

The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost - Year B
October 18, 2009
The Reverend Brett P. Backus

“Sacrifice”

*“Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or
be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?”*

Today's Gospel message is about sacrifice. It is about sacrificing part of ourselves and making space for God in our lives.

What does it mean to drink Jesus' cup and be baptized with His baptism? Sacrifice. The early Christians knew this. In their time, to be baptized as a Christian and to participate in the Eucharist meant consciously putting their lives in danger and even risking death. For them, to be a Christian in and of itself, was to sacrifice. As for Christians today, or at least for Christians in America, we obviously do not live in such a situation. Our Christianity does not equal a sacrificed life by default. However, I want us to realize today that our deciding to be baptized with His baptism and our drinking from His cup does still entail and signifies a deep level of sacrifice in our lives as Christians.

To be baptized into the Body of Christ and to participate in communion with God and with one another does result in sacrifice. It results in our being called to sacrifice our time and our energy. It results in our being called to take on the role of servant to our fellow Christians as well as to all members of Creation. And yet, our choosing to participate in these holy sacraments, these holy mysteries, does also require another even deeper level of sacrifice on our part. Thought it may not be our physical lives that is required by our submission to and acceptance of Christ, we as followers of Christ are still called to sacrifice our selves in order that we may put Him first in our lives and that we may truly follow Him. If we do not put Christ first, before all things, then who do we have to follow?

So how do we accomplish this? I dare say that there is one thing that we all have in common which we all probably put in the lead position of our lives over Christ. Money, our possessions. I truly doubt that there is anything else in our lives which is so deeply intertwined with our selves and our souls as our money. So, it seems to me then, that for us as 21st century American Christians the most authentic way for us to truly sacrifice ourselves

in the name of Christ, to lay down our lives as a result of our being baptized in His baptism and drinking from His cup, is for us to make a sacrificial giving of that which makes up such a large part of our lives, our money. Our sacrifice is our tithe. It is the one thing that we can give that is both given out of love and is at the same time one of the most painful actions to take. In tithing we sacrifice ourselves.

Now, I have to confess that this idea, this view of the act of tithing is not something I have always held. Actually, to be honest, until fairly recently I held a pretty negative view of tithing. In a way, I thought that the concept of tithing was simply a money making tool used by the church, a concept taught to Christians that would ensure the financial survival of the Church as a whole. In other words, I saw no spiritual value in the teaching of the tithe, and I certainly was not convinced that such a teaching came from God. I understood and accepted, of course, that a church needs money in order to keep its doors open, but for me the purpose of one's tithe stopped there. That is, until I had the following experience. Now, I have told this story once before in a sermon, so I ask that those of you who have good memories to please at least try and act interested!

Once while I was living abroad for mission work, I had the opportunity to serve a particular indigenous community which to this day continues to hold very strongly to its native religious system and social/cultural practices. My interaction with individuals from this community would completely and forever change the way that I viewed tithing, or sacrificial giving to God. One afternoon, as I approached the mud brick home of an elderly man that I was to eat dinner with, I caught a glimpse of the elderly man's wife around the side of their home almost ceremonially cutting off small pieces of all the vegetables and meat that she was going to use to prepare her meal, and dropping them on the ground. At that point, I assumed that she must be giving some scraps to her animals, though it did seem odd to me because everything was still raw.

After being welcomed into his home, the elderly man quickly offered me a seat and a beer as a gesture of hospitality. As I sat down and made myself comfortable, I noticed the old man do something strange. Immediately after pouring his beer, the man dipped his fingers into his glass and proceeded to sprinkle a generous amount onto the floor while gently whispering a phrase. Shocked at what seemed to me to be a complete waste of the lovely golden refreshment, I asked the man what he was doing. He gently explained that his people always give a portion of whatever they have to mother earth before enjoying what they have received. He said that they do this as a way of recognizing their utter dependence on her and the fact that all things come from her. At that point I remembered what the

woman was doing as I approached her home and everything started to make sense. This family, dirt poor, living in the middle of nowhere, and raising their own food, willingly and whole heartedly sacrificed a portion of absolutely everything they had in their possession, even the source of their very sustenance, as a way of recognizing and placing their god before them in all things.

As Fr. Corky said in his speech at our celebration dinner, sometimes God uses people who are different from us in order to teach us. Finally, I was able to understand the true meaning of tithing. Tithing is sacrificial giving. It is the most profound spiritual discipline that we as Christians can adopt, and it is one of the only sure ways that we as Christians can truly put God first in our lives. After having the experience I just described to you, I was finally able to understand all of this, but I have also come to learn that actually doing it is a whole other level of learning.

Personally, I was very impressed last week as I listened to Fr. Rob share with us about how he was taught to tithe from an early age. I was not. Though my parents were faithful tithers, my brothers and I were left to struggle with the concept of tithing and make a personal decision of our own about the matter. Though I now know what I really think about tithing, the practice continues to be a real struggle for me. Over this past year, our first year not living as students, Carla and I have learned the hard way that it is absolutely impossible to tithe, no matter your level of income, unless you intentionally put God and your sacrificial giving first and before absolutely everything else in your life.

But that's the point isn't it? I don't tend to be a fan of speaking about blessings as a result of tithing. For me, to think about our giving in this way is to call into question the true intention behind our giving. However, the belief in one's life being radically blessed as a result of tithing I too believe to be true. It must be true. Perhaps not in the material sense of being blessed, but rather in the spiritual. Personally, I can imagine no greater blessing than the sense of fullness and confidence that comes as a result of truly putting God first in one's life, and the almost unfathomable experience of becoming sufficiently unattached from wealth, possessions, and worldly things that one is finally able to honestly and fully become preoccupied with God.

That is the result of sacrificial giving. It is the point of sacrificial giving. Just as the early Christians understood that to follow Christ meant to literally put God before all things, even before their own lives. So too must we all understand now that to be baptized into the same baptism as Christ and to drink from the same cup means to literally place God before all things in our life, before our money, before our possessions, before ourselves. To

accomplish this is to truly become followers of Christ. To accomplish this is to be truly blessed.

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Amen.s