



Richmond Hill Reflections

“The Deep Meaning of Sacrifice” (Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft)

September 6, 2020, Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Reading: Matthew 16:21-26; “The Way to You” by Hakim Sana’i (Translated by Priya Hemenway)

When I began this series on church words, I shared how they get narrowed to set meanings. Like how “faith” generally means assenting to a list of doctrines. That fact impacts other words. As a particular viewpoint becomes the only or at least primary belief considered orthodox, it becomes the filter through which a word is heard. This is the case for the words I’m talking about today – “suffering” and “sacrifice”. Ironically, I’m guilty of what I just said in one of the words I chose. In our gospel passage, Jesus tells his disciples how he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering and be killed. He doesn’t use the word “sacrifice” yet when I read how Jesus would be killed that’s how I heard it. Equally, the reverse happens when you hear “sacrifice” and presume what’s meant is Jesus’ death. It’s limiting, and for many, as a church word, it is really disquieting.

Let’s begin the expansion process by looking at how “sacrifice” is used generally. Often, we think of someone dying in service of others. A mom dies saving her child, a firefighter goes back into a building, a soldier is killed in the line of duty. The root of “sacrifice” is *“sacra facere”*, “to make holy”. We’re saying the death is holy, righteous, because it happened in service of others. “Sacrifice” first referred to religious rites, especially an animal killed to show devotion to the gods. The animal is “set apart” so only the gods can use it. It is made holy, and the one offering it is sanctifying their relationship with the gods. It’s about letting go of something, even some, if not all of oneself, for that relationship. In earlier times, religion and society were interwoven. Even more than now, to die in battle was honourable, one’s life given in devotion to the community as much as the gods.

Of course, sacrifice isn’t always a death. Placing themselves at risk, the soldiers pulling apart a fallen building in Beirut are making a sacrifice. We sacrifice for a cause. To fight climate change we sacrifice comforts, to slow the spread of COVID-19 we sacrifice our “normal lives”, to make peace each side sacrifices something to find common ground. Sacrifice, a willingness to let go of self for others, lies at the heart of non-violent resistance. Like Gandhi before him, Martin Luther King Jr. told fellow activists not to fight back against police. We call this sacrifice, not just because they didn’t fight back, but because at its heart their aim was to make holy how we see and treat each other.

For all these reasons Jesus’ followers used sacrifice language about his death. At the time they weren’t thinking of various theories of atonement. They were making sense of what happened. After all, Peter wasn’t alone in assuming the messiah was going to bring “salvation” (more on that in two weeks) through victory over the Romans. Jesus’ suffering and execution should have ended the

movement but it didn't. His teaching became more powerful because he gave his life for it. As his followers spoke of his death in terms of redemption, that it was holy, and somehow makes us holy, they were redeeming his death, and his life. Based on what I've shared, his death was a sacrifice if for no other reason than he saved his followers' lives by not resisting arrest. But the meaning of the cross expanded beyond that. His death came to be understood as an act of love for us all.

There are many ways to interpret how this works, but I'll highlight one I've shared before, as it connects to what's going on in our world right now. Consider the deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Chantal Moore, too many others. As people hold their pictures, kneel for 8 minutes-46 seconds, say "I can't breathe" as a rallying cry, they're making sure their deaths weren't in vain. Their deaths become redemptive as grief and anger transform into action. René Girard suggested Jesus' death "saves" because it reveals our collective violence, shocking us out of complacency. This rings true when I consider how the death of George Floyd and others highlight the suffering of racialized people, shocking white society into finally seeing how deeply entrenched racism is.

Jesus' death was a deep crisis for his disciples, but as I shared last week, we need crisis moments to move us from established order, with its ego-focus, to imagine something new. The disciples realized the new world Jesus lived and died for was more profound than kicking out the Romans. His vision was a transformation of how we see and treat one another. This begins with a change in how we see ourselves. Richard Rohr suggests there are two experiences that shift us from self-focused sense of specialness, always fulfilling our wants, to see our true nature of connection to others, and God. Love and suffering. They both displace the ego as centre and help us see divine presence at our core, and at everyone else's, as Sana'i writes to sense sweetness all around us. We know the world is in crisis. But as we see each other's pain in our own, we have a chance in this awakened connection to create something new, a world rooted in what Jesus died for: inclusive love, justice for all, true peace.

The crisis I am referring to is often accompanied by suffering but not for its own sake. We need to lift suffering from others. But it can be a door to spiritual growth. This is one way of seeing the cross Jesus invites us to carry. When embraced we can let go of our "lives" and gain real "life", see past the narrow view of the ego and discover the love at the centre of everything. We can prepare for this, paraphrasing Sana'i, by letting go of the constant voice of self to listen to the silence that is God. In this, various types of meditation are like a prayerful sacrifice. Be it the silence of centring prayer, the rhythm of Sufi whirling, the soul listening of *lectio divina*, the embodied focus of yoga, whatever it is, I "sacrifice" the false self that clings to separation, and seek connection, open to the love, to God, at the core of who I really am. As we rediscover our holiness, we can then make our lives a sacrifice of praise – serving others, restoring relationships, seeking a just and inclusive world.

As I said, the words "sacrifice" and "suffering" can be limiting, even turn me off church, but doing what I can to "make holy", to live out who we are in Love? And intentionally seeking to open myself to that in my life? Understood that way, these words just may be the heart of spirituality. Amen.