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This Holy Mystery: Sacrificial Living

This morning is both a beginning and an end. Since Ash Wednesday, we have been on a six-week journey through Lent, walking step by step, week by week, closer to the emotional and spiritual roller coaster of the final week leading up to Good Friday and eventually, Easter Sunday. We have spent our time in worship during this holy season of reflection and preparation focusing on our sacrament of Holy Communion, delving into the different aspects of the meal, what it means for us, and what it challenges us to do and be in response. From experiencing forgiveness, to giving thanks, to remembering who you are as you remember Jesus, to lamenting exclusion, to celebrating unity, and being inspired by the Holy Spirit, this has been a deep and meaningful journey to the heart of this sacred meal of bread and cup, and I hope it has been as impactful for you as it has been for me.

On this final Sunday of Lent, we celebrate Palm Sunday and remember when Jesus rode into Jerusalem, greeted with joy and a palm waving procession. We know the way the story goes though... Jesus, being Jesus, was not content simply basking in the glow of praise, but got right to work... and as a result, stirred up trouble and made people upset. Our gospels tell how Jesus weeps over Jerusalem, overturns the tables and then teaches in the temple, telling parables to warn the people against the Pharisees. The Scribes, Pharisees, and High Priests are uneasy with Jesus' teachings, and we hear of their plotting and scheming. Jesus' teaching challenges the rote religion, the understanding that if you follow the rules about Sabbath and food restrictions, offer your sacrifices in the Temple according to the specifications in the Torah, then you'll be good to go; God would be with you and you'd receive your blessings.

This model of religiosity is based on computing... putting in X so you receive Y in return... only offering to God what is absolutely required... only BECAUSE it's required, not really because you WANT to make an offering. Jesus was not the first person to push back on this calculated view of religious observance, but prophets like Amos and psalm writers argued that worship should be more than what happens in the Temple, on the sacrificial altar. In Amos, we hear, "Stop your songs. Stop your offerings. I will not accept them because your hearts aren't right." "The sacrifices of God," says Psalm 51:17, "are a broken spirit and a contrite heart." These OT writers argue that simply offering a sacrifice on the altar

is not what God really wants... what God desires is a changed life, the worship of heart and life. It is not music and sacrifice in the Temple that God wants from us, but to do justice, love righteousness, and walk humbly with our God.

Jesus continued on this OT teaching of challenging rote religion... religion that existed for the simple purpose of maintaining the laws and following the prescribed rules and rites. This last week of Jesus life highlights the length that he would go to live out this ministry, the personal sacrifices he was willing to make in order to share the good news of liberation and love, healing and hope. At the communion table, we remember the sacrifices that Jesus made in his life... the public ridicule and punishment he withstood through his death, and how, even from the cross, he continued teaching us about love and forgiveness. Jesus' suffering compels us to remember him and all others who have given their lives in attempts to overturn powers of social oppression, and to pick up the mantle ourselves as we offer our whole selves for God's work and kingdom building.

This level of dedication of self is not easy... it's not attractive... and if we're being honest, it's not often what people are looking for when they come to church. For many, church (and faith in general) has been overtaken with a consumer mentality... asking first, "What am I getting out of it?" We go to church because it makes us feel better, we like the music, or maybe most of all, we enjoy fellowship with the people we meet there. While none of these are bad reasons for attending church, they should not be the ultimate reason... In our Romans text, we heard Paul encouraging the Roman church to "present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship" – reminds me that faith is not something we do for ourselves... for what WE CAN GET OUT OF IT. We do not go to church simply because it makes us feel better, driven by the question, "What's in it for me?" This is something that separates church from many of the other "member" driven organizations. Church isn't all about you! It's about God.

If you find yourself focused solely on what you like and get out of church, I challenge you to hear again this scripture, which resonates through the conclusion of our communion liturgy... "I urge you to present you bodies as a living sacrifice to God"... Our faith is not about what we can get from God, or even what we can get from the church... it's about what we can offer to God and for God's work in our church, community, and larger world. It is about connecting with something that is bigger than ourselves, remembering that it's not all about us, but about loving God and neighbor, and inspiring and equipping us to help in the justice and righteousness work of building the kingdom of God here in our midst. It is about who we are and how we live every day, inside and outside the church. It's about living our lives as an offering for God.

As we journey through this Holy Week, leading us to the cross of Good Friday and the Easter celebration beyond, I invite you to listen carefully for the ways you are being challenged to respond to God's call in your heart and life. As you partake of This Holy Mystery of Communion, may you experience strengthening of heart and spirit, and hear with fresh ears, the way God is calling you to "present your whole self as a living sacrifice to God." May we all be blessed in the offering of our hearts and lives. Amen!