

CONSTRUING THE CROSS: SACRIFICE

John 12:20-26

A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward on the First Sunday in Lent, March 10, 2019, at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Alexandria, Virginia, as part of a Lenten series entitled “Construing the Cross.”

Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. Jesus answered them, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

Let us pray: *Lord, Emerson once wrote: “There is...truth concealed in... prayer and...sermons; though foolishly spoken [yet]...wisely heard.”¹ Our prayer for this series is this: However foolishly spoken, may these sermons be wisely heard. In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.*

I.

In the 1980s and 1990s, with family spread out among three states, I spent a lot of highway time between Texas and Tennessee and Iowa. In those days of cassette tapes and boat-length Oldsmobiles, I listened to the not-yet-disgraced humorist and storyteller Garrison Keillor, who was at his height of popularity on Minnesota Public Radio with his show *A Prairie Home Companion*. One of the monologues – stunning when I first heard it and no less so when I listened to it several times later – was entitled “Hog Slaughter.”²

This is the time of year [Keillor began] when people would slaughter, back when people did that — Rollie and Eunice Hochstetter, I think, were the last in Lake Wobegon. They kept pigs, and they’d slaughter them in the fall when the weather got cold and the meat would keep.

I went out to see them slaughter hogs once when I was a kid, along with my cousin and my uncle, who was going to help Rollie...

When you slaughter pigs, it takes away your appetite for pork for a while. Because the pigs let you know that they don’t care for it. They don’t care to be grabbed and dragged over to where the other pigs went and didn’t come back.

It was quite a thing for a kid to see. To see living flesh, and the living insides of another creature. I expected to be disgusted by it, but I wasn’t — I was fascinated. I got as close as I could.

And I remember that my cousin and I sort of got carried away in the excitement of it all and we went down to the pigpen and we started throwing little stones at pigs to watch them jump and squeal and run. And all of a sudden, I felt a big hand on my shoulder, and I was spun around, and my uncle’s face was three inches away from mine. He said “If I ever see you do that again I’ll beat you ’til you can’t stand up, you hear?” And we heard.

¹ This is an abridged quote from Emerson’s “Divinity School Address” (1838).

² Available at <https://www.amazon.com/Hog-Slaughter/dp/B008HI3QDU>.

I knew at the time that his anger had to do with the slaughter, that it was a ritual and it was done as a Ritual. It was done swiftly, and there was no foolishness. No joking around, very little conversation. People went about their jobs — men and women — knowing exactly what to do. And always with respect for *the animals that would become our food*. And our throwing stones at pigs violated this ceremony, and this ritual, which they went through...

It was a powerful experience, life and death hung in the balance. A life in which people made do, made their own, lived off the land, lived between the ground and God. It's lost, not only to this world: but also to memory.³

When Keillor told this story, I could tell there was absolute silence in the audience. It was as if the doors to the theatre had opened and a spirit of reverence, holiness, awe, had swept over the auditorium like smoke from dry ice. Everyone was silenced by sacrifice.

II.

In Christian tradition, we say as a matter of course that the death of Christ involves sacrifice: Christ *sacrificing* his life or his *being sacrificed* for us. Along with scapegoat, deliverance, the tree and the serpent, sacrifice is one of five objects of nature or human experiences associated with the cross of Christ on which I will be preaching during Lent.

As the church has equated sacrifice with Christ's death, different and nuanced associations have arisen.

- A major set of associations focuses on the *impact* of the death of Christ *on God*:
 - In one version, God is *angry* with human sin, and in order to *placate* God's anger, Christ is sacrificed.⁴
 - In another version, God's *justice* is violated by human sin; someone must bear the punishment for divine justice to be satisfied; with his death, Christ pays the price in our stead, takes the punishment on our behalf; and God's justice is satisfied.⁵

In these understandings of sacrifice, it is *God* who changes.

- Another major association between the cross and the sacrifice of Christ involves *a change to human beings*. In this version, Christ is willing to go the distance to the cross out of the depth of his loyalty and love to us, just as a parent is willing to sacrifice his or her own life for the life of their child. When we realize the depth of Christ's love and sacrifice, our hearts are moved from selfishness and sin to awe and gratitude. His sacrifice influences us to greater morality; it brings about a change not in God, but in *us*.⁶
- A third association of cross and sacrifice involves *a change in the world*. In this understanding, sin and evil have become so powerful in the world that God must come and declare war on evil, fight it at every front, lose his life in battle to it, yet prevail over it in a war God ultimately wins. In this association, Christ is like a "smoke jumper," who parachutes into the eye of the forest fire, does battle, loses his life, but in the process

³ Garrison Keillor, "Hog Slaughter," available at <https://www.elephantjournal.com/2015/09/garrison-keillor-on-teaching-children-to-respect-all-life-death/>.

⁴ This version is sometimes called "the substitutionary atonement."

⁵ This theory of the atonement is sometimes called the "satisfaction of justice" theory.

⁶ This theory is known as "the moral influence" theory.

brings the fire under control. In this understanding, it is the *world* which changes because of the sacrifice of Christ.⁷

Each of these has merit. Centuries of theological formulation lie behind each. Each speaks a part of the truth of how the death and resurrection of Christ bring redemption.

III.

But in the passage we read today, we have an image of sacrifice that *differs* from these we have been considering. This image is more associated with *the cycle of nature*.

In John's Gospel, at the Passover Festival, people from outside Judaism – known as Gentiles – come to see Jesus and ask to be his followers. When Jesus sees them coming, he says: “The *hour* has come for the *Son of Man* to be *glorified*.”

- When Jesus refers to himself as “Son of Man,” it is one of the rare titles used for him that he accepts and uses to describe himself.⁸
- When Jesus uses the word “hour” in John, he is not speaking of the time of day.⁹ Rather, he is speaking of *the time* when he will be “glorified,” by being raised up *on* the cross and *in* the resurrection.¹⁰

Immediately after Jesus says “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified,” he adds a one-sentence parable:

*Unless a grain of wheat
Falls into the earth and dies,
It remains just a single grain;
But if it dies, it bears much fruit.*

Unlike other associations of sacrifice and cross, in this association, sacrifice is related to the *cycle of life and death* in nature. Jesus is saying that as in the cycle of all living things, his *death* bears fruit that changes the human heart and *overcomes* the *power of sin and evil in the world*. “If it dies, it bears much fruit...” Sacrifice as part of the cycle of nature.

IV.

Frances M. Young,¹¹ a scholar I am following for this series, points out that as living creatures, we are entirely dependent for our sustenance on the *cycle* of creation, destruction and consumption of *life* in the form of food.

- We plant seed
- When it grows we pluck its leaves or fruit
- We grind it and cook it and eat it that we might be nourished and live.

⁷ This theory is generally known as *Christus victor*.

⁸ Jesus uses this title of himself (or once is quoted using it) twelve times in John. In addition to our passage, these occurrences are at 1:51, 3:13, 3:14, 5:27, 6:27, 6:53, 6:62, 8:28, 9:35, 12:34, 13:31. It comes from a vision in Daniel 7:13-14.

⁹ John 4:52, 53 is an exception to this statement.

¹⁰ John 2:4, 4:21, 4:23, 5:28, 7:30; 8:20.

¹¹ The bulk of insights in this sermon are found in Young, *Construing*, 21-22, 30-43.

Every time we eat, a plant or animal has died, that we might have life.

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This planting and growing, plucking, preparing and eating, is one reason the sacrifice of Christ is so intimately bound up with ritual, with the Sacrament of Holy Communion, the Lord's Supper, the Roman Catholic Mass:

*Take, eat, this is my body, broken for you [Jesus says]
This cup is the New Covenant,
Sealed in my blood,
Shed for the forgiveness of your sins.*

*Whenever you eat this bread,
Drink this wine,
You so show forth the Lord's death
Until he comes again.¹²*

This cycle of birth and death, bearing fruit and being plucked and eaten, is why we react to Christ's death with such *awe*. We don't joke around. We have very little conversation. We don't throw stones at that which will become our food. Rather, we encapsulate the cycle and the sacrifice in ritual: The Sacrament of Holy Communion.

But always – always – the *source* of what is sacrificed is God. Both plant and animal come from God, as Christ comes from God.

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When we realize that God is the source of both the life cycle and the sacrifice involved in it, we are moved to *reverence* for God.

- We are moved to reverence when life is created or life is taken.
- We are moved to reverence at the sheer giftedness of life and our utter dependence on God for the food and grain by which life is sustained.
- We are moved to reverence for the earth into which seed has fallen and on which animals have lived and breathed; for the soil *in* and *on which* both have grown; for the water by which the lives of both been sustained; and for the air both have breathed.
- And reverence leads us to share the fruits of the earth – meat and grain – with others. We do not hoard sacrifice for ourselves.

¹² Luke 22:19-20; Matthew 26:26-28; Mark 14:22-24; I Corinthians 11:24-25.

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Finally, as we are moved to reverence for God who is the source of life, we *offer* all life for God. As Jesus concludes the parable:

*Those who love their life lose it
And those who hate their life in this world
Will keep it for eternal life.*

Just as God offers all God has for us, we in turn offer all we have for God.

- Our hearts and minds and wills
- Our loves and losses
- The work of our hands
- The thoughts of our minds
- The imaginations of our hearts
- The riches of our homes and our nation.

In offering all we have to God, we do so *not* to escape God's *punishment* nor restore God's *justice*. We simply give all to God as God has given all to us.

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Last week in Adult Education at Westminster, Dr. Jerry Kennedy, a literature professor from LSU, described the concept of "nation" in human history and said that "the nation is such a powerful force that people are willing to sacrifice their lives for it."

- In our congregation and community, we know something of that power and willingness.
- Every November we remember people who have given up their lives for our nation.
- We know people who put their lives on the line every day in service to our nation.
- Many of us, in the work of our lives, have vowed to "support and *defend* the Constitution of the United States,"¹³ to support and defend our nation.

We know the reality and power of sacrificing for our nation. We know its necessity and honor. It is probably the highest form of public sacrifice we know. But something greater than even nation is here. Living "between the ground and God," we give *all* that we *have* and *are* to *God*; and we trust, that in God's care, what we sacrifice will bear fruit *beyond* what we can dream or imagine.

Amen.

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¹³ US Code 3331, "Code of Office," available at <https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/5/3331>.