

“How do we make something sacred?”

Jesus keeps showing his disciples, again and again, that he is not interested in fulfilling their expectations, or anyone else's. He will abandon the expectations of his own spiritual tradition if he sees true faith in his healing power and person manifested, even in someone Jews consider an outsider.

In each of the readings today, a situation that could seem dangerous or lacking in respect for Jewish law is shown to be the way in which God's will is lived out. The prophet Isaiah speaks of the foreigner who loves the name of the Lord and is willing to be his servant; that person will have his sacrifices accepted at God's altar, the house of prayer for ALL people.

In Psalm 67, God's saving health is to be known among ALL nations. The idea that the Jews are the chosen people often seems to vanish in the generous love God has for all people willing to offer praise. God judges all people with equity, and guides all the nations upon the earth.

The apostle Paul, in speaking to the Romans, makes it clear that all people, not just someone like him, a child of the tribe of Benjamin, may receive the mercy of God. The Romans are just as eligible for the mercy available through God's son, Jesus Christ.

In today's Gospel, Jesus himself does the unexpected. He tells the apostles that the Jewish ideas about some foods defiling those who eat them are essentially meaningless. What gives life meaning is to be “planted” in the love of the Father. If you eat with clean hands while you are full of evil intent, that does not bring you into the nearer presence of God. When the Canaanite woman comes seeking help for her daughter, Jesus acts out a parable in the form of a drama about the up-ending of expectations. At first, he indicates to her that since she is a foreigner, his nourishing healing and love are not for her. When she shows faith that Jesus can heal her daughter with her humility and the acknowledgement that Jesus is the master, he reverses course, commends her great faith, and instantly heals her daughter. Great faith receives its reward, no matter who asks for the blessing Jesus can confer—that of healing.

All of the readings today also refer, in one manner or another, to **sacrifice**. In each instance, what the listeners to the prophet, to the psalmist, to the apostle and to the Master himself, Jesus, are asked to **sacrifice** are their expectations:

- cherished attitudes,
- their unwavering belief in the Law,
- in the case of the Romans, their thought that the mercy of Jesus is not available to them, and
- in the case of the disciples, their attitude that a foreigner should not expect healing from Jesus

...all these versions of “truth” must be abandoned, before the divine action of mercy can allow foreigners to be a part of the covenant at the altar of the house of prayer for all peoples; can allow both Jews and others to experience the light of the countenance of the Divine; can reveal to Romans their equal eligibility for God’s love; and can demonstrate to the disciples that what they are learning from Jesus is available to all.

Sacrifice means to make something sacred, and it always involves accepting and acting upon the unexpected. We humans limit ourselves all through our expectations and our rigid attitudes about what is “right.” Why we expect that a Savior (who ate and drank with tavern keepers, tax collectors who were essentially traitors to their own people, women with bad reputations, and who went around in the Holy Land not with devout rabbinical students but with a bunch of smelly fishermen, and died the ignominious and tortured death of a political criminal would be interested in whether we practice good hygiene, hang out with only virtuous and patriotic members of our own nation, and keep all the laws—those expectations are beyond me.

Somehow, the word “sacrifice” has come to mean something we are expected to do as Christians, to “give up” something. In some instances, that may be the case. However, in many circumstances, sacrifice is literally making something sacred—with our time, our attention, our prayer and our treasure and talent.

Often, true sacrifice asks that we take something on that we would not normally be expected to do. We respond, as Jesus did repeatedly, to needs that unexpected situations put before us. We give up our own personal inclinations in order to serve in ways we could not have anticipated. Many of the demands of the pandemic we are experiencing require sacrifice of habitual patterns, preferences, and likes and dislikes. As followers of Jesus Christ, concerned for our neighbors and our brothers and sisters, we make these sacrifices for the good of the Body of Christ. We make sacred the well-being of those around us, and accept new behaviors and disciplines that we did not choose. Do we truly believe that life is a sacred gift from God? Very well then—we do everything we can to ensure that life continues in those around us.

If there is anything this pandemic has shown us, it is that our expectations are meaningless. The theologian Thomas Aquinas suffered an illness that nearly killed him; he recovered through the grace of God. Someone asked him how he regarded his extensive theological works after having been through such a life-altering experience. He answered simply: “I saw all of them as grass.” Face to face with our own mortality, we are forced to ask what has real meaning. The Great Commandments--to love God, and to love our neighbors as ourselves—reveal themselves to be the real glory of life. We live, and we love, and we honor the sacrifices that life in Jesus Christ requires. May God be pleased with our efforts, and may the example of a godly life, referred to in our collect today, allow us to follow in the blessed steps of the holy life of Jesus Christ.

AMEN.