

Our reading from the fifth chapter of Leviticus is part of a grouping of chapters – the first seven chapters – which have been called by some scholars “a small handbook on sacrifices.”

There are instructions in these particular chapters that may at first glance seem to be almost irrelevant to us who do not perform animal sacrifice any more.

When someone talks about ‘getting back to the Bible’, I like to refer them to these chapters – do you want to see this next Sunday here in worship?

It would be a bloody mess all over the carpet, that’s for sure! Not exactly my idea of ‘traditional worship’!

And yet, sacrifice such as this was absolutely essential in the worship of ancient Israel, for through these sacrifices we’re reminded, as strange as it may seem, that God loves us!

Because in those sacrifices God was providing the means for his people to restore a broken relationship with God.

And these sacrifices were made outside the temple, so the people were reminded that their life with God was not just private and personal, but it was public, too.

But this observation gives us the question for the morning, for those of us whose biblical faith is built upon this faith we find in the Old Testament scriptures: *the question is why we don’t do it. Why am I off the hook when it comes to offering these sacrifices, Sunday after Sunday all year long?*

In one sense, of course, the reason is simple. It’s the answer to every question you ask the children in the children’s story – I remember one 4<sup>th</sup> of July, I asked whose birthday it was; a hand shot up, “Jesus!”

Jesus is the answer. Jesus is the reason why we don’t perform these sacrifices. He is for us our priest. And on the cross, he offers up his own life as the only sacrifice that we ever need.

And his life and with his death given for us, all the other sacrifices fade into insignificance: “once for all” the scriptures say, upon the cross.

A sacrifice, not that we provide, but that God has provided for us. A sacrifice for you and me.

But is that it? Is that it when it comes to sacrifice? One death on a cross so long ago. Wiping out the whole system of sacrifices? Is that it? Is that all we should say about sacrifice?

Well, of course, the answer to that question is mixed! YES: the bloody sacrifices are over.

But NO: the idea of sacrifice, the lessons from sacrifice, these are to be as indelible a part of our worship and our spiritual lives, as radical a part of our lives as ever they were in the lives of God’s ancient people – whether in our worship or in our daily living.

The idea of sacrifice, then, is there at the very core of our worship still today – many sanctuaries are shaped like a cross – a cross on the table, on the wall – one church, it hung over the pulpit, visible to all!

The way it ought to be: so we cannot miss it, influencing everything we do in our worship: the love of God for us made known in the death, the sacrifice of Christ for us; a sacrifice which brings to an end all those animal sacrifices of the past but which builds on them for its significance: to restore our broken relationship with God.

But it’s not only in our daily and our weekly worship that we come face to face with sacrifice in the life and the death of Jesus Christ. It is, according to the scriptures, also, to be in the way we live our lives.

Sacrifice is not just something God does for us. It is something that God calls us to do for others.

Look again at the opening words of our reading from Paul's letter to the Romans: *In the light of the mercy of God (in the light of what God has done for us in Christ, in the light of the sacrifice of Christ for you and me), present your bodies as living sacrifices to God, which is your spiritual worship, holy and acceptable to God. Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your minds that you may prove what the will of God is, what is good and right and holy.*

Present your bodies to God in response to Christ's sacrifice for you – living sacrifices to God. Is this your way of life? A sacrificial way of life?

If I do not have to shed blood as part of worship as a priest before you, what is shed in my life and in yours which in any way, shape, or form resembles a sacrifice these days?

Where is sacrifice in our lives? Have we even touched its edges?

I'm not exactly sure what sacrifice means for us who live in this country, still the wealthiest in the world. We, all of us here today, are among the wealthiest people in this world whom God looks down upon week after week.

So surely some of our sacrifice has to do with our comfort and our wealth.

Because so many of us think in terms of satisfaction rather than sacrifice – think about it this way: we don't like raising taxes which calls for a sacrifice, but it's the only way teachers and police and firefighters can get a salary increase; but to satisfy our football fever...

For example: Alabama: educators across the state have not received any kind of pay adjustment in about seven years; "I truly appreciate the sacrifices our teachers have made," says Gov. Bentley.

But the football coach at the University of Alabama gets paid \$7 million a year and had his \$3 million home paid off by supporters.

Sacrifice or satisfaction – you tell me.

When we think of our religion, our church, we do the same - we look for how it satisfies us, not for the sacrifice called for by Christ.

I was working with a church's Pastor Nominating Committee – it was a multi-staff church, and as the committee talked about the responsibilities of the pastors, the statement was made that they need to be clear about the ministers' responsibilities, so when someone had a complaint, they would know whom to call.

This 'complaint' responsibility for ministers and it's an unwritten part of the job description, but it's indicative of how we think about the church. We use religion for our satisfaction, rather than hearing God's call to sacrifice – rather than presenting our bodies as a living sacrifice, we present God with our shopping list and demand satisfaction.

The church is seen as a supplier of religious services, and if the customer is not satisfied with the services received, you complain – just like a department store or a club.

Following that line of thought, it was John Judson at a General Assembly a few years ago who spoke about the loss of membership in our churches.

He put it in a different light that I think points to our use of religion in terms of satisfaction versus sacrifice.

He said that we're focusing on the wrong thing as we talk about the loss of members – he says that Rotary clubs and country clubs have members, but that churches are supposed to have disciples, and he asked the pointed question: Are we in the membership business or the discipleship business?

Members come looking to be served – disciples look for ways to serve. Members look to be satisfied – disciples look to sacrifice.

Satisfaction centers on us and simply builds walls for our comfort zone, while sacrifice centers on Christ and challenges us to move beyond and follow Christ into a discipleship zone!

What would it mean for this church's mission and ministry, what would it mean for your faith if you chose to sacrifice?

You think it through. Where is the sacrifice, where is the point, the place, for you to present yourself as a living sacrifice?

I don't know where it is for you, but look for that place in your life and say to God: "*Here is a place, a small place perhaps, to begin with, which I will sacrifice to you.*"

There is power in sacrifice, because God will take that and use it – on one hand to make you a stronger, more faithful disciple, and on the other hand, for the world to see what is good and acceptable and holy in the eyes of God – and with both hands, to give God's love in Jesus Christ to the world.

TO GOD BE THE GLORY.