

PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
Sixteenth Sunday After Pentecost
August 31, 2008
"A Costly Love"
Rev. John L. Thompson
Romans 12:1-2; Matthew 16:21-28

The teachings of the Bible present us all with a disturbing challenge. We are reminded that God has called us to be Christ-like, and this call demands nothing less than the total gift of ourselves.

The apostle Paul couldn't have been clearer about what it means to be a follower of Christ. Being a Christian means committing ourselves to be a living sacrifice! The disciples of Jesus were not prepared for his death on the cross, even though he tried to prepare them. They could not imagine that serving God might mean dying on a cross. But faith in God demands such self-giving, sacrificial love.

The cross is more than a reminder that Christ died for us. It is the blueprint of how we are to live in the world. Being a follower of Christ means putting the needs of others ahead of our own comfort. It means taking the suffering of others on ourselves to set them free. It is a costly love!

What is love? No other word is so over-loaded with definitions and meanings. Something in all of us knows what it means, but who of us has been successful in expressing its meaning? Part of the problem is that there are so many different kinds of love. That little word is expected to cover everything from the first blush of youthful attraction to the most generous act of benevolence. What is love?

Among the ancient Israelites, as among other ancient nations, worship meant providing domestic service to the gods. Worshipers offered food, shelter, and whatever made life pleasant. Just as the slave washed and wore clean clothes when giving the master something to eat or drink, so the ancient worshipers approached the gods. The primary point, as with the servant and master, was to keep the gods happy, or to avoid making them angry. In earliest times the Israelites saw sacrifices and offerings of animals and grains as providing God with food, but later these practices came to have a purely symbolic meaning. Still, the quality of the sacrifice remained important - - lambs were to be "***without blemish.***" These were, literally, dead sacrifices. **The later prophets, and Jesus, saw that the sacrificial system had become a spiritually *dead* practice, a substitution for the offering of oneself in worship to God. When the conduct of the people was at variance with these ritual practices, the prophets reported God's reaction: "I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and cereal offerings, I will not accept them."** (Amos 5:21-22)

The first Christians were Jewish converts, and they interpreted the meaning of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection in terms of Israel's temple rituals and practices. John the Baptist introduced Jesus as "***the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.***" (Jn 1:29) "***Christ, our paschal lamb, has been slain,***" wrote Paul to the Corinthians. (1 Co 5:7) **The Incarnation was first understood in terms of the faith of Israel and was seen as its fulfillment.**

Even the wisest or most intelligent of us may not be good at analyzing our own problems or at knowing what we need. A man suffering from hay fever stopped by the library to read about his ailment. As he thumbed through a medical encyclopedia, he became intrigued with some of the diseases listed there. Suddenly he froze with fear. As he read the symptoms for typhoid fever, he realized he had had it for months. He came across something called St. Vitus' Dance, and, to his surprise, found that he had those symptoms, too. Greatly disturbed he began reading the entire volume alphabetically. He found he had Bright's disease in a mild form and cholera with severe complications. He concluded he had had

diphtheria from birth. Later he said, **“When I went into the library, I was a healthy man. When I came out, I was a physical wreck.”**

Sometimes the truths we need are right under our noses. Words we have used for years may suddenly open like a flower revealing a dimension and depth we have not perceived. It happens to a fictional character named Mark Sabre, who says: **“I’ve got the secret. I’ve got the key to the riddle that’s been puzzling me all my life. I’ve got the new revelation in terms good enough for me to understand. . . . Here it is: God is - - - love. Listen to this, Hapgood: ‘He that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God and God in him; for God is love.’ . . . It explains everything to me. I can reduce all the mysteries to terms of that [this].”** (A. S. M. Hutchinson, *If Winter Comes*)

Isn’t it true? We can say, **“God is love,”** a thousand times without being struck by its disorienting, and re-orienting, significance. **It is not so much that love defines God as that God defines love. Such an insight may change us forever, especially when we see how God’s love is revealed in Jesus Christ.**

In Jesus Christ we see God’s love revealed as a sacrificial offering, as **“the Lamb who was slain.”** (Rv 5:12) Jesus’ entire life was a sacrificial offering, and he is remembered as **“the man for others.”** His sacrificial death received his Father’s loving approval in being raised from the dead. **All who love him are invited to take up their own crosses and follow him, becoming living sacrifices. It’s a costly love. Paul understood that when he said: “I appeal to you . . . to present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God. . . . Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds.”** This is the truest meaning of love. True love is always costly: a living sacrifice.

Because God is love, and because the greatest of God’s gifts is love, life is found where life is given away. **“Life will yield up its hidden sweetness only when it is being sacrificed to something more precious than life.”** (Ellen Glasgow) This is the secret, the costly but sublime secret, of joy.

Scholem Asch was a Polish-American author who wrote chiefly in Yiddish. His books reflect his conviction that Christian faith should be considered the logical continuation of Judaism. In *The Apostle* an elderly rabbi says: **“See you not what has happened in Rome? The more they burn the believers in the Messiah, the more they fling them to the beasts, the mightier grow their numbers. Behold! Rome went forth against Jerusalem with the sword and Jerusalem went forth against Rome with the spirit. The sword conquered for a while, but the spirit conquers for ever!”**

In this election year, we must exercise our Christian faith. As Christians we must reach out right and left to those across the political spectrum in common cause for justice. As Christians we must reach up and down to those on the pilgrimage of faith in common commitment to truth. Each time we make our witness, as we are worshipping, as we are feeding the hungry, as we are clothing the naked, as we are sharing our love, we are describing the demands of our faith and the shape of our discipleship.

I would love to be your pastor. I would love for this to be your church.
