

Power in Christ's Self-sacrifice

Sermon preached at St. Peter & St. Paul, Marietta, GA
by The Rev. Thomas C. Pumphrey, March 18, 2018
The Fifth Sunday in Lent (year B), John 12:20-33

John 12:20-33 (NRSV): Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor. "Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say-- 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him." Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

Do you follow baseball, or play baseball? Do you know the rules well? There is one strategy in baseball that I find particularly interesting as a preacher. This is the strategy of the "sacrifice fly." In a sacrifice fly, the batter purposefully hits the ball high into the air—a "pop-fly," which is easy for a fielder to catch—thus the batter is easily called out. But the sacrifice fly is hit so that teammates advance the bases—perhaps even scoring a run. The batter sacrifices personal opportunity so that others might make it home. There is power in the sacrifice fly. And there is power in God's sacrifice for us, power far greater than the sacrifice fly.

Today is the fifth Sunday in Lent. We are moving ever closer to Easter and the Feast of the Resurrection. But, of course, this means that we are closer to Jerusalem, closer to the Last Supper that we remember on Maundy Thursday, closer to Good Friday and the sacrifice of Jesus' crucifixion. Next week, on Palm Sunday, we hear from scripture how Jesus entered Jerusalem in great celebration. But then Palm Sunday turns to the Sunday of the Passion, and we hear of Jesus' betrayal, arrest, torture and crucifixion.

In today's Gospel reading—the last Sunday Gospel before Jesus enters Jerusalem, we hear Jesus say that now is the time for him to be glorified. Now he will draw all people to himself. But the means to this end is through the crucifixion. The means to this glory is through the cross. Jesus' power comes through his sacrifice, through giving himself up for us.

I heard a brief story once that impressed me as a remarkable example of self-giving. I was asked to join others in praying for a man who received a kidney transplant. Perhaps this gift of life is not so unusual, but I was struck by the account of the donor: the man's living sister gave one of her kidneys so that her brother might live. She accepted the risks of surgery and the loss of a kidney so that her brother might have life. She very literally gave away a piece of herself for her brother.

Now, I know that some families are close, but I've seen enough sibling rivalry and been in enough arguments with my brother and my sister to know that sometimes family relationships

are harder than friendships. Yet this example of someone who gave something of herself for her brother rings true in the Christian life.

I'm sure that this had to be a sign of forgiveness to her brother. After all, what brother has *not* sinned against his sister? And yet she set all that aside to give herself for her brother—that is forgiveness indeed. This gift meant *life* for a man facing *death*, and it took a little of her life as well. This sacrifice also kept alive their relationship.

What a powerful story! There is *power* in that kind of self-sacrifice! And that power is the power and glory of Jesus' sacrifice for you and for me.

Jesus says "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." Jesus gives himself to be the final sacrifice for sin, to break down the barriers that separate us from God, and from each other and the barriers to God's wholeness. Jesus gives himself for us, that we might have life, and have that life eternally. In the weakness of the cross is Jesus' glory and gift to the world. We find Jesus' power in his self-sacrifice.

God loves us enough to come to this troubled world and give all of himself for us—not just a kidney, but his whole life. God not only gave us this dramatic sign of his forgiveness, he made our new life *real* in the resurrection. This new life is stronger than death, stronger than any dangers we fear.

Perhaps we're used to hearing about Jesus' self-sacrifice and his power in weakness. But notice that Jesus also calls us to follow where he leads. Jesus calls us to follow him in the power of Christian self-giving. "Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also." This is the path that candidates for Confirmation and Reception will choose this afternoon. This is the path that Jesus calls all of us to choose.

Perhaps you might not have a kidney to spare or a brother who needs one, but we can give of ourselves in other ways. We can sacrifice our time to pray and grow closer to God. We can sacrifice our time to help others to learn and pray and follow Jesus. As Christians, we answer Jesus' call to give of ourselves not just to family members, and not even just to our brothers and sisters in Christ, but to everyone around us. In our jam-packed schedules, we can sacrifice our time for others. In the midst of our strong sense of justice, we can offer someone mercy. When we are burdened with our own frustrations and stress and tension and our own sense of injustice, we can still muster the gift of kindness. When we are so distracted by our own issues, we can still offer our attention to others and reach out to engage others in relationships.

When we give of our time, God sanctifies the rest of our day. When we give of our resources, God blesses what we keep. When we give of our attention, when we allow ourselves to be weak in the service of others, God strengthens our soul through the nourishment of reconciliation. Jesus heard God's call to give himself up so that the world might be blessed. As servants of Jesus Christ, we follow in the way of the cross, because the way of the cross is also the way of life. There is power in Jesus' sacrifice, power for us, and power in us.

All of these gifts we give feel like sacrifices to us. All of these gifts, on one level, take something from us. But as Jesus said, whoever serves Jesus must follow him, and where Jesus is, there will be his servant also. Yes, Jesus gave himself up to die, and yes, we are called to give of ourselves to others. But if we follow Jesus to the cross, we also follow Jesus to the *resurrection*. Jesus gave himself for us, and Jesus also rose for us, that we might have life and renewed relationship with God and with each other.

Our new life in Christ is greater than our sacrifice, greater than our loss, greater than death or any dangers that we fear. The way of the cross is the way of life. There is power in the sacrifice of Jesus.

As we often hear at the offertory: “Walk in love as Christ loves us, and gave himself for us, an offering and sacrifice to God.”