

EASTER IV, 2018
John 10.11-18

The fourth Sunday of Easter is known as Good Shepherd Sunday. The scripture lessons and hymns are about shepherds. We reflect on the image of Jesus, the Good Shepherd. The title of "pastor" is from the Latin word for shepherd. A shepherd leads, feeds, comforts, corrects, and protects his flock. These are responsibilities that belong to every church leader, every parent of children, of anyone charged with leading people. They are responsibilities that Jesus most clearly illustrates. The earliest Christians had seen Jesus as the fulfillment of the ancient Jewish dream of a good shepherd.

In the Gospel reading today Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." The way of Christ is sacrifice: laying your life out for the good of others. I want us to reflect on the meaning of sacrifice and why it is so central to our faith, to life itself. My thesis is a very simple one. First, sacrifice is the heart of God. Second, sacrifice is the heart of life.

Sacrifice has gotten a bad rap in our day. In the first place, the concept is simply out of place in a world focused on the self. In a Burger King, "have it your way" world, the idea of giving up one's way for the sake of someone else is like speaking a foreign language. A commercial proclaimed the creed of our times: "I want it, and I want it now!" Hardly an outlook that is hospitable to a creed that tells of how the Son of God became man for us and our salvation, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified for our sins.

Some psychologists criticize the idea of sacrifice. They say it leads to repressing emotions and self-destructive behaviors. There may be some truth in this; we have all known people who boast of how hard they work and "sacrifice" themselves for their company, church, or family. There are those who confuse sacrifice with self-rejection. But the real problem here may be a wrong notion of sacrifice and deeper unresolved obsessions in the person's soul than sacrifice itself.

What is sacrifice? It is any act in which one gives of oneself for the good of the other. It is going outside yourself for the sake of the other. This clears up one misunderstanding from the start, that sacrifice is always obeying some law of self-denial or always saying no to yourself. Perhaps you have met such people; their whole life they have said no to their desires because they thought it was the Christian thing to do. Inwardly, they resent it. That is not sacrifice. It is obedience to a law, not an act of love.

Sacrifice is the heart of God. It is there in the Bible from beginning to end. In the beginning, God chose to go outside of Himself and create the universe for us to live in. The very act of creation is sacrificial. As John says in the start of his Gospel: In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was God and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." And later: "God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son...." Sacrifice. It is all over the place. God is not a rock or an island, entire of Himself who feels no pain. His nature is to go outside Himself, to give Himself for our life.

In the Bible, sacrifice is the seal of God's covenant with us. It is the sign of God's love, the means by which God and mankind come into contact. Thus, in the Bible sacrifice is not about deprivation or sadness. It is about joy, festivity, and thanksgiving. It is not so much about giving up but giving.

Sacrifice is the nature of God, His true heart of love. This is demonstrated more than any place else in the cross. In the sacrifice of Christ on the cross God and man came into contact in a way which can never be separated, because God has followed us even into death itself.

Jesus illustrated His sacrifice by giving up his equality with God and becoming a servant. He defined His mission in life that way: He came, not to be served, but to serve. He did it as an act of love and used it to establish the mark of His Church: "love one another as I have loved you." And the greatest love of all? It is, Jesus said, to lay down your life for someone else.

Most of all, Jesus gave us the Eucharist. In Holy Communion, as the name suggests, we are invited

into this community of God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We are invited into God's sacrificial, self-giving life. God invites us to receive His love. The Eucharist is the way God embraces us, touches us. Which is why it is so central to our faith. Without Holy Communion, God remains only an idea, a philosophy, a monologue. In the Eucharist God extends Himself to touch us, to embrace us with His love.

This leads right to the second principle: sacrifice is at the heart of life. Your life, my life, all life. The deepest need of a human being is to go outside ourselves, to give ourselves in love to God and to others. You are here, you are who you are, because of the sacrifices of those who came before you, of your parents, your teachers, everyone who touched and shaped your life.

Our sin is that we settle for so little. We think life is in taking, getting, having, experiencing, instead of giving. Instead of opening ourselves to others, we close ourselves off. Some people today are so walled off to others that even God cannot reach them.

Jesus reveals what it means to live a fully human life. We see this in the Gospel reading today: Jesus is the "Good Shepherd" who lays down His life for those whom He loves. He is not like a hired hand who cuts and runs to save his skin when danger or hard times arise. Jesus won't quit on you. He won't walk out on you. As the saying one hears today puts it, Jesus is "all in": He is "all in" all the way, to the grave and beyond.

David Brooks is one of my favorite editorial writers. In his book, The Road to Character, he calls today's culture "The Big Me," where everyone is promoting himself, expecting others to admire them. Life is creating your own storyline, parading it on social media, and then, as it is on Facebook, looking for people to "like" me.

The way of Christ, the way of life, is sacrifice: laying your life out for the good of others. Jesus shows we reach human fulfillment in giving ourselves in loving service to others. The question is not the search to find the meaning of your life. That's just narcissism. The real issue is: What does

life demand of you? What do the circumstances of your life calling you to do? It's the difference between life as a quest and life as vocation, as calling. This is as radically different and counter-cultural a lifestyle you will find, whether it be 2,000 years ago in Jerusalem or today in the USA.

The Gospel is good news because it calls us home: to God, to community with others. To exist in relationship to God and for others is to live sacrificially. Any act of selflessness, in which we give ourselves to help someone else without asking, "What's in it for me" is an act of sacrifice, a following Christ, that puts us in harmony with our true self, what God made us to be.

Mahatma Gandhi, the great leader of India in the last century, was not a Christian. But he was heavily influenced by Jesus. He had his own list of seven deadly sins of the modern world. One of them was: worship without sacrifice. Worship that lacks sacrifice becomes worship of the self, not God. As author Steven Covey comments, "Without sacrifice we may become active in the church but remain inactive in the Gospel. We go only for the social façade of religion ... but there is no real walking with people. Instead they will be into outward observances and all the visible accoutrements of religion. But they are not God-centered.... It takes sacrifice to serve the needs of other people."

Much of worship today is not giving sacrificial praise to God, but self-worship. For some Christians the main question they come to church with is, "What is in it for me?" rather than "How can I seek God and follow Jesus?" The latter question is the only way to spiritual health and wholeness. It is the way of sacrificial love.

St. Augustine in the 4th Century sometimes said to people as he gave them the sacrament: "Receive the Body of Christ, so that you might become what you are." The true effect of the Eucharist is that Christ's sacrifice will be formed in us, that we will live sacrificially with each other. So, in the Prayer of Thanksgiving in this Easter season we ask God "...to accept this our sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving, which we offer in union with Christ's sacrifice for us as a living and holy surrender of ourselves." Amen.