

It's Not Too Late

This week's chapter was a tad challenging to negotiate, but the nugget that I pulled from the chapter, the supplemental material, the bible verses and the discussions this week is about "sacrifice" and what, indeed, does the Lord require of each of us?

There were several biblical stories in this week's readings, but I want to focus on specifically two – What sacrifice was about in Abraham's day and what sacrifice was about in the age of the Old Testament prophets. After reflecting on these two stories, I will touch on what sacrifice is about for you and me.

First Abraham. This week, we have the story of Abraham being called by God to sacrifice his one and only son. Actually, Isaac wasn't his only son, he did have an older son named Ishmael, but that is another sermon. Anyway, Abraham felt the call to kill his son for God. WHY? Here's some background. In the age that Abraham lived, it was a widely held assumption that if you didn't want trouble from the gods, then you must offer your first-born son so that you can escape a perilous life. This was simply the way things were done. Everybody knew it was true and if you were the least bit "righteous" then you would obey this Truth that everybody and his brother believed.

Close your eyes and imagine this...McLaren writes, "Put yourself in Abraham's sandals. Imagine that you and everyone you know believes that God is a severe and demanding deity who can bestow forgiveness and other blessings ONLY after human blood has been shed. Imagine how that belief in human sacrifice will affect the way you live, the way you worship, and the way you treat others. Now imagine how hard it would be to be the first person in your society to question such a belief. Imagine how much courage it would take, especially because your blood might be the next to be sacrificed!"

McLaren continues with an idea that is known to be true by those of you who are making the transition from a conservative perspective of Christianity to a progressive perspective of Christianity. He writes, "Questioning widely held assumptions about God can be a dangerous venture indeed."

The story of Abraham and Isaac is exceptional not because the Lord supposedly told Abraham to kill his son, but because Abraham went up the mountain with Isaac with the full intention of sacrificing his son to God just like everybody else, but instead he came back down the mountain with his son, alive and well! What happened? Abraham questioned the widely held assumption that God needed human sacrifice. And instead of obeying that assumption, he replaced that thought with the premise that animal sacrifice is good enough. And so, according to legend, this story marks the end of human sacrifice and the beginning of animal sacrifice. This was a significant RE-FORMATION, or reformation of the dominant beliefs of the day.

Fast forward a thousand years. The Hebrew text shares many, many, many stories of prophets who “questioned those widely held assumptions.” Of course, we know what happens when one challenges authority, when one challenges ingrained beliefs of how the world turns. We know that the person who says “NO” to the world, ends up not living in the world much longer. If you’re a prophet, pointing out the truth, in all likelihood, you will be killed.

Never-the-less, there were many prophets in the days of antiquity and there continue to be many prophets today. The second scripture for this week is the scripture from Micah, the scripture that Jill read to us. Let’s hear it again....

‘With what shall I come before the Lord,
and bow myself before God on high?
Shall I come before him with burnt-offerings,
with calves a year old?
Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,
with tens of thousands of rivers of oil?
Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?’
He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness.’

Micah was questioning here, the widely held assumption that has been accepted as capital “T” Truth for a thousand years; that God does not require animal

sacrifice after all. That was indeed a dangerous endeavor, for that challenged not only the norms of society, but it challenged the whole economy of the day.

Micah and the other prophets claimed that God does not require human sacrifice, nor does God require animal sacrifice. What God requires is the sacrifice of “self.” God requires for us to turn away from our own self-interests and seek justice for all, love kindness and humbly, very important HUMBLY walk with God. Here, many, many, many years after Abraham’s reformation, comes another. The prophets were re-forming the widely held assumptions of what God required.

Today, the Christian church is shrinking at a staggering rate. We’re dying! Why? Because the widely held assumptions of how God operates in the world is failing humanity. And because the Christian church is failing, a new RE-FORMATION is underway. They say every 500 years the church encounters a reformation, and the last RE-FORMING of the church happened 500 years ago with Martin Luther and John Calvin and Huldrych Zwingli. We’re due.

So, what is the widely held assumption that is being challenged today? Many, many, many, many Christians today maintain the assumption that the Lord still requires a blood sacrifice if we are to live “righteous lives,” that God is pleased with. However, instead of the blood sacrifice of our first-born son, and instead of the blood sacrifice of animals, God required the blood sacrifice of Jesus. In the supplementary material to this chapter that is available to all of you, McLaren points out that this widely held assumption gives people the following message: “Humans are separated from God and under God’s damnation because of their imperfection. God demands blood sacrifice as a punishment for our sins. Blood-shedding and violent death are, then necessary for punishment. So just as a ram was substituted for Isaac, Jesus was substituted for us.”

This theology is pretty darned old. It’s imbedded in our traditional liturgy and doctrine and even some of the hymns in our hymnal today. It opens up the idea that God is wrathful and angry at us. It leaves the door ajar for judgment, condemnation and blame. It is possible that this theology can be twisted into a kind of hate for our brothers and sisters. And in many, many instances, that is exactly what it has become. But truth be told, this is the widely held assumption

that is killing the church and it is why we are presently experiencing a RE-FORMATION.

The perspectives that are being lifted up today that reject the idea that God is a blood-thirsty God, are not new. Theologians from the start of Jesus' ministry and long before, held the notions that are being taught today by progressive theologians in this new RE-FORMATION. It's just that the ideas are not lone voices crying out in the wilderness, but there is a swelling that is happening today. A rising of many voices challenging the once widely held assumptions of what sacrifice is all about.

And so, what is replacing this idea that the Lord required Jesus to die a bloody and horrific death? The prophets of today go back to the old prophets of antiquity. Sacrifice for Christians is about handing our whole lives over to God so that God can use us to bring about justice, and to be kind to all living things and to walk in partnership with our Creator. Blood-sacrifice of any kind is not necessary, and it never was.

Our faith must always be open to correction, enhancement, and new insight. Otherwise we remain stagnant and our faith will die. But being open to correction requires humility. We must humbly walk with God, open to the possibility of what we have believed to be true all our lives, may not be true after all.

In closing I'd like to share one short story that I've told before, but you get to hear again. When I was serving as Associate pastor at Salem First United Methodist Church, I was leading a class one Wednesday night and the question for all the participants was, "What is your favorite part of worship?" The most obvious answers included, singing old hymns, enjoying the choir, children's time, or the message. But Gary Onstot, the lay leader, a member of the church for well over 50 years, one of the most faithful men I knew in that church had a surprising answer. He said his favorite part of Sunday's service was the offering. We were all a little stunned and asked him to explain himself. And he shared that every Sunday he puts a check in the plate that passes by and is placed on the altar. And every Sunday as he follows through with the physical act of giving, he offers a prayer where he is not just putting a check in the plate, but he is putting his whole life before God and presenting himself on the altar. Gary is the one who taught me

that the offering of our tithes is merely a symbol of the true sacrifice that God requires. The sacrifice of self.

As this church joins with other churches and Christians across the globe in the swelling of this new RE-FORMATION, we carry the message out into the world that the Lord does not require blood. The Lord simply asks for us to live as Jesus did -- seeking justice everywhere, loving kindness in all we do, and with great, great humility, walking with God in partnership, being the instruments that God uses to merge together the kingdoms of the world with the kingdom of God. Let it be so through you and me.