



**March 7, 2010 Sermon by Rev. Nancy Talbot**  
*Sacrifice: Is it Worth It?*

Readings: Mark 12: 41-44; Romans 12: 1-2

One of the things I couldn't help but notice throughout the televised broadcasting of the Olympic Games was the way the cameras, from time to time, would pan in on an athlete's parents anxiously watching their son or daughter's performance. Sometimes we had the pleasure of seeing them caught up in the euphoria of seeing their child deliver a medal winning result.

What the media well knows, what we all know, is that behind every Olympic athlete is a parent or parents who have made sacrifices for the sake of their child's athletic career. Sometimes it's a sacrifice of money, people re-mortgaging their houses to pay for an elite level coach. Sometimes it's a sacrifice of a career while mom or dad moves across the country to be closer to a training facility. Always it's a sacrifice of time, time spent driving back and forth to the rink, time spent at tournaments, time that could have been spent on relationships with other children in the family or with a spouse, or on vacations or in pursuit of their own dreams.

And when a child makes it into the Olympic Games, whether they win a medal or not, surely each of these parents would say "Every moment, every dollar, every sacrifice, was worth it."

This is sacrifice that we can understand. We may not ever choose to do it ourselves, or have the opportunity to do it ourselves, but we can understand it.

We can also understand the sacrifice people made of their lives in the world wars; giving their lives for the sake of freedom. Although we may be less certain about the sacrifice being made by our young people in Afghanistan, we hope their sacrifice is also worthwhile, that in some way they are making a better world for others because of what they give. This too is sacrifice we can understand.

But there is a form of sacrifice, I have never been able to understand, and that has never seemed to me worthwhile. It's the notion that Jesus sacrificed his life for the sake of my sins; the notion that because I'm a sinner, someone, had to pay the price for my sins with their life.

This idea in theological terms is known as the theory of atonement and it's an idea that has been around for a long time. Its origins are found in the ancient practice of sacrificing animals on various forms of altars as a way to restore relationship with God. In ancient times, if I knew I had done something wrong, I would make an offering of an animal to absolve my sins. Even if I wasn't consciously aware of doing something wrong, I would still make sacrifices just to make sure my bases were covered.

Some of you have heard me talk before about Rene Girard's theory of sacrifice. Girard suggests that human sacrifice and later animal sacrifice grew out of an awareness in ancient times that whenever someone was killed or murdered it caused a "hush" in the community. Violent activity would cease for a period of time. To tap into the power of that hush, communities began to believe that they could keep peace by doing the killing themselves through making human and later animal sacrifices.

In this way of thinking, Jesus “sacrificial death” essentially becomes a way of keeping order in our communities. We don’t actually even have to stop ourselves from our sinful behaviour, because Jesus has paid our debt for us. All we have to do is give our lives to Jesus, get “washed in the blood of this sacrificial lamb” and we’re good to go. Violence against one person has redeemed violence against all people.

In addition to setting up a system whereby I can go out on Saturday night and sin boldly because I’ve got Jesus on my side and all I have to do is confess my sins to him in the morning, the main problem I have with this way of thinking is that it sets God up as a kind of a divine child abuser. What kind of a loving parent would ask their child to become a scapegoat for everyone else’s crimes? What loving parent would “send their child to their death.”? It’s not a form of sacrifice I can understand or seems worthwhile.

From a biblical perspective, the earliest hint at this way of interpreting Jesus’ death or sacrifice is found in the Bible in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians when Paul wrote “Christ died for our sins.” The problem with this phrase however, is that in both Greek and English there are two ways to interpret it. The first, most popular understanding is that Jesus died to save us from our sins. But an equally acceptable interpretation of the passage would be to say that Jesus died because of our sins.

That leads us into a very different way of understanding the cross, and it leads us to a very different way of understanding sacrifice.

One of my favourite writings about sacrifice is a deceptively simple poem by Mary Oliver called “Goldenrod.”

On roadsides, in fall fields, in rumpy bunches, saffron and orange and pale gold, in little towers, soft as mash, sneeze-bringers and seed-bearers, full of bees and yellow beads and perfect flowerlets and orange butterflies. I don't suppose much notice comes of it, except for honey, and how it heartens the heart with its blank blaze. I don't suppose anything loves it, except, perhaps, the rocky voids filled by its dumb dazzle. For myself, I was just passing by, when the wind flared and the blossoms rustled, and the glittering pandemonium leaned on me. I was just minding my own business when I found myself on their straw hillsides, citron and butter-colored, and was happy, and why not? Are not the difficult labors of our lives full of dark hours? And what has consciousness come to anyway, so far, that is better than these light-filled bodies? All day on their airy backbones they toss in the wind, they bend as though it was natural and godly to bend, they rise in a stiff sweetness, in the pure peace of giving one's gold away.

According to contemporary scientists, it is a godly and a natural thing to bend and to give one’s gold away. From a cosmological perspective we are hard wired for self-giving and self-sacrificing. Every day the sun burns brightly in the service of life on earth. Stars explode and life is created. Tomato plants mature and life is sustained by the nourishment they give up. Self-donation in the service of life is an evolutionary dynamic in the unfolding story of the universe. It’s how the world works.

What if we were to think of Jesus sacrifice in this way, not as something that God required of him, but rather as a self-donation in the service of life? An enactment of truest human nature.

Whenever we talk about sacrifice we need to remember sacrifice involves two elements: the act of making something sacred or hallowed; and the offering of ourselves to do that hallowing.

In other words, whatever we make hallow or sacred, we will make sacrifice for. If we revere money, we will give our life-energy for it. If we revere power and influence, we will give our life-energy for it. A great question to ask yourself is what do you hallow in your life –what are you giving your life-energy for.

In the Jesus story, what Jesus makes hallow is life itself -- each and every life. So valuable to him is each human life that he refuses to return betrayal with betrayal, insult with insult and violence with violence.

Not once on his journey to the cross does his integrity get compromised, not once does he diminish himself for the sake of others. He gives of himself in death fully and without compromise to the principles by which he lived his life, his dignity intact.

Somehow I think this is what Paul is trying to get at in this morning's scripture reading when he asks us to present our bodies as a living sacrifice: Letting love be genuine; hating what is evil, holding fast to what is good; loving one another with mutual affection; outdoing one another in showing honour.

Somehow I think this is what the widow is doing in this morning's Gospel reading, making sacred her life of faith by giving herself to it fully and without fear, trusting that even if she gives away everything she owns, there will be enough.

So often when we think of sacrificial living we think of those who have sacrificed their very lives for what they believed in: Martin Luther King, Oscar Romero but you and I also have the capacity to live sacrificially, to choose who or what it is in life that we are willing to make sacred, what we are willing to hallow and therefore that we are willing to make sacrifices for.

Making sacrifices will be worth it if what we choose to make hallow is our planet; or our relationships with one another, or the common good, or the ideal of non-violence, or the inclusion of all, or the value of every human life.