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8/21/2011, in preparation for Pentecost 10A
Romans 12:1-8, Matthew 16:13-20
Presenting Our Bodies

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. (Romans 12:1, NRSV)

For me, one of the most moving liturgies of the year is the Holy Confirmation of our young people. This past Pentecost Sunday, we confirmed three lovely children of our congregation: Annie Scherba, Robert Berk, and Bobby Franzese. And within that Confirmation liturgy, a highpoint for many of us was the claiming of these young ones for Christ. Bishop Robert Rimbo read out the appeal, in continuity with St. Paul of old. Bishop Rimbo, to begin, said this to our young ones:

BISHOP You have solemnly pledged yourselves to the holy and saving gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. Now receive the sign of that gospel on your body and in your heart, that you may know the Lord and the power of his resurrection.

Then he entrusted the sign of the cross of Christ to our young people, referring step by step to parts of their body and asking them to dedicate their bodies, along with all their powers, to Christ:

BISHOP Receive the + cross on your forehead, a sign of God's endless love and mercy for you. Learn to know and to follow Christ.

CONGREGATION Glory and praise to you, almighty and gracious God.

BISHOP Receive the + cross on your ears, that you may hear the gospel of Christ, the word of life.

CONGREGATION Glory and praise to you, almighty and gracious God.

BISHOP Receive the + cross on your eyes, that you may see the light of Christ, illumination for your way.

CONGREGATION Glory and praise to you, almighty and gracious God.

And so on.

As the bishop spoke, I traced the sign of the cross on each of our Confirmands -- on their forehead, ears, eyes, lips, heart, shoulders, hands, and their feet. It was a

claiming of them for Christ, as if Jesus was throwing his arms around each of them and asking them to dedicate themselves wholly to him.

... CHRIST DIED FOR THE UNGODLY

In earlier parts of St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans, the apostle described the immensity of God's love for us. Here is one of my favorite passages along these lines, in the majestic language of the King James Version:

⁶For when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died *for the ungodly*. ⁷For scarcely for a righteous man will one die: yet peradventure for a good man some would even dare to die. ⁸But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were *yet sinners*, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:6-8, KJV)

Let us ponder this, all us sinners, and take heart: While we were yet sinners, before we had done anything to make us worthy of such a thing, Christ died for us. I guess his love leapt ahead of what we were, and he loved us for what we could become, what he would make of us if we will.

Now, in today's reading, St. Paul bids us to render to God a sacrifice in some way worthy of his sacrifice for us. God gave his Son to die for the ungodly, to die for us. Let there then be some similarity of measure to our gratitude. Let us not be so miserly in our love. As the apostle says,

...present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.

SACRIFICE

Now, the grammar of our text uses the proposition "to." We are to present our bodies as living sacrifices *to* God. But I believe we could also say that the logic of the gospel of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ means that we could shift that preposition a bit to another one: "with." That is, we should present our bodies as living sacrifices *with* God, *along side* God. For that is our doctrine and that is our joy. The Triune God does not require sacrifices from us in order to somehow placate him. It is not that he is wrathful, but can be shifted away from his wrath by our sacrifices. Rather, the Lord wants the kind of sacrifices that help other people.

Indeed, the Bible knows that from beginning to end. In his penitential Psalm 51, King David sings of the Lord's desire for a new kind of sacrifice -- not the blood of lambs or goats, but of a new heart:

¹⁶For thou desirest not sacrifice; else would I give it: thou delightest not in burnt offering. ¹⁷The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise. (Psalm 51:16-17, KJV)

Likewise with the prophets. They know that the Temple sacrifices will not please God if at the same time there is injustice and suffering in the land. Hear Isaiah, example:

¹¹“What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the LORD; I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of he-goats...¹⁵When you spread forth your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood.
¹⁶Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, ¹⁷learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow. (Isaiah 1:11, 15-17, RSV)

Likewise, here is another prophetic example, this time a single, great verse from Hosea. The LORD says this:

⁶For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God, rather than burnt offerings. (Hosea 6:6, RSV)

The lesson becomes crystal clear in the story of Jesus. Think of that great verse we all love so much, John 3:16:

For God so loved the world, that *he gave* his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. (John 3:16, KJV)

The true God does not receive sacrifices in order to be persuaded away from wrath. Rather, the true God sacrifices himself. He gives himself. He gives his only begotten Son so that we might have everlasting life.

Indeed, that is how Jesus describes his ministry. If he must put the principle of his life into words, it can be found in our Lord's words to his disciples about the seats of glory in his kingdom. It goes like this:

²⁵But Jesus called them unto him, and said, Ye know that the princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion over them, and they that are great exercise authority upon them. ²⁶But it shall not be so among you: but whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister; ²⁷And whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant: ²⁸Even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, *and to give* his life a ransom for many. (Matthew 20:25-28, KJV)

This is the nature of God, and therefore the nature of reality: God gives of himself for the sake of humanity. Now, in Romans Chapter Twelve, St. Paul asks us to join our God in this sacrificing of ourselves for others. We are to present ourselves as “living sacrifices” to God.

HOW DO WE DO THIS?

How do we do this? How do we present our bodies as a sacrifice to God? In answer, let me borrow the words of our brother St. John Chrysostom:

And how is the body, it may be said, to become a sacrifice? Let the eye look upon no evil thing, and it hath become a sacrifice; let thy tongue speak nothing filthy, and it hath become an offering; let thine hand do no lawless deed, and it hath become a whole burnt offering. Or rather this is not enough, but we must have good works also: let the hand do alms, the mouth bless them that cross one, and the hearing find leisure evermore for lections of Scripture. (Homilies on Romans, Homily XX, on Romans 12:1ff)

It occurs to me that we ourselves could go on this manner. Let me try my hand at it: If we would present our bodies as a living sacrifice to God, let not the feet wander into some far off land where one loses his substance in riotous living, as did the Prodigal Son. Let not those feet wander so, and they have become a sacrifice. Let not the arm embrace the adulterer, and it hath become an offering. Let not the hand cast the stone toward the adulterer. Let the hand drop that stone, and it hath become a sacrifice. Let not the shoulders break down the doors of the bank to rob that bank, and they have become a sacrifice to God. Let not the tongue slash and cut and do grievous harm either to enemy or loved ones, and that tongue has become a spiritual offering to God. Or rather, Chrysostom is right: we need our bodies to do more than to refrain from wrongdoing. We need our hands to give alms, our tongue to speak the truth with love, our eyes to read sacred scripture, and our body in general to not grow weary with well-doing:

And let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not. (Galatians 6:9, KJV)

A LIVING SACRIFICE

Notice too the excellence in the kind of sacrifice the apostle seeks. He does not seek a dead sacrifice, but a living one:

...present your bodies as a *living* sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.

In older times, devout people offered dead sacrifice. Or rather, the offering of the sacrifice killed the thing offered. So, the knife or the flames would destroy the lamb or the dove offered to the Lord. But St. Paul speaks of a different kind of sacrifice. He speaks of a sacrifice that does not deplete life, but enriches it. He speaks of a “living sacrifice.”

And so it is with Christian virtue. When the hand relaxes, so that the fist converts itself into a handshake, life is not made poorer, but richer. When the tongue is caught in time, when it is bridled, so that it does not harm, but rather encourages others, then life is increased. When the stomach moderates its appetite for rich food and fine wines, and rests content with plain food, enough to satisfy the hunger, but not to drive us to excess, beyond what is natural and healthy for our frame, well, then life is not diminished, but improved.

Altogether, when St. Paul urges us to present our bodies as living sacrifices, he is thereby urging us to discipline ourselves in some measure after the discipline of Jesus Christ, who bent his body, his talents, and his great love in our direction, for our salvation; and to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.