

Words for an Emerging Church

Sunday, June 27, 2021

Facing Up to the Sacrifice Factor

I have received full payment and even more; I am amply supplied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent. They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God. And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus.

—Paul writing from prison, Philippians 4:18-19

As we continue to emerge from the COVID slowdown we enter a season of taking back and reclaiming. Now is the time to take back the vacations and dining that we so missed. This is the season to again move about and socialize. But we are finding this harder than we first anticipated. The COVID malaise persists and will require our attention if we are to defeat it.

I continue to be taken aback by the things that one can miss about the slowdown. We said we missed vacations and dining out, but we also came to like the money we saved staying home and the fewer headaches we had once we didn't have to plan those getaways. We said we missed the social gatherings, but we came to like the lower stress of not having to plan and host events. In my own work I immediately lamented losing the mobile nature of my pastoral duties. Pastors once had numerous meetings to attend, appointments to keep and people to visit, and we clergy spent more time on the road than in the office. We may have longed for more office time to collect our thoughts, prepare sermons, and get organized, but too much office time made us stir-crazy. Then came the immobilizing virus. It took a while, but I came to enjoy the quiet of the office, and as my old schedule returns, I am already missing that abundance of time in my study. This is not only a season to take back the old habits and pleasures of pre-Covid times. This is also the time to bid farewell to some unrecognized blessings experienced during the shutdown. Getting back to normal involves leaving something behind. To use an underappreciated Biblical word, if we want to gain anything it will require sacrifice.

Sacrifice is something of a dirty word in our day. We prefer to believe that sacrifice is not necessary as we are experts at efficiency and can get all sorts of things done with the right planning. We tell ourselves that sacrifices and hard choices are unnecessary when we can instead multi-task and juggle our many endeavors. Efficiency is a great thing, and can even be an expression of good stewardship, but it only goes so far. And if we are to be honest with ourselves, we will readily admit that multi-tasking and juggling are more illusion than reality. Truth be told, time, energy and funds are limited resources. Life requires choices, and each choice we make demands sacrifice.

Much of the persistent malaise that holds us is the result of our reluctance to make those sacrifices. We want to re-engage, but we don't want to leave our newly renovated comfort zones, and so we feel stuck. To get back to our pre-COVID ways means to give up our more relaxed schedules and our greater abundance of quiet, lower stress times. In terms of reactivating our Church life we need to think in terms of the sacrifice of time which worship and Church activities require. A dollar in the plate is also a sacrifice as giving means that this money will not be spent or saved for other, more self-serving purposes. Whatever energies, mental or physical, which we exert in the Lord's work is a sacrifice of other projects and interests which could be served. Choices can be hard because we do not like to sacrifice.

Sacrifice has become a dirty word in our day, but we could all benefit by facing this challenging concept more squarely. And yet, as we step back to understand sacrifice from a perspective of life and eternity, we find that there is tremendous gain in sacrifice! The imprisoned Paul thanked the impoverished Philippians for the support which they sent to him at some sacrifice, and he assured them with a promise to be embraced by all those who dare to sacrifice for God. *And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus.* God provides for those who live obediently. When I was unemployed, I once pondered what kinds of funds I might have if instead of giving to the Lord's work I had simply saved it. The enemy was trying to lead me astray, but I had not an ounce of regret. Instead, I delighted in the faithfulness of God whom I trusted to be faithful to me in that season of uncertainty—and indeed He was!

The word sacrifice brings to mind something given up and lost, but in its Latin root it means that something is made holy. Whatever we may sacrifice in keeping our walk with Christ, painful as that loss might be, will be made holy and become an offering of eternal value. If we want to shake this post-COVID malaise it will require some choices and sacrifice. It may not be a path we will naturally want to follow, but it is the wonderful highway to renewed life.

Blessings,

Pastor Jim

My Lord and my God, take me from all that keeps me from thee.

My Lord and my God, grant me all that leads me to thee.

My Lord and my God, take me from myself and give me completely to thee.

—Nicholas of Flue, 1417 - 87