

Sermons at Saint Paul's

Creating Peace through Spiritual Nourishment and Service in the World

The Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost/October 18, 2015

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The Dance, the Song, the Prayer, and the Gift – they all elucidate the sacrifice and offering that our Bible lessons reveal this morning. The Letter to the Hebrews says of us who are a priesthood of all believers that “every high priest... offer(s) gifts.” And Jesus led the way saying, “the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve.” We have all heard this so many times that it may have lost its impact. A different culture’s take on sacrifice can help us to understand it afresh through images and words that sound strange to us but carry the same idea.

Next week, Bishop Steven Charleston will be with us. He is a member of the Choctaw tribe from Oklahoma, and formerly Bishop of Alaska. His most recent book is *The Four Vision Quests of Jesus*. He will speak about this on Saturday afternoon at 3 here in the church. As you know our second rector at Saint Paul’s became Bishop to the Great Sioux Nation in 1873 out in what was then the Dakota Territory. Early on he described the vision quests undertaken by sixteen-year-olds. They “go aside and seclude themselves, fast days and nights” in order to find a spirit that will come to them and be their guardian spirit. Hare concedes, “Our boys here (in the east) of sixteen or seventeen never – at least I did not – fast day and night for two or three days to get a keener sense of the invisible. I say these people (the Dakotas) are an intensely religious people.” Bishop Charleston interprets the Garden of Gethsemane as Jesus’ third vision quest. It is there that Jesus offers “up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death” and make him “the source of eternal salvation.” Jesus would give of himself for the healing of the world. “By his bruises we are healed” Isaiah had said. The cosmic effect of his sacrifice is that “unity may overcome estrangement, forgiveness heal guilt, and joy conquer despair.”

The Dakota people act out this grace of sacrifice in what is called a Sun Dance. The late Terry Star who preached here six years ago was a Sun Dancer. A pole is erected at the center of the dancing ground to which the dancers are attached by a rawhide strip that is pushed through their skin and tied off. Terry said that today sometimes the rawhide is merely tied to the dancer without the piercing. “The Sun Dance of the Lakota people,” Charleston observes, “is the belief that the sacrifice of the dancers own bodies... will offer to God a small part of the life that God bestows on humanity. It is a return of life itself in humble acknowledgment of the power of the Creator.” Jesus at Gethsemane chooses to undertake this Dance. The pole at the center of the ground is the cross to which he is attached, his body pierced. “Jesus,” Charleston says, “is the Sun Dancer for all people, for all creation, for all time. Through his Dance, all life will be blessed forever.” His sacrifice is the giving of a life for love.

Isaiah doesn't describe a Dance rather he offers a Song. It is the last and longest of the four servant songs from this book of prophecy. The song however has some similarity to the dance. The dancer tires and becomes weak identifying with the weakness of humanity. It is there that God's power is made perfect and gives life. In the song, the servant God merges with the infirm and bruised, the oppressed and afflicted. The song glorifies the Servant for identifying with those in need. God pours into one's deepest need overflowing life – unity overcoming estrangement, forgiveness healing guilt, joy conquering despair. It is all God's gift.

Rather than Dance or Song, the Letter to the Hebrews speaks of sacrifice in terms of Prayer. The high priest was the one who alone could bring before the very presence of God in the very holiest portion of the Temple through fervent prayer the needs and vulnerabilities of his people. He himself also stood in that condition of weakness before God. There was no glory in it. Through Jesus, God elects to be one with all people in brokenness and prayer. The prayer offered at a place around which all creation moved was simply, “Father forgive.” It was a life-giving prayer offered once for the salvation of all.

Whether it is through Dance, or Song, or Prayer, or offering some of what we possess, that is, the Gift, it is not for glory but to serve one another in need. The disciples, however, want glory not sacrifice. James and John want to

sit in the places of power on either side of Jesus. The other disciples want to be on the right and on the left too, which is why they are indignant over the brothers' request. The irony of course is that the words "one on his right and one on his left" appear later to describe the two bandits crucified on either side of Jesus. Jesus' disciples do not know what they ask. He explains. Following Jesus means giving of ourselves in love for the life of others. It is not lording it over others. It is not amassing as much as we can for ourselves. It is not being dominant as a tyrant. Rather, "whoever wishes to be great among you," says Jesus, "must be your servant." We heard those same words a month ago. In the gospel for that day, the disciples were arguing about who was the greatest. Over and over Jesus has to remind them, "Whoever wants to be first must be... servant of all." Whether it is in the dance, or the song, or the prayer or the gift we take our place alongside Jesus in humility by giving of ourselves in love for the life of others.

In the dance we are no longer merely reactive or triggered, nor are we passive recipients of whatever comes along. Instead we are partners in the dance with God to change the world. In the song we will sing at the close of our worship:

Now on high, yet ever with us, from his Father's throne the son
rules and guides the world he ransomed, till the appointed work be done,
till he see, renewed and perfect, all things gathered into one.

We are active partners in overcoming estrangement with unity, guilt with forgiveness, and despair with joy. Our prayer this morning was that we might persevere in this with steadfast faith. The offerings that we make, the pledges that we submit, are our sacrifice that this will of God may be done. It cannot be done completely by us, but it cannot be done completely without us either. In all humility we are partners with God in Christ.

The Dance, the Song, the Prayer, and the Gift all arise from our vision of Jesus' coming. In the Dance we partner with God to change the world. In the Song we add our voice to a rising chorus of life. The Prayer is the communion of all that we are with all that is God. The Gift comes from what we have been given and acknowledges the One without whom there could be nothing. Our

pledge anticipates the need we share and our willingness to do something about it – to build community where the estranged are gathered into one, the guilty forgiven, and where every despair gives way to unconquerable joy.

Amen.