

Easter 5
Church of the Good Shepherd, Silver City, NM

May 3, 2015
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Sacrifice

Many years ago the parents of a good friend of mine settled among the Cofan people of eastern Ecuador. They learned the language, and like my parents with the Tsachi people, they began the work of producing the New Testament in the Cofan language. They also brought with them some innovations from outside the tribe. They brought in a kerosene refrigerator. The refrigerator would produce ice cubes, which in the hot tropical climate were a welcome relief in one's drink. The Cofans had never seen ice. One of them, when given an ice cube, began to dance around and toss it from hand to hand. "Hot, hot," he said! Another very perceptive one said, "Oh, this is good. I'm going to take it home, dry it out and keep it!"

Amusing, yes, but this was just the tip of the iceberg. The socioeconomic and political factors that brought the missionaries also brought others. They were entrepreneurs, farmers and ranchers, and sharks. They brought money and a cash economy. They brought strange diseases and stranger cures. Within a generation the Cofan people, like so many other peoples around the world, were thrown headlong into a larger, more dominant culture. Like it or not, they found themselves dependent on forces way beyond them. Unless they could engage the larger culture creatively their future as a people was uncertain. They have adapted well: They now sell carbon credits to multinational companies to fund ecologically sound farming practices on tribal lands.

(We could discuss the ethical implications of such a process but that's a different sermon, so with your permission we'll let that one sit on the shelf until a different time.)

In today's Gospel lesson today Jesus talks about being the true vine. We are the branches and without being joined to him we cannot bear fruit, but if we are joined to him we will bear fruit that will last. It all has to do with being in Christ. It harkens back to a prayer Jesus prayed for us in the previous chapter, "Father, may they be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that the world may know that you sent me." It's almost like getting on the same page as the larger cultural context, but it's an even bigger concept. It's knowing that when we see ourselves as separate from Christ we wither and die, for Christ is the source of our existence, our life and our wellbeing. And just as getting on the same page with the larger culture has changed who the Cofan people are, so being one with Christ changes who we know ourselves to be. Some of it may feel bad—as we find things that were important to us are no longer so, but unlike the cultural analogy I have drawn, all of it is ultimately hugely good. The closer we get to being one with

Christ, the closer we are to being one with God, the truer to ourselves we are, the healthier we are as people, and the more good we do for the world.

The second lesson today the author picks up on many of the themes and language of the Gospel of John. Even perhaps more clearly, in the Epistle of John we see love at the center of the redeeming work of God in the world. Love is the nature of God; love is the motivation for the redemptive sacrifice of Christ on the cross. Love is the nature of those who are joined with God through that action.

There is another image in today's reading that helps us understand. The author refers to Jesus' death on the cross as the atoning sacrifice for sin. Back in Old Testament times sacrifices were offered for the forgiveness of sin. There are some aspects of the rite that are largely lost on us moderns. It's not an economic transaction with God. My niece, when she was a small girl, went into an antique shop with her mother. Being only 3, she was not that in control of her elbows. One of them hit an expensive teapot causing it to crash to the floor and break. Of course, my sister-in-law had to pay for that teapot, which she hated ever after! This model says, "I broke something, so I have to pay for it."

It's not a legal debt to God's holiness. A while back I was turning left onto Swan from Silver Heights Blvd. I rushed to get through after a truck passed through the intersection going the other way. I didn't even get to the bank and the cop had me! I had entered the intersection on red! I paid a fine. This model says, "I broke the law so I have to pay my dues to society."

The problem with these models is twofold: One, the end result is a return to the status quo—nothing has really changed. Second, the cost of the offence may prove worth the price! We've all had children who stole a cookie before supper and got punished but the cookies were good enough to be worth it! These concepts fail to require surrender.

The ancient sacrificial system was far more costly to us and to God. The symbolism went like this: The sacrificial animals were chosen by God, not the penitent. In the ritual the penitent placed his hands on the head of the animal and recited all of his sins. Then the animal was sacrificed, and the flesh of the animal was shared by the penitent's family in a meal.

In laying his or her hands on the head of the animal they associated themselves with the animal. The animal represented their rebellion, the death of the animal represented the death of their own pride, and the meal was an action of thanksgiving for being made acceptable once more to God. The core meaning for the penitent one was a profound surrender to the source of Life. The sacrifice only had meaning if it was an outer action

representing an inner surrender. You hadn't truly offered sacrifice unless you left different than what you came.

Of course, the early Christians were all Jews. They saw in Jesus the ultimate sacrificial lamb: chosen by God, on whom all our insolence and pride was laid, and in whose death we die to sin, that we might rise again to a reconciled life with God. Just as the sacrifice of the sin offering was a recommitment to walk in righteousness and compassion, so when we accept the work of Christ on the cross we commit ourselves to a life of ever-increasing unity with the God of our being. Therefore the writer of I John can say, "He who loves knows God and is born of God; he who does not love does not know God for God is love." Love is the heart of the Divine source of our being.

So what does that mean for us? The word "theosis" was defined by the Church Father Origen in the 2nd century as, "God became man so that man could become God." He got labeled a heretic for saying that until people understood what he meant. We don't become gods, but we share in the nature of God. The theme that in Christ we actually share in the nature of God is one that recurs in Christian writing throughout the history of the Church. We resist it because it sounds esoteric and impossible. We're too aware of our brokenness and the pain and suffering of the world and our own contribution to it. How could we actually partake of the nature of God?

Yet it is really quite simple. God's nature is love. In the epistle lesson for today the author says, "Those who love are born of God and know God." When we do not love we try to create our own little world, as if we WERE God. We find ourselves alienated from God, from one another and from the rest of the world. When you cut the electricity off from a light it goes out. When we are cut off from the ground of existence we begin to die. Our lives become more and more of a shell, the form intact, but no vitality within.

When we do love in the self-giving way that Christ loves we surrender the rule of our egos to the rule of the King who reigns from the Cross. We connect with the ground of our being and the lights go on. We become increasingly who we really are, even as we surrender to becoming godly.

Then an amazing thing happens. When we play chess each playing piece has its role. The game consists of the relationships between all the pieces, in terms of their capacities and their position in relation to the others. When pieces make good plays the game goes well. When they make foolish plays things aren't so good. Even the pieces that have been taken and are off the board are not out of the game, for the game goes very differently if I manage to capture all of your rooks. Their absence still influences the game. The world is like a chess board where each piece has a role to play in relation to

the other pieces. When we live from our egos we change the game for evil. We cut not just ourselves off but we erode others' relationships with the ground of all being. When we live in love we change the game for good. We are reconciled ourselves and we make the world conducive for others to be reconciled, too.

Now, living in self-giving love is not an easy thing to do. Ego is powerful, and has set up structures in the world that support its reign. Challenging the ego stirs things up, makes people anxious and incurs the wrath of those vested in how things are. Jesus promised us that when we abide in him we produce fruit that will last. Ultimately, in view of the Cross, self-giving love wins the day!

So if we believe in Easter, in Jesus' sacrificial giving of himself for our sins and we accept that sacrifice for us then we commit ourselves to ever greater levels of surrender to that self-giving love, to know it and to live it, confident that in the end this is what joins the world to God once more and makes things right again.

Know it and live it; to be loved and to love after the pattern of Christ, this is what it means to live as a Christian.