

The Sacrifice Makes It Sacred

This coming Monday, we will celebrate Memorial Day. Memorial Day is a time where we are mindful of and thankful for those who answered the call to serve our country and made the ultimate sacrifice. Our Scripture readings for Sunday are also stories of sacrifice, but I'm going to address them from a counter-intuitive perspective at first. I want to ask you if you have ever said, "What a waste!" I hope I'm not upsetting anyone by asking this question on Memorial Day, because I am not suggesting that about our troops. I'm just asking if you have ever experienced a situation in your life where that thought crossed your mind. The Scripture verses I have chosen for today include a few stories in the Bible where some of the characters might have said just that: "What a waste!"

First, let's look at 2 Samuel 23:13-17: "Towards the beginning of harvest, three of the thirty chiefs went down to join David at the cave of Adullam, while a band of Philistines was encamped in the valley of Rephaim. David was then in the stronghold; and the garrison of the Philistines was then at Bethlehem. David said longingly, 'O that someone would give me water to drink from the well of Bethlehem that is by the gate!' Then the three warriors broke through the camp of the Philistines, drew water from the well of Bethlehem that was by the gate, and brought it to David. But he would not drink of it; he poured it out to the Lord, for he said, 'The Lord forbid that I should do this. Can I drink the blood of the men who went at the risk of their lives?' Therefore, he would not drink it."

David was holed up in a cave, and the Philistine garrison was at Bethlehem. David longed for a drink of water from the well outside Bethlehem. Three of his most loyal confidants took David seriously. They went on a mission that involved hiking 11 miles, breaking through the garrison, getting the water from that well, and then bringing it back to him. But instead of drinking the water, David pours it out on the ground and says, "God forbid that I should drink this." That doesn't seem to us like a shrewd move for a military leader that wants to build loyalty. Is there any way David's soldiers would do anything like this for him again? They might have easily said, "What a waste!"

Not so fast! There is much more going on here. We ought to remember David was a shepherd boy who grew up in Bethlehem. David is longing for a simpler time, prior to all of the drama and strife of his current reality where he is under duress and so many people are counting on him. David doesn't just pour the water on the ground: he pours it out "to the Lord." He turns this into a ritual. In the ancient world, there is a such thing as a drink offering to God. People at that time recognized that food and water were gifts from God. David turns the brave actions of his soldiers into a sacred offering. The cost of bringing that water is so high that David concludes that he is not worthy to receive it, that only God is worthy of a gift this grand. The sacrifice of these soldiers makes it worthy of God. By pouring the water out to the Lord, David turns it into a sacred ritual, honoring those brave soldiers for their sacrifice. When we understand what is really going on here, we re-tell the story in a different light. It is no longer a story of impetuous, reckless waste, but a story of honor, commitment and humility.

Now let's look at Matthew 26:6-13. We encountered Luke's version of this story in a previous sermon. I think Matthew's version really helps draw out some of the same wisdom as our reading from 2 Samuel: "Now while Jesus was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, a woman came to him with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment, and she poured it on his head as he sat at the table. But when the disciples saw it, they were angry and said, 'Why this waste? For this ointment could have been sold for a large sum, and the money given to the poor.' But Jesus, aware of this, said to them, 'Why do you trouble this woman? She has performed a good service for me. For you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me. By pouring this ointment on my body she has prepared me for burial. Truly I tell you, wherever this good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.'"

"Why this waste?" Jesus' disciples said angrily. Jesus says that what she did was not wasteful: it was beautiful. It was a holy and sacred act. Jesus said that because of her sacrifice, her story would forever be told as part of his own story. And here we are still talking about her today. When Jesus retells her story, he makes it part of his own story - a story of beauty, commitment and sacrifice. In both of these Biblical stories, the sacrifices make them sacred. In both readings, the sacrifices that were made were costly. It is the cost of these sacrifices that made them ritual acts. Simple water becomes sacred, simple anointing oils become sacred - because of what they cost to offer them.

As we go through life, we sometimes experience events that prompt us to think, "What a waste!" At Memorial United Methodist Church in Thomasville, North Carolina, the senior pastor challenged the staff I was on to come up with a big project that would bring the members of the church together and connect them more to the local community. We decided to tell the story of Jesus' birth through a live, drive-through nativity. It would begin with Isaiah's prophecies, proceed to Herod's palace, progress through Bethlehem to the manger, and end with the empty tomb. We called it the "Journey to Bethlehem." And it was a huge undertaking. We had to build sets for the village, we had to sew costumes for all the participants, we had to find animals to enliven the sets - including camels!

I will tell you now that when we began sharing the vision we had and plotting out the budget for this project, several members of the church said, "Why this waste?" I'm not necessarily being critical of them; we need folks to hold us accountable and ask the tough questions. Wood, paint, fabric, props and animal rentals all cost money - quite a lot of money, as you can imagine. The whole church had to ask the question, "Should we do this?" There were people who thought the time, effort and expense would be better spent feeding the hungry, volunteering in schools, healing the sick. These were valid concerns to be sure, but we decided to raise the money for the project outside of the regular church operational budget and go for it. We didn't know at the time whether it would be worth it. Would people show up? Would bad weather ruin the experience? Would it be too costly? Even so, we chose to pour ourselves out into our community to dynamically tell the greatest story ever told. I'm telling you now about the "Journey to Bethlehem" because this is one of those times where everything worked out. We had over 400 cars and even families on bicycles come through that first year. Yes, it cost us time, effort and money, but we did it because we love our Lord, and all our hard work paid off. God took our offering and deemed it holy - deemed it sacred.

Sometimes, however, when we say, "What a waste," we don't get the sense that it was worth it. I have been involved in two ministries that had similar goals: to create worship experiences for people with special needs. In Greensboro, I was one of the founders of Salvage Garden, which projected a vision in which everyone was valued. In Thomasville, it was Worship 139, taken from

the Psalm which says we are wonderfully made. In both cases, we put tremendous time and effort into creating sensory worship events, mostly for kids, that didn't rely on words for praising God. We made music together, we prayed with hand and arm gestures, we incorporated color and movement whenever we could to engage people in worship. And in both cases, things started out really well, with anywhere from 20 to 40 people attending. But as time went on, we saw our numbers decline. We realized that families with special needs children often have routines they must follow and are on tight schedules. We were more successful in holding onto a core group of folks in Salvage Garden, but Worship 139 dropped down to 2 people the last time we held it. It would have been easy for myself and my partners to say, "What a waste." But it was never a waste. God's word tells us that whenever two or more are gathered, God will be in the midst of them. The sacrifices we made as leaders and believers made it sacred, even if it was just for a season.

I'm going to be honest with you and tell you that there have been times in my life where I questioned whether my seminary education was worth it. My path to ministry was neither straight nor easy. My plans for how this was supposed to go kept changing. I was involved in part-time music ministry for a long time, both before and after divinity school. Sometimes it looked like that was all I would ever do - that I would never be an ordained pastor. Though I managed to combine music ministry with serving as a pastor in two other churches, I still often said, "What a waste. I should have stayed in software. I didn't need to go to Wake Forest to do this." I think we all have times in our lives where we question the decisions we've made, and the reason I'm telling you this is to free you to own that as well, for all those times that you've thought, "What a waste." We are all called to engage with God and bring to God the things that are on our hearts. That thought has been on my heart several times. Thankfully, I've been able to get past it now, at least as far as my education and vocation are concerned, but that doesn't mean those doubts and questions never existed.

So often, we make sacrifices for our kids, our careers, and our relationships - we pour so much into them! We invest so much of ourselves, our time and our talents, that when it doesn't work out the way that we had hoped, we could easily say, "What a waste." But in all of this, God sees us, God knows our hearts, God knows our struggles, God knows our sacrifices. And all of this is part of God's story. Our efforts and investments are not wasted. Our kids, our jobs and our relationships are blessings. When we invest in them, we invest in our blessings, and our sacrifices are not wasted. When we are tempted to say, "what a waste," it's important to try to reframe or retell our stories, much like our Scripture readings today.

Let's now consider the words of the apostle Paul, who wrote in Ephesians 1:9-10 that God "has made known to us the mystery of his will, that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth." The Greek word for the underlined phrase is *Anakephalaiosasthai*. It means to summarize, recapitulate, gather up in one, or to bring unity. In ancient Greek, this is a mathematical term which means to "sum up." Paul uses *Anakephalaiosasthai* to describe Jesus. He is saying that God is summing everything up in Christ. All of history, and all that will ever be, begins and ends with Jesus. Paul is saying that all of our stories - including those times we say, "What a waste" - all of those are being summed up in Jesus. The woman who breaks the alabaster jar: her story becomes part of Jesus' story. All of our stories become part of Jesus' story, too. The term "infinity" is also a mathematical term that applies to Jesus, who is infinite. Here's something really cool: any number that we try to add or subtract, multiply or divide by infinity is still infinity. When our stories are added to Jesus' story, we become part of the Gospel. We become part of infinity: part of eternity.

In our stories, quite often the worst moments are the most interesting. The hard times, the moments of loss, the moments of sacrifice: they make our stories worth hearing. What if you went to a movie, and in that movie, everyone is happy, everyone immediately finds their true love, there's no conflict, no strife and everyone lives happily ever after? Pretty boring right? That's not a very interesting story. I don't think I'd pay to see that movie. It's the hard times that make our stories more interesting.

Let me illustrate this by telling you two different versions of a camping trip: they have the same ending but different paths for getting there. Here's the first version: my son and I got some time together over a weekend to go to the Davidson River Campground in the mountains of North Carolina. We learned some things about ourselves, each other and about nature. Now the second version: it started raining right after we left and didn't stop raining the entire time. One of the tent poles broke, and we had to use a stick and duct tape to fix it. Our plan to read books at night (and listen to the Wake Forest game) was ruined when we realized we didn't bring any batteries with us. I got poison ivy. The water in the Davidson River was too cold for swimming. We were startled by a snake in the campground and had to chase it out. Now: which of those two stories is more interesting? The second one, right?

Yet neither version is completely true or honest. Neither tells the whole story. If all we did was tell the bad parts of the story, that wouldn't be an honest account. Stepping away from the event, I can see that my son and I still found a way to have some laughs. The river was so cold that it numbed the poison ivy. We learned which snakes to avoid. Without batteries to listen to the game or read by flashlight, we focused more on each other and listened to the rain. Likewise, if we leave out the bad stuff, we're not being truthful either. The good and the bad are all part of the story.

When we tell the whole story, we realize that the weekend was not a total waste. We learned resilience and grew closer. At the time it was happening, this experience, complete with rain, poison ivy and snakes felt like a trip we should never have taken. In the middle of it, that trip was awful. It would have been easy for us to say, "What a waste!" But the further removed we get from the moment, the funnier it gets, and the more important that time together, learning and growing becomes. Now that my son has finished school and is out in the workforce, and those camping trips are fewer and farther between, those memories become more and more precious, snakes and all.

That's what God does. He holds up our stories in the scope of eternity, allowing us to look at them differently. When our stories are retold through Christ - all of our pain, loss, sacrifice and frustration, as well as our victories, our joy, and our laughter - becomes a love story, a story of triumph. We are called to do our humble best, to run the race, to make bold efforts to bring about God's kingdom. None of us individually can bring about the full realization of God's kingdom on earth. We are all part of the body of Christ - headed up by Jesus himself - doing our part, doing as much as we can for as long as we can, knowing that we are part of God's story. A story that is still being written, a story whose ending is the same as the beginning, a story with a happy ending because there is no ending!

So go on: serve God with all you have, love the people in your life with reckless abandon, knowing that in God's story, nothing is wasted. On Memorial Day, I hope we all take a moment to remember those Americans who sacrificed their lives to protect our nation and its people. And I hope we will all honor their sacrifice which makes it sacred. Amen.