

²¹From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. ²²And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.” ²³But he turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

²⁴Then Jesus told his disciples, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ²⁵For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. ²⁶For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life? ²⁷“For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. ²⁸Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.” (Matthew 16: 21-28)

As we continue our series on the marks of discipleship, we turn to a concept that can be uncomfortable or unpleasant to some: “sacrifice.” To the modern ear, the term elicits difficult images of painful loss, deprivation, or even martyrdom. We think that sacrifice is something that primitive people or pagans did, not something that we are called to do.

And yet, sacrifice lies at the very heart of our understanding of who Jesus Christ was and is. The love of Christ is no normal love. It is a “sacrificial love,” and the greatest symbol of that love is the cross, which by definition is a crude instrument of punishment, suffering, and death. Perhaps it is no longer fashionable to think of Christ’s love in this way, but scripture stubbornly resists our attempts to sanitize this complicated aspect of our faith.

Right here from the outset, as we enter into this discussion of sacrifice as an element of discipleship, I will confess that it holds a mystery that I do not fully understand. The idea that God would somehow require pain or suffering of us as a prerequisite or rite of passage is puzzling to me, because it seems oddly inconsistent with the nature of a loving God. And yet, it is impossible to deny that an ability to endure pain, a commitment to persevere through difficulty, and a willingness to keep walking with God even when it hurts, are all somehow part of an authentic journey of faith.

This morning’s scripture contains the purest and most undeniable expression of that idea. “*If any want to become my followers,*” Jesus says, “*let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.*” Christ is trying to share a very difficult truth with the disciples – that in the coming days he will be required to “undergo great suffering... and be killed.” They objected immediately. Peter took Jesus by the arm, pulled him aside, and essentially told Jesus to quit saying stuff like that. And Jesus responded with the most direct rebuke he ever gave to a disciple. A denial of Christ’s sacrifice was not just problematic – it was the enemy of true faith. Sacrifice was a divine imperative – not just a possibility, but a “must.” And there was more. Sacrifice that not just a must for Christ, but for anyone and

everyone who wanted to be his disciple. *“If any want to become my followers,”* Jesus said, *“let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”*

The writings of the early church only served to reinforce the point. As Paul wrote in Romans 12:1, *“I 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.”*

And later, while he was sitting in a prison cell bearing his own cross and paying the price of his own discipleship, Paul did not lament the reality of sacrifice, but actually celebrated it. *“I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death... forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.”*¹ For Paul, sacrifice was not something to be avoided, but rather a key part of the path to heaven. This is how we know we are children of God, he wrote, *“if, in fact, we suffer with [Christ] so that we may also be glorified with [Christ].”*²

Now, let me be clear at this point that I do not believe we all have to be martyred to be Christ’s disciple. We are not all called into a literal lion’s den where we will be called to make the ultimate sacrifice. Yes, it has meant that for a great many people over the years, some very recently. But probably not for you and me. Again, this is a mystery to me, so I don’t feel like I have the authoritative, final answer, but I think the kind of sacrifice Christ is looking for from us is not as much about suffering per se as it is about the willingness to endure what is necessary. Are we committed to following Christ enough to stick with it, even when it is really hard?

I have always been proud to have grown up in the same hometown as the man who at birth was given the name William Sidney Porter. He came along about a hundred years before me, but we both called Greensboro, North Carolina home. In elementary school we all went to the local history museum to walk by the recreated storefront of W.C. Porter’s, the drug store run by his uncle where he had worked as a teenager. This man would later move to New York City, where rumor has it he wrote his most famous short story in Pete’s Tavern, a bar still in operation on East 18th Street. By that time, he was known to the world simply as O’Henry.

The story he wrote there was “The Gift of the Magi.” Students of literature probably know it as one of the best illustrations of irony in English prose, but I think it also illuminates the idea of sacrifice as we are called to understand it. If you know the story, you remember it is about a poor young couple, newly married and living in a New York City tenement. By way of possessions, they had almost nothing. But early in the story O’Henry sets the stage with these words:

“The James Dillingham Youngs were very proud of two things which they owned. One thing was Jim’s gold watch. It had once belonged to his father. And, long ago, it had belonged to his father’s father. The other thing was Della’s hair.

¹ Philippians 3:10-14.

² Romans 8:16-17.

If a queen had lived in the rooms near theirs, Della would have washed and dried her hair where the queen could see it. Della knew her hair was more beautiful than any queen's jewels and gifts."³

As their first Christmas together drew near, both Jim and Della wanted to give something very special to the other. For Della, Jim found a set of beautiful, jeweled combs. He knew she had seen them in the shop window and loved them. She never dreamed she would have them – they were too expensive. But Jim knew that beautiful hair like Della's deserved combs like this. And he knew she would love them.

And Della had also found the perfect gift for her husband – a beautiful gold watch chain, simply made, but elegant and pure like all good things are. To quote the story, "As soon as she saw it, she knew that Jim must have it. It was like him. Quietness and value—Jim and the chain both had quietness and value. She paid twenty-one dollars for it. And she hurried home with the chain and eighty-seven cents."

The irony of the story is that, in order to afford these precious gifts of love for the other, both Della and Jim had given up the thing most precious to them. Jim had pawned his grandfather's watch to pay for the combs, and Della had cut and sold her hair to pay for the watch chain. Jim had a wonderful chain but no watch; Della had combs but no long hair to run them through.

When asked to define the concept of "sacrifice," pastor and author Frederick Buechner landed on this idea: "To sacrifice something is to make it holy by giving it away for love."⁴ That, I would say, is what Christ is really seeking from us. In fact, the derivation of our word "sacrifice" does not recall the grisly images that tend to come to our minds. The word comes from two Latin roots -- *sacer*, which means "sacred," and *facere*, which means "to make" or "to do."⁵ In other words, to sacrifice something is to make it sacred. And in the Way of Christ, could there be any other way to make something sacred than to sanctify it with love.

And lest we forget, that kind of sacrifice has always been in the DNA of Larchmont Avenue Church. On Christmas Day 1932, as the crisis of the Great Depression continued to worsen, Rev. Robert Russell stood in this pulpit and painted a dire picture for the congregation. This sanctuary was less than three years old, and the loan that had financed its construction was falling deeper and deeper into arrears. The church had finally received word that, unless the deficiency was rectified quickly, the bank would be forced to foreclose. He knew that members of the congregation had problems of their own, and he knew that they had all been digging deep already. He knew he was going to a well that was nearly dry already, but he had no choice but to share the situation.

Russell was clearly a man of great faith, but I wonder if even he could have foreseen the sacrifice that this congregation made in the days and weeks after that sermon. Our ancestors in this place prayed hard, went home, and started opening drawers. They went through chests in the attic, boxes in the basement, and they began collecting anything of value that they could find: jewelry, knives, forks, old spectacle frames. Don't you expect

³ https://americanenglish.state.gov/files/ae/resource_files/1-the_gift_of_the_magi_0.pdf

⁴ Frederick Buechner, "Sacrifice," in *Beyond Words: Daily Readings in the ABC's of Faith* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004).

⁵ <https://www.adf.org/articles/cosmology/nature-of-sacrifice.html>

that in that trove were at least a few heirloom watches with simple but elegant chains... perhaps some hair combs from happier, more prosperous times... Whatever they had to give, whatever they could muster, the people of this church dug deep and brought what they could to this very place to offer what they could to God. The things that could be sold as is were sold, and the rest went to metal dealers in the city. And God smiled upon what they found, and accepted what they gave, and made it to be enough. Thanks to that sacrificial offering, the bank was satisfied, foreclosure proceedings were halted, and here we are, nearly 100 years later, gathered as a congregation to talk once more about being disciples of Christ, and to affirm the sacred truth that "To sacrifice something is to make it holy by giving it away for love."

In the name of the Creator, the Savior, and the Sustainer, *Amen.*