

After the Sin and Sacrifice

Hebrews 10:11-18

Think back on a significant experience in life. How do you share that story today? Does your telling of the event now differ much from the way it unfolded originally? How does the meaning of your experience for your life change your telling of it? For example, when my daughter was an infant in Bogota, Colombia, I was with her when, one evening, our room in the small hotel caught on fire. A candle left burning had fallen over onto the bed. As I reflect on that story, I tell it in the context of my feelings of guilt, isolation and loneliness following the fire. Then there was prayer and a tangible sense of connection to God and loved ones. The meaning of that story is much more important to me and my telling of the story now than the chronology of events. In fact, I cannot accurately tell the chronology except from my own point of view and then it becomes colored by my interpretations.

This is true for most of us and it was true for the followers of Jesus trying to make sense of his crucifixion and their experience of his presence with them after his death. The fact is that Jesus was crucified. From that we can safely surmise that he was executed by Rome for sedition, being a danger to the empire. Beyond that, everything is filtered through the perspective, experience, and interpretation of the early church. Remember that story about a group of people, acting without benefit of light, who were asked to describe an elephant never having seen one before. They were limited to the sense of touch and could only describe the elephant in terms of the parts of the animal they could feel, and then only by using categories of description with which they were already familiar.

The meaning of Jesus' life and the sacrificial nature of his death, according to the New Testament, was to bring about reconciliation between God and humanity. But how does this reconciliation happen? Was the crucifixion required by God to pay the penalty for humanity's sin (Jesus substituted for us to bring about atonement). Was the 11th century theologian Anselm correct in his attempt to show on purely rational grounds that the debt incurred by human sin could be suitably discharged, and the affront to God's infinite dignity could be suitably rectified only if one who was both fully divine and fully human took it upon himself to offer his own life on our behalf. For at least a thousand years, this interpretation has dominated Christian belief.

The goal of all the New Testament writers was to depict Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God, and the royal one establishing God's Kingdom. There are many interpretations of the cross in terms of the life and ministry of Jesus -- images familiar to Jesus' followers. There is the image of the scapegoat who was sent out into the wilderness to die after ceremonially receiving all the sin of the people. There is the image of a sacrificial offering given to appease God and achieve reconciliation.

The writer of Hebrews depicted Jesus as the high priest, an image that would have been very familiar image to Jewish Christians. Priests offer sacrifices day after day in a futile effort to bridge the gap between heaven and earth. In contrast, Jesus has offered his life on the cosmic altar of the cross to eliminate any further need of sacrifice and any further discussion of sin. The ancient vision of Jeremiah is recalled as God says, "I will put my laws in their hearts...and I will remember their sins no more." (Jeremiah 31)

There are many ways to interpret what Jesus accomplished in his life, death, and resurrection in terms of bringing heaven and earth together. His life of dedication and his death of self-giving

love shows us the extent of God's love and just how hard it is to transform the world into the Kingdom of God. Jesus showed us how to live our lives. And there are other interpretations of the meaning of Jesus' cross. They all have validity. At the same time, no one interpretation is the right. It is a mistake to put that kind of emphasis on an interpretation as representing the whole truth about Jesus.

If none of these interpretations offers the single right answer, then what is right? If the heart of Christian faith is not found by believing in one doctrine about Jesus or in all of them together, then what is at the heart of faith? In the 21st century, given the layers of meaning and interpretation surrounding the Christ event – and given that the key is not which interpretation(s) to believe, where ultimately are we to place our faith. What is the heart of Christian faith? What do you think? I asked this of several ministry colleagues this week. Their answers were simple: to do justice, to make peace, to foster reconciliation.

One of them, in response to my question, looked back at me and said, "I bet you're going to say it's the *Kingdom of God*." Yes, that is my answer. The heart of faith is living in the reality of the King of God. Of course, there is one caveat to that answer. Next week we're going to explore alternative, contemporary language that might fit better than *Kingdom* in terms of the focus of our faith. But for now, I understand Kingdom as representing our partnership with God. God is in each of us and each of us is in God. God is in all of us and all of us are in God.

The heart of Christian faith is the partnership we have with God for the purpose of transforming this world according to God's dream of Shalom: peace, wholeness, and the oneness of humanity in God. We are co-creators with God of a world characterized by compassion, justice, equity, and love. The heart of Christian faith is that we follow Jesus more than worship him, that we follow him on the way he walked 2000 years -- along the way he lived and the way he died.

To follow the Christ Spirit (the Spirit of God), to live and die along this way, is to be awake to our presence in God and God's presence in us – a partnership. It is to let this presence guide our actions and choices, and to make the most of this partnership in the process of doing what we do. This is the heart of Christian faith. The heart that was in Christ also beats in each of us.

So how do you do it? How can we use that partnership and live into it so we can grow, be happy, find peace – all that describes being citizens of the Kingdom of God? The answer is in understanding one thing and in doing one other thing. First, we need to understand that this partnership not of two individual beings (one divine and one human) but of an individual and the divinity of her/his life – our lives within the life of God and God's life lived in each of us and all of us. Second, we need to live our lives along two journeys, one outward and one inward, as author Elizabeth O'Connor described:

Each person, no matter how old, has an important work to do. This good work not only accomplishes something needed in the world, but completes something in us. When it is finished a new work emerges that will help us to make green a desert place, as well as to scale another mountain in ourselves. The work we do in the world, when it is true vocation, always corresponds in some mysterious way to the work that goes on within us. (*Cry Pain, Cry Hope*)

These two journeys flow into each other. We choose and do things with our lives: work, leisure, and service that, when life-giving to us, reflect our vocation. There is also an internal process by which we hold ourselves in the life of God and hold ourselves in oneness with all creation. The journey inward and journey outward are circular. There is no particular order. Do justice, love

kindness, and walk humbly with God. The world of action leads to reflection and my internal process pulls me to act. One of my actions is this poem:

The pain I feel is my doorway
across the threshold
into the room of all pain
where I find Jesus
My oppression is the doorway
into the room of all oppression
being the oppressor
being the oppressed
In that room I find Jesus
What I experienced
moved me inward
to confess my collaboration
with oppression
and with pain.
What I confessed
moved me outward
to fight oppression,
to lift up the oppressed
to end oppression
Journey inward
to value my doorway
across that threshold
into that room
and out to do justice
My passion lies
in front of me?
become a peace warrior
a justice warrior
nonviolent, but not by much
AND value your doorways
your thresholds
out to proclaim liberty
to all who are oppressed
in the world
to proclaim liberty to all oppressed parts of myself
freedom to those I love
and to love all parts
of all people
proclaim liberty using words
when necessary
Justice will be so hard to achieve
It's a long, long, long, long way to level!
To live by faith in
the pain of reconciling
Giving value
to my grief
and yours
This is the doorway

This is the threshold
to salvation! (Jack Price, 2009)

There is an urgent message for each of us. Trust that God is the reality of our lives. Trust that the priorities of life need to be giving service, doing justice, making peace, challenging violence non-violently, living compassionately, agitating political power, feeding the poor, clothing and housing those in need, acting to enable freedom and release from captivity for all who are the prisons of life: prisons of fear, hate, pride, illness, confusion, wealth, and poverty. Most churches offer some ways to do this -- in cooperation with each other. You may know some ways to do this yourself in your other-than-Sunday-morning life. These actions, what you and I do, move the world, even a small part of it, toward alignment with the Kingdom of God. They also move you and me along the way of spiritual renewal and growth.

Let us act! Let us pray! Let us share our lives! Let us choose to live in a reality that we can't see most of the time -- a reality we sometimes touch in worship and in prayer, a reality we know at the deepest place of our existence, a reality in which we hope most desperately. We can find this reality and live in it. The way is to follow Jesus.