EVERYTHING, REALLY?
Scripture: Hebrews 9:24-28 and Mark 12:38-44

FOCUS: We New Testament folk are called to sacrifice not blood and critters, but ourselves and all that we have and are.

Jesus had some pretty harsh words for religious professionals, words that we who dare stand in pulpits proclaiming the Word of God ought to take very seriously. In our Gospel text from Mark Jesus is, in essence, telling the laity to watch out for the preachers. He warns that while the Scribes love being treated with respect, and gladly sit at head tables at civic events expecting to be honored along with the politicians, they are not doing such a good job of taking care of those in need, and they are taking advantage of the vulnerable. They are using their positions rather than serving their parishioners.

Jesus warns that there will be a day of reckoning for such folks. Implied, if not stated outright, is the idea that a new day has arrived, a day when the rules governing access to God have been rewritten. For centuries the people had assumed that access to God required an intermediary, and the spiritual leaders of the day were glad to accommodate that assumption. It was a lucrative and prestigious profession, one easily and often exploited for personal gain and social advantage. One source of their power was their sacred responsibility for the handling of the mandatory animal sacrifices, another their exclusive right of access to the most sacred parts of the temple and by implication to God’s presence. Jesus was a real problem for the church hierarchy for he came to do away with the need for blood sacrifice. He came to rend the vail in the temple which separated the people from the presence of God and to initiate their direct access to God. He came to make the work of the scribes and Pharisees obsolete

In the scripture we have read from Hebrews we are reminded that, as New Testament folks, we no longer have to rely on mortal mediators to help us get through to God. We are not called to bring recurring sacrifices as atonement for our failures. We know the truth that religious professionals are and have always been just regular guys and gals. Of course we can learn from them, and the vast majority are really godly servants, but that is all they are, servants of the living God. And isn’t that what each of us is called to be?

We New Testament saints also know that the sacrifice God seeks is not a whole herd of cattle or a flock of birds. God isn’t looking for us to slaughter any of God’s creatures in a feeble attempt to show our contrition. Even in the Old Testament God, frustrated with a people who focused attention on the letter of the law while ignoring the spirit, spoke through the prophet Hosea these words: ***“What shall I do with you, O Ephraim? What shall I do with you, O Judah? Your love is like a morning cloud, like the dew that goes away early. But I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice.”***

Through Isaiah God spoke to God’s chosen people: ***“What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats. . . Trample my courts no more; bringing offerings is futile; incense is an abomination to me. . .Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.”*** In The Message Isaiah says it this way. ***“‘Don't you think I've had my fill of burnt sacrifices? . . . Quit your worship charades. I can't stand your trivial religious games: Monthly conferences, weekly Sabbaths, special meetings - meetings, meetings, meetings - I can't stand one more! I'm sick of your religion, religion, religion, while you go right on sinning. . . Go home and wash up. Clean up your act. Sweep your lives clean of your evildoings so I don't have to look at them any longer. Say no to wrong. Learn to do good. Work for justice. Help the down-and-out. Stand up for the homeless. Go to bat for the defenseless.”***

David shared similar words, in that poignant Psalm 51 of contrition, written in response to being confronted by Nathan with his sinful tryst with Bathsheba and his murderous plot against her husband. ***“O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise. For you have no delight in sacrifice; if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased. The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.”***

Thank goodness we are not expected to bring animals to church, here to spill their blood on the altar. The fire marshal is, I am certain, very glad that we will not be burning any flesh either while here this morning. There is no longer any need for such rituals. Jesus made the one blood sacrifice which is sufficient for us all. He offered himself, not as a bloody offering to an angry God, but as an example of the calling which is ours, the calling to be people willing to sacrifice, to take up crosses, to offer up literally everything to God, trusting that God will go with us as we journey through this old world, doing God’s work, being the hands and feet of Christ for this time and in this place. And because of the sacrifice Jesus made we can look forward to the future as we claim the promise Paul gives us in our text from Hebrews. He writes that Christ shall appear a second time to those expecting him for salvation. And when he does he will take us home to glory.

We have been freed from the obligations of the ancient sacrificial system. Thank goodness we are no longer called to participate in sacrifice, right? Not so fast! If we are to truly take to heart what we have revealed to us in the New Testament, the challenge we have before us is far more daunting and no less messy than would be the call to sacrifice some animals this morning. We find our instructions for sacrifice in the gospel lesson we have read.

Jesus was in the temple, teaching, an opportunity offered to any Jewish male who felt he had a message worth sharing. But as he spoke he began to meddle. He spoke those harsh words about the arrogant and neglectful behavior of the scribes. He even dared call them out for their intentionally verbose and vacuous prayers. Jesus knew that it was all a show, He understood that real prayer is a very personal conversation. Remember how he condemned as hypocrites those who prayed on the street corner making sure everyone heard them? He then called for folks to go into closets, to close doors, there to truly pray, one on one with God. But you see the religious leaders of the day were not interested in promoting personal prayer, for such was a threat to their authority.

Having sufficiently stirred the pot, Jesus sat down to watch folks present their offerings. Talk about intimidating. Jesus was pretty good at subtle intimidation. So as he sat their all the movers and shakers came by and were making impressive contributions, with much flourish. Imagine being the poor widow. I picture her shuffling up to the offering box, intentionally looking down at the floor so as not to make eye contact with anyone, wishing she could just slip away but determined to do what she had come to do. But the pot stirring was not over. Jesus called the disciples over, probably making a bit of a scene as he did and said those familiar words, words we know but try to forget.

Having watched with disgust the spectacle of the ostentatious rich and famous, Jesus said, ***“Did you see that, did you see what just happened, did you see that extravagant contribution?”*** The disciples were confused for it was clear Jesus was speaking of the meager gift given by the scruffy widow woman. ***“That widow woman put more in the box than all the others combined.”*** Cue incredulous looks and shaken heads. Then Jesus explained. ***“Those other folks just gave for show and with little or no sacrifice, tax benefits don’t you know. But she gave her last coin, she gave it all.”***  Often this scripture gets exposure during financially focused stewardship drives. And there is good reason for us all to be challenged when it comes to the matter of giving. But that is not where I want us to focus today. I want us to take it even further than to the bank, I want us to reconsider what it means to give all we have.

In a few minutes we will sing a hymn of commitment. The title sums up the calling which is ours and the verses challenge us to become the children of God we are called to be. *I surrender all*. Give it all, that was a calling that the rich folk were not about to answer. It was a calling the saintly widow woman could not resist. What a difference. As we move toward our time of commitment I ask you, as I ask myself, what is it you are unwilling to surrender? Is it security or control, maybe materialistic love of stuff? Perhaps it is some destructive habit or addiction that you just cannot let go of. For some of us it might be prejudicial thinking. How about over commitment and constant busyness for the sake of busyness or low self-esteem? The possibilities are limitless and our answers are all different.

I don’t know what comes to your mind, but I know that something surely does. We humans are not inclined to surrender easily and especially not to surrender all. We like to think we are, as the British poet William Henely wrote in his poem, *Invictus,* **“masters of our fate and captains of our souls”**. But the truth is we know that we are not. That, my friends is a good thing. I have messed up things often enough even given the limited amount of control I have over life’s larger picture, no telling what mess I would make if I truly was in control.

Invictus is Latin for unbeaten, unconquered. That is a noble trait, right? We all want to be strong characters, those who refuse to let things defeat us, we want to win them all or at least give it the good old college try. When it comes to football undefeated is the goal. But it is an elusive goal. The NFL has been around since 1920 and the 1972 Miami Dolphins are the only NFL team ever to have that perfect, unbeaten season. Perfect seasons are rare in football and nonexistent in daily life. We can’t win them all.

Yet we are told by Paul in his letter to the faithful in Rome that we are to be conquerors, actually more than conquerors. Then in his letter to the church in Philippi Paul, writing from prison proclaims ***“I can do all things!”*** We like to hear these positive messages. We like to feel empowered. We would love to hold out hope for an undefeated season. Why not? We are told we are more than conquerors, now that is power! We are encouraged by Paul to join him in proclaiming that we can do all things, that is winning.

However that is not all Paul said. Paul did affirm that those he called God’s beloved saints in Rome could be more than conquerors. But it was not because of who they were, what they had done, or what they could do. Last week we talked about the nature of sainthood. Just because Paul addressed the Roman church folk as saints does not mean that they were particularly saintly as we think of saintliness. They were all just real folks like you, like me. They had trials, they had faults, they had heartaches, and they surely had not surrendered all. But they were more than conquerors, ***through Christ***. And when Paul spoke of doing all things, the same stipulation applied. He said, ***“I can do all things through him who strengthens me.”***

We need some context for those words. The most literal translation would be, ***“I can do all things in Christ.”*** In reading the surrounding verses, both here and in Romans, I think we could also take Paul to mean, ***“I can endure all things.”***  In the verse just prior to his declaration concerning doing all things Paul writes, ***“I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need.”*** In Romans, Paul’s words about being conquerors follow a rhetorical question and response. ***“Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril or sword? As it is written, ‘For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.”*** He then declares those words of confidence, ***“No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, not things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord.”.***

Like the widow who put everything into the offering that day, Paul is calling us to put everything in the hands of God, our fears, our hopes, our work and our play, our plans and our dreams, our very lives, trusting that no matter what comes our way, in the end, by the grace and sacrifice of Christ our Lord, we will conquer all and we will be enabled to endure all things. It is really all about love, God’s love for us and our call to love in response. Remember what Paul wrote to the Corinthians? ***“Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.”*** It is a simple formula, Christ and love in all things.

For your sake, for the sake of a loved starved world and for the sake of the kingdom of the one through whom we can conquer and do things, let it be so in your life. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, AMEN.