

# Spiritual Sacrifices

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast  
Olentangy Christian Reformed Church  
Columbus, Ohio  
April 13, 2008*

## **1 Peter 1:22-2:10**

Now that you have purified yourselves by obedience to the truth and have genuine mutual love, love one another continually from a pure heart, since you have been born all over again, not from perishable seed, but from imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God. Because *all flesh is like grass, and all its glory like a wildflower. The grass withers and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord endures forever.* And this word is the good news that was announced to you. Therefore get rid of all hostility, all deception, hypocrisy, and envy, all destructive talk, and, like newborn babies, crave pure milk (to extend the metaphor), so that by it you may grow into salvation – if you have tasted that the Lord is good.

As you come to him, a living stone, rejected by people as worthless yet in God's judgment chosen and precious, you yourselves, like living stones, are being built as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood that offers spiritual sacrifices which are acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. As Scripture has it: *See, I place a chosen and honored cornerstone in Zion, and the one who puts faith in it will not be put to shame.* With you who have faith, there is the *honor*. But with the faithless, *the very stone which the builders rejected as worthless has become the crowning cornerpiece, a stone to stumble over, a rock to fall off of.*

They stumble because they disobey the word, which is what they were appointed to. But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people who belong, so that you may proclaim the surpassing excellence of the one who called you out of darkness into his wondrous light — you, who once were not a people, but now are God's people; you, who were not being shown mercy, but now have been shown mercy.

## **Sermon**

Perhaps you remember the story. It's found in 1 Chronicles 22. King David had his palace, and now he wanted to build a temple for the LORD. "You, build a temple for me?" said the LORD. "I don't think so! David," he said, "your heart is in the right place. But your hands . . . you have too much blood on your hands. Too many battles. Too many wars. But your son," the LORD continued, "that's different. Your son will build my house. He hasn't bloodied his hands."

And so, after his father David died and after consolidating his own power, Solomon built a temple for the LORD. To dedicate that temple, Solomon offered sacrifices to the LORD: 22,000 oxen and 120,000 sheep! Can you picture the blood? Blood on Solomon's hands. Blood splattered on his face. Blood flowing, like the headwaters of a red river, over his feet and around his ankles. Can you picture the blood? Sacrifices and blood. You don't have the one without the other.

**Bloody sacrifices were a given in the ancient Near East.** All your better grade gods required bloody sacrifices. Any god worth the effort of building an altar, never mind a temple; any god with enough power, with enough gumption, to secure a good crop, to defend a threatened city, to turn away a plague; any god worthy of the designation "god" was no pushover. Any god worthy of the designation expected something of value to be wasted in worship, something at least as valuable as the labor and life represented by a goat and its blood.

The whole idea of bloody animal sacrifices is strange to us. It's exotic – in the worst sense of that word. It's primitive; it's barbaric. Slaughtering animals for worship?! So it's unwelcome to us that our

Bible is filled with bloody sacrifices. It's unwelcome to us that YHWH, the God of Israel, commanded bloody sacrifices. It's unwelcome to us that Solomon let flow a river of blood. It's all as unwelcome to us as a class trip to a slaughterhouse. And it's unwelcome to us that the book of Hebrews says that "without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness of sins."

**That's why, besides everything else it is, Jesus' death on the cross is a relief.** It's a relief. A relief because it's the last sacrifice. Jesus' death on the cross was the sacrifice to end all sacrifices. Whatever the reason, whatever the reasons, that YHWH, the God of Israel, required bloody sacrifices – whatever the reasons, those reasons have been satisfied for good by the cross.

So now, to our relief, bloody sacrifices are a historical curiosity: a characteristic of primitive religion (we say in our prouder moments); a characteristic of biblical faith and early Judaism that were leaning toward, yearning toward Jesus Christ; a characteristic of a past so long ago that it's been over for nearly 2,000 years. Jesus' death on the cross is a relief, because those sacrifices are over.

Jesus' death on the cross is also a relief because it leaves us with a vegetarian meal. From the beginning, Jesus' disciples "devoted themselves to . . . the breaking of bread." It's in unbroken continuity with those first Christians that we sit down to a meal in which the flesh and blood of sacrifice – in this case, the flesh and blood of Jesus' sacrifice – have become, in a sort of inverted transubstantiation, bread and wine.

The Roman Catholic teaching of transubstantiation claims that the bread and wine of Holy Communion become the real body and real blood of Jesus. It appears, though, that in Holy Communion the opposite occurs: the body and blood of Jesus become real bread and real wine. In our holy meal, flesh and blood are present – metaphorically. Flesh and blood are present – to our memory. The Holy Spirit unites us to the Jesus who perishes on the cross – by faith. But bloody sacrifices are over. And to us, that's a relief.

**Not that all sacrifices have come to an end – not at all.** The fact is, discipleship – following Jesus Christ – is a life of sacrifice. Jesus said his followers would have crosses to carry. In some cases, that cross spells the end of a disciple's life. Church history has its share of martyrs. Not that they courted death, like suicide bombers. But faithfulness to Jesus brought them into conflict with the powers, from the Roman Empire in the first century to totalitarian regimes in the twentieth century. And some of those disciples offered the ultimate sacrifice, in obedience to the Gospel, whether in the Colosseum, in a concentration camp, or in the gulag.

Usually, though, the sacrifices of discipleship don't end up in a disciple's death. Paul, for example, wrote about "offering your bodies as living sacrifices," not bloody ones. And Peter, for his part, says that the church is in the business of offering "spiritual sacrifices," which, I take it, are not about stabbed and bleeding flesh – not usually.

So what are these "spiritual sacrifices"? My guess is that Peter's *spiritual* sacrifices are not so different from Paul's *living* sacrifices. According to Romans 12, living sacrifices have two main characteristics. First, there is a refusal to conform to the standards and patterns of the world. In sports, for example, this may involve rejecting the steroid-pumped emphasis on winning at all costs in favor of training hard and competing well, with gratitude and joy over God's bodily gifts. Which way do you suppose Al and Em ran half marathons yesterday?

A second characteristic of living sacrifices is the transformation of thought and perspective, which results, in turn, in transformed behavior. In business, for example, this may involve managing for more than short-term profits on the bottom line, but instead for the long-term flourishing, by God's grace, of cubicle-dwellers, clients, and community. Where do you suppose would be a better place to work?

One could go a lot farther with Paul and his living sacrifices. But today's focus is Peter. Yet his *spiritual* sacrifices are harder to get at.

Peter sketches a seamless web (or a convoluted web, if you prefer that adjective) that stretches from obedience to love to new birth to spiritual hunger to priestly exercises of worship, prayer, and sacrifice – there it is! – to faith to testimony. I think there’s a theme to this seamless (convoluted?) web. It’s all about a new way of life, a new way of life pursued, Peter says, with all the focused energy of an eagerly nursing baby. (If Peter had only known, he might have referred instead to a newborn German Shepherd puppy. You should see the unstoppable drive those puppies have, as soon as they’re born, to get to their mother’s side and to the nourishment that waits there.) Spiritual sacrifices, then, flow from a new way of life in Christ, a way of life that is eagerly pursued.

A couple more things: first, the language of “sacrifice” used in connection with this new way of life is suggestive. It indicates that the new way of life in Christ is not easy. It’s costly. It may not cost you blood. But it will cost you money. It will cost you time. And it will give you heartache. You may go out of business. You may lose the race, not even come close to winning. You may spend hours and days next to a hospital bed because you have promised your love to the person in that bed. (Joanne, you know something about that lately.)

Here’s something you must have noticed. The sacrifices I’ve mentioned are not uniquely Christian, not on the outside anyway. Lots of people, not just Christians, make those sacrifices. In the ancient world, animal sacrifices were made to all sorts of better grace gods, including Israel’s God. These days people make living, spiritual sacrifices for all sorts of reasons. Your sacrifices become Christian when love for Christ and obedience to Christ are their ultimate foundation.

I mentioned that there were two more things. Here’s the other one. Sometimes we have a hard time seeing where God is present. Sometimes we have a hard time seeing where God is at work. I know I do. It’s really hard for us to point to God, to say, “There!” But make some spiritual sacrifices – out of love for Christ, offer yourself, your money, your time, your hands and feet – out of love for Christ offer yourself to those whom Christ loves – serve the poor – create justice . . . and you’ll see where God is. You’ll see with your own eyes. You’ll see with your own heart. And will you have stories to tell!

Your faith will give birth to testimony, to telling the story of a God and a Gospel that live today. Live today on the road. Live today in the office. Live today in a hospital room. Live today at a mother’s breast. Make some spiritual sacrifices, and you’ll find yourself telling stories that are as true as any story gets.