

“Messianic Sacrifice” (23Aug2020)
Matthew16:13-20; Romans12:1-9

♪“You and Jesus, You and Jesus
go together like a...”♪

Well, I don’t know what you go together like. I don’t think “horse and carriage.” Anyway, carriage doesn’t rhyme with Jesus. A bunch of sneezes? Cheddar cheeses? A Savior frees us?

I don’t know what the answer is, but today’s readings seem to be about how the two of you fit together.

It jumped out at me first with the words of being a “living sacrifice” as a sensible way to serve God, sort of seeming to ask for your effort and how much you’re willing to give up. Yet that intriguing phrase of “living sacrifice” doesn’t seem totally clear or easy, so let’s come back to it.

I was also noticing the relationship between you and Jesus in the Gospel. “Who do you say I am?” Jesus asks. It struck me since the answer to that question is what leads Jesus to say, “and you are...” It’s not just Peter. Who Jesus is relates to and is bound up with who you are.

It’s also important for those identities to go in that order. I’m not saying you’re narcissistic or anything, but you do have a tendency to make it about you. You first want to say who or how you are, what you’re doing, how good or bad you’re feeling, and what that means in your relationship to Jesus. In terms of sentence structure, you place yourself as the subject and make Jesus the object.

That gets dangerous in relation with God and Jesus. If I’m controlling too many verbs, I start to worry—if it’s about *I* worship God, *I* have faith, *I* am spiritual, *I* believe in Jesus. The question isn’t so much, “Do you love God?” The important direction is, yes, Jesus loves you.

Peter, who is there to help us understand, again ends up receiving misdirection as a poster child. Just as two weeks ago we could misfocus on how he was so faithful to walk on water, here we want to make it about him having the right answer, being able to say who Jesus is.

But if we take that as central, then we’re missing the point. When it’s about our response,

then we miss what we’re responding *to*, undercutting the foundation of what church actually is and who God is.

Jesus is God’s chosen and anointed, the Son of the living God. Even on his path to be executed by the Empire, he is what prevails against the gates of Hades and the powers of death. It’s not that we’re choosing sides in a partisan squabble. It’s not even that we’re for or against God. It’s just a confession, a simple admission that Jesus is the source of life.

For an analogy, we might pause and take a deep breath. Or we could’ve ignored our breathing. But it still happens. You might claim you’re breathing helium. But the only, simple, right admission is that you breathe air, life-giving oxygen. And you could try to assert that you’re the one doing the work because you have to inhale, but honestly it’s the oxygen doing it in you and for you.

That’s what the confession of Jesus is like, too, and his work in you. He is life.

It’s even more evidently vital when we get to the 2nd reading, as it talks about your gifts, with Paul making a quick little list of ways faith could be active in you. To stick with our breathing example, Paul could say: well, you might use your breath to sing, or to say something caring, or you might blow up a balloon, or puff a dandelion, or give CPR.

Yet we can end up taking the list as if there’s a right thing to do. It turns the gift into a curse, or at least a burden. Instead of saying, Wow! There’s all this oxygen constantly around for me, and look at all the ways it’s useful! we instead go back to the self-centered concern that adds the word *should*. I *should* be doing such-and-so, and I *should* be doing it more. If you’re not blowing up enough balloons, then you’re wasting the gift.

I don’t like to argue with Martin Luther King, but this week I was reading *Living Lutheran*’s April issue (I’m always behind) and there was a nice article on our vocations with an MLK quote: “When you discover what you’re going to do in life, set out to do it as if God Almighty called you at this particular moment in history to do it... If it falls to you to be a street sweeper, sweep streets like Michelangelo painted pictures... Sweep

streets so well that all the hosts of heaven and earth will have to pause and say, ‘Here lived a great street sweeper who swept [her] job well.’”^{*} I mean, the guy’s articulate. And valuing things that might not seem exceptional I certainly agree with.

But that’s a heckuva burden to put on a street sweeper. You may have oxygen to be able to blow up balloons like Beethoven composed music, but maybe it’s enough that the oxygen filled the balloon and got the job done and you don’t need the critical pressure. It takes what is descriptive and makes it into a rule, from indicative to imperative. It’s enough to say that street sweepers are using their gifts, faith active in love to make our society better. God is working through street sweepers, whether or not they realize it. It isn’t only if the streets become a masterpiece with their effort.

Let me make a distinction. Jesus says “flesh and blood” don’t do this work. Clearly, Peter’s vocal chords needed to speak the confession. Clearly, balloons don’t inflate themselves with oxygen. Clearly, streets won’t get cleaned up just by magical holiness of the Spirit blowing through, but need an actual street sweeper. But we can just as clearly say that the good is effective because of God. Your gifts are not that you’ve mustered enough power and energy and wisdom to know just what’s needed and then to do it so effectively. It’s not that flesh and blood don’t do it, but that flesh and blood don’t do it *alone*.

Partly I’m hammering on this because it’s the truth. But also partly because I worry about you, particularly as we return to the phrase “living sacrifice.”

You likely feel these days as sacrifice, as forsaking so much. Dorothea Torstenson repeated the quip of the early pandemic that we didn’t expect to be giving up so much for Lent this year. And this seems like an endless Lent. If only quarantines really were only 40 days. Life is stifled and hard; you may still be alive. But it’s not much of a living sacrifice. It’s more of small deaths, a sacrifice by a thousand cuts, and for some—in job difficulties or school routines or vacation plans or

our capabilities to socialize and be in relationships—some cuts go deeper.

The message today, the message of faith, is not that you should deal with the pandemic like Michelangelo painted pictures, not that you should be the best darned pandemic responder there is. It’s not that you’re required to register your burdensome gifts so you can give up more. It’s not waiting for your right answer.

The word “sacrifice” is from the Latin and the direct translation is “doing a sacred or holy thing.” Paul rightly adds the word “living” to that because it isn’t about killing something off, not about taking life, that is how to do God’s thing. The Old Testament prophets reiterate that slaughtering things is not how to please God. This is that your flesh and blood is doing the holy thing, is sacred and filled with gifts because the God of life is operating in you through all of these moments. It means the holy thing is street sweeping and is being a family and is playing with friends and is eating lunch and is painting pictures and is sharing caring words and is in all you do. With all of your living, with surviving these days, with every breath, God is doing a holy thing in you, in your flesh and blood. That is your relationship with Jesus. And the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.

^{*} <https://www.livinglutheran.org/2020/04/tap-into-your-vocation/>