a bit more otherworldly excitement. But today, Paul reminds us that that's not what faith is about. It's not what church is about. It's not an event or a production that tries to be bigger and better and more entertaining. It's about being the body of Christ that serves others, and loves others. And offers itself as a living sacrifice for others—for God—again and again.

A living sacrifice, that's what the apostle Paul calls us to be. And those words, living and sacrifice, sound like good church words and good Bible words. But they were so much more in Paul's day and age. In his world, sacrifice happened regularly. It was a regular part of worship and regular part of faith. People brought sacrifices to their temples all the time to offer them to God. Usually those sacrifices were animals; birds, sheep, goat, maybe a bull-- if you had a lot of money and needed a lot

from God. People brought their animal offerings to the priests at the temple of Zeus or the temple of Apollos or the temple of Athena. Or to the priests at the temple in Jerusalem. And the priests would take that living animal and put it on the altar and killed it and then burn a portion of it as a smoke offering to your god. The sacrifice was a sign of your buy-in and your commitment. That you wanted to please God. That's how the system of sacrifice worked. That's how God worked.

People made sacrifices in Paul's day all the time. Do you need God's protection for a voyage across the sea? Sacrifice. Want God to look favorably on your business venture? Sacrifice. Looking for forgiveness for a big mistake? Sacrifice. Want to say thank you for making it through the hard times? Sacrifice. Want to bank some righteousness with the gods and make sure that they were on your side? Sacrifice. Everyone sacrificed in Paul's world. And each religion had rules for what and where and how to do it. There were rules for the Jewish temple. And rules for the Roman temples. And animals—or shares of animals—were available for purchase everywhere, for every faith. Animal lives that could be offered for your life.

Animal sacrifice was everywhere in Paul's day. But for Paul to talk about us BEING the sacrifice, for us to lay down our lives and offer our lives to God, it would have been very strange indeed. Being a sacrifice was for animals, not for people. You didn't present YOUR body at the altar, you presented the body of a lamb or a goat or dove to offer its life on your behalf. You weren't the sacrifice. Something else was. But not anymore, says Paul. Not anymore. Because of Jesus Christ, who sacrificed himself for us. Who gave up his life of heavenly glory. Who gave up his power and his privilege and his own place with God so that we might have a place with God too. Jesus gave his own body. And now we are that Body. We are the Body of Christ, the life of God given for the life of the world.

Paul says, I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice. Given to God. Offered with no strings attached and no thought of getting a return. Given like a sacrifice taken to the temple altar. Given totally and completely. Not partially or incrementally or on a rental type basis. But entirely. Here, God, take all of my life; it's yours. What would that mean to offer our lives to God? What would that look

like? What would it mean to offer the church's life to God, to please God? To please the One who gave his life completely so that we might have complete life in him?

Paul says, present your bodies as a living sacrifice to God. Putting all of yourself as you are on the altar as an offering. This has to be one of the hardest things Paul asks us to do. And honestly, I find it difficult, to give my life over to God every day. Not one time, but again and again; a living sacrifice, lived every day. Saying every day, this day is not just for me, it's for God. Saying every day, I'm not here to please myself. I'm here to please God. When really and truly, I would like to just please myself. And do what I want to do with my life. Because it's my life. I often use that excuse. Or everyone else is doing what they want. And they are being so much worse than me. That's another excuse I use. And then of course, there's always the excuse of, you don't understand, God, my life is hard. And I'm trying to do all these things for others. And I can't manage what you want too. But those are just excuses, says Paul. They are just excuses for not giving your life to God. For not being part of the body of Christ and its living sacrifice.

But Paul says if we want to know the life of Jesus, if we want to be part of the life that really is life, then like Jesus, we must give our lives to God. Our lives aren't our own. They were never meant to be our own or for our own purposes. They were made on purpose by God for God's purposes. To love and be loved. To serve and be served. To bless and be blessed in a great cosmic, interconnected dance.

It's not always easy to do what Paul says here. This is grown-up mature Christian stuff here. It's not easy and I get the feeling that it wasn't easy for Paul's church in Rome either. The Romans lived in Rome for goodness' sake, the center of the civilized world. Where everything that was happening, happened. And all the best stuff in the world was available. There were exotic things from everywhere. Trade goods and treasures and foods from all over. Exciting entertainment 24/7.

Interesting new religions and cults to sample and explore. There was so much to do. And so much to enjoy.

But Paul says, you aren't just here for you. You are here to be a part of something bigger. You are part of the body of Christ. The body that offers its life and sacrifices for others. William Weaver was one of the

first black children to integrate the high school in Knoxville TN. On the first day in his new school, the teachers called him racial slurs. In the weeks that followed, they offered him no encouragement or help. He got all Fs on his first report card. He started to think, maybe I am really dumb. But then Edward Hill, William's seventh grade science teacher came to visit him. Mr. Hill told William to start coming to the middle school in the afternoons and on Saturdays. And the teachers in his former school tutored him. The counselors at the high school never bothered to speak to William about college so Mr. Hill applied to Howard University for him, secretly, and William got a surprise scholarship to attend. And William went on to become a doctor and the chief of surgery at the VA medical center in Fayetteville NC. William said, "Mr. Hill, I believe, saved my life. And that's the ignorance of youth and the wisdom of age when you look back on it you say, 'How did I get here? How did I make it?' It's because people helped you, whether you knew it or not."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.npr.org/2017/08/25/545848025/-people-helped-you-whether-you-knew-it-or-not>

It's people giving their lives for the lives of others. Being that sacrifice. And you don't have to be particularly perfect to do it. You don't have to be a Rockstar in the faith. You just have to show up. And give yourself to your time and your place. Just show up and give your life to please God, you will find God giving life right back to you. Over and over again. Every day. A living sacrifice, not a dead one.

There is a church in our area that is closing. From what I understand, it just can't be the body of Christ in its community any more. But I also understand that it was a long time coming. It wanted community members to be part of the church, but it did not want to be part of the community. The church wanted to be alive, but it wanted to be alive in 1954. It wanted life again, but not so it could give that life to the world. Eventually, they sold their building. They moved into a store front. They hoped things would change. But they couldn't agree on the risk they needed to take. And their new pastor couldn't fix it. Because he couldn't be the minister and all the Sunday School teachers and the mission committee and the lone potluck cook and the only one to visit the sick. The body of Christ needs a body. It needs more than one person to show

up. It needs every person to be a part of the living sacrifice; to have life by giving life for the life of the world.

Paul says, present your bodies as a living sacrifice, Paul says. Be an offering to please God in the flesh. Be part of God's purpose in the flesh on purpose. Be part of the body of Christ that lays down its life in the flesh so that others might have life too. Again and again and again for the sake of God, for the sake of love. Loving others as they are, love others as we are. Showing up over and over in the flesh for others in the Community Garden, at community dinners, and community discussions. Offering ourselves with backpacks full of food, with a meal, with our time to be with kids at Girl Scouts and Youth Group and Sunday school; to be a community at potlucks and at worship and at service events. We are the body of Christ, here to be a living sacrifice. As God in Jesus Christ laid down his life for us, we lay down our lives for God. As Jesus offered himself entirely for the sake of love, so we offer ourselves entirely for the sake of God's love in the world. Again and again. To participate the cosmic and otherworldly work of our Creator. To be part of what is good and acceptable and pleasing to God.