

Love and Sacrifice

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“Sacrifice” is a word often used in conjunction with the observance of Memorial Day. We speak of those who have made the ultimate sacrifice in the service of freedom. Those who have worn this nation’s uniform in one of the many wars in its history, and who have given their lives in the process. Our reading this morning broadened the scope of our attention to sacrifice a bit. It noted that there are more sacrifices involved than just the deaths of combat soldiers. There are the wounds, both physical and emotional, of those who survive. And then there are those family and friends left behind, who must cope with their own sacrifices. Sacrifices of togetherness, and safety, and security.

I’d like to spend some time this morning thinking about the concept of “sacrifice.” Where did it come from? What does it really mean? How does it play out in each of our lives? Our experiences of war – either personal or vicarious – and our observance of Memorial Day bring a certain focus to the idea of sacrifice, especially in its most ultimate form. But there is a larger context, and I think it’s worthwhile to consider the larger role that sacrifice plays in life.

First, there is a particular religious connection to the idea of sacrifice, which goes way back in history. One of the basic definitions of the word is: “a type of religious offering, or gift to a superior or supreme being, in which the offering is consecrated through its destruction.” Throughout their history, humans have been known to sacrifice just about anything they have ever used or produced: animals, crops, sometimes even fellow humans.

The purpose of such sacrifices has been, sometimes, simply to express homage and veneration. At other times it has been to give thanks for good fortune received. And sometimes they have been offered in hopes of bringing good fortune, or of appeasing the divine wrath incurred by human transgressions. At the root of all these forms of sacrifice is the desire to establish or sustain a proper relationship with some God or gods.

But the idea of sacrifice in human history has a much broader scope than simply as a feature of our relationship with some divine being, who may or may not exist or care. Another definition of the word is: “the forfeiture of something of value for the sake of someone or something considered of greater value.” That certainly encompasses the kind of religious sacrifice that I’ve described. But it goes further. For instance, it also encompasses the sacrifices made by those serving their country in battle. In that context, the “something of greater value” is the country itself, or ideals and values such as freedom.

The idea is that there things or ideas – or people - to which we assign greater value than our own selfish interests or well-being. Consequently, we are willing to give up something of value to us for their sake.

Now, there are those who would argue that there is no such thing as pure altruism. That there is always some element of self-interest even in actions that appear selfless. Certainly that is sometimes the case, especially when a short-term sacrifice is made in pursuit of longer-term advantage or benefit. For instance, consider the use of sacrifice in various games and sports. In chess, a player will often sacrifice a piece intentionally for the purpose of gaining some longer-term tactical or positional advantage. In baseball, a sacrifice bunt means an almost certain out for the batter, but moves his teammate further around the bases, increasing the likelihood of scoring and ultimate victory.

In those, and many other cases, apparent sacrifices are made for the ultimate benefit of the one doing the sacrificing. And interestingly enough, sometimes that is the result even when it wasn't the original intent. Consider the story of Sadhu Sundar Singh, who was traveling with a companion through a pass high in the Himalaya Mountains. At one point they came across a body lying in the snow. Sundar Singh wished to stop and help the unfortunate man, but his companion refused, saying, "We shall lose our lives if we burden ourselves with him."

But Sundar Singh would not think of leaving the man to die in the ice and snow. As his companion bade him farewell, Sundar Singh lifted the poor traveler onto his back. With great exertion on his part, he bore the man onward, but gradually the heat from Sundar Singh's body began to warm up the poor frozen fellow, and he revived. Soon both were walking together side by side. Catching up with his former companion, they found him dead – frozen by the cold.

In the case of Sundar Singh, he was willing to lose his life on behalf of another, and in the process found it. In the case of his callous companion, he sought to save his life but lost it.

Unintended consequences sometimes work in the other direction as well. That is, the "greater good" that we seek by our sacrifice may not always work out as we hope. Recall O. Henry's classic tale, "The Gift of the Magi." Jim and Della Young are very much in love with each other. Each wishes to give the other the perfect Christmas gift, but lacks the necessary funds to do so. And so each sacrifices their most prized possession in exchange for the cash to spend on their beloved's gift: he his cherished gold pocket watch, and she her rippling and shining cascade of beautiful, long brown hair.

Of course, in a twist of irony, the resulting gifts are: for him, a platinum fob chain for his watch; for her, a set of tortoise-shell combs to enhance her beautiful head of hair.

The best of intentions went awry. And yet, there is something more beautiful in those intentions than the watch and the hair that were lost through selfless sacrifice. O. Henry ends his tale like this:

The magi, as you know, were wise men – wonderfully wise men – who brought gifts to the Babe in the manger. They invented the art of giving Christmas presents. Being wise, their gifts were no doubt wise ones, possibly bearing the privilege of exchange in case of duplication. And here I have lamely related to you the uneventful chronicle of two foolish children in a flat who most unwisely sacrificed for each other the greatest treasures of their house. But in a last word to the wise of these days let it be said that of all who give gifts these two were the wisest. Of all who give and receive gifts, such as they are the wisest. Everywhere they are wisest. They are the magi.

I would like to offer two more stories of sacrifice; one quite profound, and the other fairly mundane and ordinary.

The first recounts an act of extraordinary unselfishness by a group of men that became a legend of martyrdom and sacrifice. Just after midnight on Feb. 3, 1943, the Army ship *Dorchester* was torpedoed by the Germans just south of Greenland. Passengers and crew had a mere 25 minutes to get off the boat. As 902 people went for the life jackets, it was discovered there weren't nearly enough.

In the ship's final minutes, Methodist senior chaplain George Lansing Fox, Rabbi Alexander Goode, Dutch Reformed minister Clark V. Poling and Roman Catholic priest John P. Washington, were helping passengers leave the vessel, when four men appeared, all of them without life jackets.

The chaplains quickly gave up their own vests and went down with the ship, perishing in the freezing water. Survivors saw them, locked arm in arm, praying and singing the Navy hymn, just before the ship dove beneath the waves.

The other story took place at a time when an ice cream sundae cost much less than it does today. A boy entered a coffee shop and sat at a table. A waitress put a glass of water in front of him. The boy asked, "How much is an ice cream sundae?"

"Fifty cents," replied the waitress.

The little boy pulled his hand out of his pocket and studied a number of coins in it. "How much is a dish of plain ice cream?" he inquired.

Some people were now waiting for a table, and the waitress was impatient. "Thirty-five cents," she said angrily.

The little boy again counted the coins. "I'll have the plain ice cream."

The waitress brought the ice cream and walked away. The boy finished eating, paid the cashier and departed.

When the waitress came back to the table, she swallowed hard at what she saw. There, placed neatly beside the empty dish, were two nickels and five pennies – her tip.

Many wise and esteemed individuals have shared their wisdom on the topic of sacrifice and selflessness. Henry Ward Beecher said “It is not what we take up, but what we give up, that makes us rich.” Albert Einstein stated that “Only a life lived for others is worth living.” Senator John Kerry tells us that “The American spirit wears no political label. In service to others and yes, in sacrifice for our country, there are no Republicans, there are no Democrats, there are only Americans.” Confederate General Albert Pike said, “What we do for ourselves dies with us. What we do for others and the world remains and is immortal.”

Moving once again beyond the military context, Trappist monk Thomas Merton wrote, “Peace demands the most heroic labor and the most difficult sacrifice. It demands greater heroism than war. It demands greater fidelity to the truth and a much more perfect purity of conscience.” And Mohandes Gandhi claims that “The sacrifice which causes sorrow to the doer of the sacrifice is no sacrifice. Real sacrifice lightens the mind of the doer and gives him a sense of peace and joy.”

All admirable sentiments, and worthy of keeping in mind. And yet it is stories like those of the four chaplains and the young ice cream lover, of Sadhu Sundar Singh and of Jim and Della Young that speak more directly to the heart. A part of what they have to say is that there is more love somewhere, guiding the actions of our fellow humans. There are role models showing us that there is the possibility of acting out of love, on behalf of others, even when there is no apparent benefit to ourselves.

Another gift of such stories is the challenge that they put before us. What am *I* willing to give up for the benefit of others? What am *I* willing to sacrifice for the greater good – for the future of humanity and the earth? What would *I* be willing to die for? How much love do I have, and how can I share it? How can I best acknowledge and honor those who have sacrificed for me? These are questions worth pondering. May we give them worthy consideration as we, each of us, go about our living.

So may it be.