

Our reading from the book of Hebrews talks about sacrifice. We have a good idea what sacrifice looks like. A baby is born. It takes time to take care of that child. Doctor office visits. Middle-of-the night feedings. Diapers to be changed -and those aren't cheap! Sacrifices are made in terms of time and money.

A man in a Muslim country becomes a Christian. He will sacrifice his family, work, freedom, and maybe even his life for his faith.

Speaking of faith, this past week at Annunciation Catholic School in my old hometown; yet another horrifying and deadly school shooting in our country. But in the midst of that terror and chaos, children were protecting other children: One older boy made the split-second decision to sacrifice his own safety and risk his very life as he jumped on top of a younger boy to shield him from a shot gun blast. All of these are scenes that I've mentioned show what sacrifice looks like.

Now let's go back, way back, thousands of years. Making a sacrifice was a huge part of the temple worship during Old Testament times. In the centuries before Jesus was born, the Jews made sacrifices, lots of sacrifices. They sacrificed all types of animals: bulls, sheep, goats, lambs, doves, and pigeons. They sacrificed grain and crops. They had sacrifices to give thanks, sacrifices for peace, sacrifices to go with prayers, and especially sacrifices to take away sin and guilt.

In fact, the most important day in all of Jewish life was a day of sacrifice for sin and guilt. It was the Day of Atonement. On that day, a goat was sacrificed, and its blood was taken into the holiest place in the temple. It was offered to God as a way to atone for, make up for, bring forgiveness for the people's sins. You can imagine what a sacrifice looked like on that day. Blood, lots of blood, on the altar, staining the wood and stone. Blood on the ground and sprinkled on the ark of the covenant in the Most Holy Place in the temple. And then, the body of the goat was burned outside the city, outside the sacred place.

What did a sacrifice look like in Old Testament times? Lots of blood and fire and smoke. And many of the Old Testament sacrifices were made to bring forgiveness for sin and to take away the people's guilt.

But then the day came when all those animal and grain sacrifices were no longer needed. The day came when one sacrifice was made that made all those other sacrifices obsolete. The day came when Jesus made a once-for-all-time sacrifice.

Let's begin to see what His sacrifice looks like. The altar is made of wood, but it's in the shape of a cross. On that cross, blood is shed - Jesus' blood. But notice the irony, the reversal. On the Day of Atonement, the sacrifice was made in the temple, in the Most Holy Place. It was then burned outside the holy places, in a defiled, unclean place. Jesus was sacrificed outside, in the unclean, defiled place, so that we could enter the holy place of God's presence. Jesus' sacrifice comes at the end of the day of agony. His head is bowed down. He's taken His last breath. A crown of thorns circles His head.

Now, it looks peaceful. But everything before that moment was violent and bloody. If you had looked at Jesus' back, His blood would've been matted to the wood of the cross. His face would've been streaked with blood from the crown of thorns. Blood would've oozed out of the nail holes in His hands and dripped down His wrists and arms. Blood would be rolling down His side, where a spear had punctured Him. And blood from the nail holes in His feet would've crept down the cross and onto the ground.

Now He is peaceful, Jesus has committed Himself to His Father in heaven. That's the end of the sacrifice. What happened before was violent, bloody, dirty, and filled with agony. It's a painful scene to picture in our minds, but don't lose sight of what Jesus' sacrifice looked like. And don't lose sight of **why** Jesus made this sacrifice.

He did it to take away the sin of the world. His sacrifice was to atone for our guilt. Jesus sacrificed His life so that we might live eternally with Him. On the altar of the cross, His blood was shed so we would be clean in God's eyes. The writer of Hebrews says, "Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood" (v 12). We come into God's holy presence only because Jesus has made us holy, sanctified us, by His holy blood shed on the cross.

Jesus' sacrifice is the only one that makes all those animal sacrifices in the OT mean anything at all. Jesus' sacrifice is the only sacrifice that sanctifies us before God. Jesus' sacrifice is once-for-all and for all times.

But the time for making sacrifices is not over. Oh, it's over for gaining forgiveness, for being clean and sanctified in God's eyes. Those sacrifices for forgiveness and atonement are done. We can't add any sacrifice to what Jesus did on the cross.

But other sacrifices are still to be made. Listen to verses 15–16 of our text: "Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God." We still make sacrifices to God: the sacrifice of praise with our lips; the sacrifice of doing good and sharing what we have.

What do those sacrifices look like?

These scenes make me think of the sacrifice of praise with our lips: Hymnals open and we're singing together. The words of the Creed are spoken out loud as we confess our faith in the triune God. Heads bowed before a meal to say thank you for the food when eating at home or out to eat. The choir singing an anthem of praise about Jesus. Telling someone about Jesus at school or work. Speaking God's blessings to someone who sneezed. Saying "Thank you, Lord!" throughout the day for the wonderful gifts He gives us daily. I'm sure you can picture in your mind what the sacrifice of praise with our lips looks like in so many other ways.

Now for the sacrifice of doing what is good. The writer of Hebrews gives us a list of good things to do, ways to give of our time, our efforts, and money, to sacrifice of ourselves, in the way we live.

*Verse 1:* "Let brotherly love continue." We're family, and we care for one another as brothers and sisters in Christ. We sacrifice time, effort, and money to make First Lutheran our home. Maybe it's teaching Sunday school. Perhaps it's singing in the choir. Maybe it's serving on a Board, being an usher, a greeter, or a screen presenter. There's a whole list of volunteer needs on page 13 of the new September newsletter. We also support one another just by speaking important words of encouragement or consolation: "Let brotherly love continue."

*Verse 2 says:* “Show hospitality.” Every year, we provide food to the McLeod Emergency Food Shelf for those in need. The Mat Makers group assembles useful and comfortable mats for the homeless. On our offering envelopes, we can designate part of our offering for Angel Seeds fund, that money goes to a different charitable group each quarter as determined by our Board of Stewardship.

Let’s move to verse four: “Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled.” God’s Word is clear. Marriage is to be treated with respect, honor, and as an institution of precious value. The gift of sex is to be expressed within the marital relationship alone. In a world of rampant pornography, television shows where sex and marriage are seldom put together, and a climate in which sex outside of marriage is seen as just normal, these words about keeping the marriage bed pure seem quaint, out of step, old-fashioned. But they are God’s Word, and it’s what our sacrifice of doing good looks like today.

*Verse 5:* “Keep your life free from love of money and be content with what you have.” Have you ever woken up in the middle of the night worrying about a bill that needs to be paid or about the debts you’ve built up? I know I have. One way I’ve found to get back to sleep is to count, not sheep, but blessings. I simply start saying thank you in a prayer for anything and everything God has given to me. Counting blessings rather than fretting over bills makes for a better night’s sleep.

Or have you ever caught yourself coveting something new or better than what you already have? Better clothes, the newest cell phone, a new car, even a new house. Being content is hard. But once again, the secret is to thank God for what we have. Being content and not loving money is what our sacrifice looks like today.

The list in our text goes on and it’s good to read and take to heart, but are you getting a picture of what our sacrifices look like? The writer to the Hebrews has summed it up well. Jesus made the best sacrifice; the once-for-all sacrifice for us on the altar of the cross. He sanctified us, that is, He made us holy. And now that Jesus’ once-for-all sacrifice has sanctified us, we live lives of sacrifice with our words and by doing what is good in God’s sight. Amen.