

Sacrificing Sacrifice

Easter Day: Mark 16.1-8

March 31, 2024

The Rev. Scott Walters

If an elaborate meal with friends or family is part of your Easter observance, I hope it doesn't go sideways for any of you. But if it does, you might take consolation in the fact that you're not all that famous. Not too many decades after the Resurrection, Pliny the Younger got his Roman nose bent out of shape when a friend ditched dinner at his house in favor of someone else's invitation one night. The letter that the snub inspired has now survived almost twenty centuries. It begins like this:

AH! you are a pretty fellow! You make an engagement to come to supper and then never appear. Justice shall be exacted; you shall reimburse me to the very last penny the expense I went to on your account; no small sum, let me tell you. I had prepared, you must know, a lettuce apiece, three snails, two eggs, and a barley cake, with some sweet wine and snow (the snow most certainly I shall charge to your account, as a rarity that will not keep). Olives, beet-root, gourds, onions, and a thousand other dainties equally sumptuous. You should likewise have been entertained either with an interlude, the rehearsal of a poem, or a piece of music, whichever you preferred; or (such was my liberality) with all three. But the oysters, sows'-bellies, sea-urchins, and dancers from Cadiz of a certain — I know not who, were, it seems, more to your taste. You shall give satisfaction; how, shall at present be a secret.

I mean, is that some first-rate Roman hate mail, or what? It also makes a point, from a different direction, that St Paul famously made in 1 Corinthians where he said that love "keeps no record of wrongs." When we start tallying up what we're owed, we're not operating in the realm of love anymore, are we?

This is one reason I think we should be wary of the way some Christians over the centuries have understood the death and resurrection of Jesus as settling an account with God for our sins. This is not the guiding metaphor all Christians have used, by any means, by the way. But it's gotten quite a bit of traction in some corners of the church. And there is language in scripture that, taken at face value, can suggest the central concern of the cross is that God has been offended by our sins, so someone's going to have to pay. This Easter Day I'd like to propose the not terribly radical idea that the story of Holy Week and Easter is not one about settling scores. It's about the perfect expression of a divine love that has always been at work in the world and has never had any interest in counting wrongs or costs at all. Because that's not what love does.

I think "God must be paid for our sins" can also rest on our misunderstanding of the religious practices of the Hebrew people. An even more specific way we talk about paying down our sin debt with God is by making sacrifices. God's not quite as mean as miffed old Pliny who, after listing his former friend's offenses, says the form of repayment he plans to extract "shall be at present a secret." Pliny's going to relish the threat of the great reckoning that is to come for the wasted snails and snow for a bit. At least God gave the Hebrews clear instructions about how to make things right.

But from the beginning, the sacrifices of the Jews were not ways of filling the belly or appeasing the anger of their God, as they often were in the surrounding cultures. And, while they could be a powerful way of dealing with the corrosive effects of their sins and failures, as the best forms of ritual still have the power to do, they weren't ultimately for God's sake. Over and over again we're reminded that God doesn't relate to creation as one who needs anything from it. Especially sacrifices. "Do I eat the flesh of bulls, or drink the blood of goats?" God asks in Psalm 50. That would have been the case with lots of the nearby gods. "Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving, and pay your vows to the Most High." is what they are told.

Ultimately sacrifices were to cultivate thanksgiving for God's gifted creation and promises to take our place faithfully within its abundance. You bring the first tenth of your harvest to offer at a festival, not because God is a severe moral accountant, but as a ritual of grateful trust, an annual reminder that you may have worked hard in your fields, but productive soil and sufficient rainfall, the warmth of the sun and the mysterious kernel of life buried within every seed are gifts offered up by God's creation for free. Hebrew festivals were ongoing practices meant to form a whole community in the ways of gratitude and grace in the midst of a world that desired sacrifice, not mercy.

It should be strange to us, then, that the Resurrection has so often been described in terms of God needing a blood sacrifice for our sins and Jesus offering himself as just that so that nobody has to bother with the mess of slain turtledoves and livestock anymore. Jesus was a faithful Jew who never suggested making sacrifices at the temple was a burden. He just preached what the prophets preached. Which is that we keep turning our rituals inside out and making them into methods of securing the approval of a God who withholds it until we get our sacrifices just right. When, in fact, they were meant to be practices in community that stir our gratefulness and love, reminding us of the loving ways of a loving God who is always creating, always giving away life and goodness for free.

When the women leave the tomb at the strange ending of Mark's gospel, it sure doesn't sound like they believe the terms of some divine contract have just been neatly fulfilled. They are seized with terror and amazement, we're told. None of it makes sense to them. They promise not to tell anyone what they've seen, but apparently they

couldn't keep that promise since here we are, wondering at the same mystery and wondering why it might still matter to the likes of us all these centuries later.

On Good Friday, the most common and enduring ritual sacrifice of them all, the execution of a criminal, had claimed their beloved friend. It was a death that that was supposed to pay a debt to society and to the gods of moral order. Yes, Rome may have gotten this one wrong. Maybe he was innocent. But that's just the cost of doing business in a world of imperfect information. It's no reason to throw out the whole sacrificial system. He'll still be an example to some, is what they thought. Is what we still seem to think.

What the empire didn't know ... what no one quite comprehended, even Jesus's closest friends and those first women at the tomb ... was that the executed one had made his so-called sacrifices at the temple like the faithful and observant Jew he was. But he hadn't lost sight of what they were for. He believed the prophets and the deep wisdom of the Torah that said they were practices that can break us out of the stingy, sin counting, sacrificial mindset, and open a way of life grounded in a grateful love that accepts no conditions.

Surely that's why he told us to turn the other cheek when we're struck, to give with no expectation of return, to learn the trust of lilies and sparrows. Surely that's why he taught us to wonder at the magic of yeast ballooning into bread and mustard seeds bursting into trees. It's why he told stories that said the only way you'll protect yourself from the lavish love of the Father of prodigals is if you refuse to take your seat at the party he's thrown and insist on sitting outside and stewing in your righteous indignation at the injustice of all that unmerited grace. It's why he told us we have to lose all those lesser visions of life, if we're ever to find the life we were made for.

In the end, which was not the end, Love didn't win. Pilate probably didn't even lose any sleep over the matter that night and Rome's version of sacrificial justice rolled on and on and still rolls on. Love didn't win. It lost. As love is always losing because it just can't keep the score. Love was forgiving his executioners on Friday, and on Sunday morning, the love of God, in the body of Jesus awakened right back into the world that thought it had done him in, maybe because he just couldn't stay away from his beloved people, this beloved creation. Love had already forgotten the terrible score.

Friends, Christ is risen! Jesus is alive! And he still longs to deliver us from our deadly old habits of mind that keep tallying up our sins, so we can calculate what the acceptable sacrifices might be. He longs for us to awaken to the fact that we live and move and have our being within the creation of an utterly besotted God, who has no need for sin payments, but who wants us to take up the subversive work of transforming what look like the same old stingy sacrifices into perfect offerings, pure and unqualified gifts by givers who forget even to wonder what might come back to them in return. He wants us to live, not only like we are loved with a love even crucifixion can't kill, but to live like starry-eyed lovers of this world ourselves, so that all

that is best and most beautiful within it can come forth into the space that only love can make.