

Sermon Aug 23 2020
Redeemer, Ramsey
Pastor M. Linderman

Grace, Mercy and Peace, from God and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ,
Amen.

As some of you know, I have a professional background in studying other religions. And in my time off, I still dabble in teaching a course on world religions at Seton Hall University. In this capacity, over the past several years, I have had the opportunity to teach about the scriptures of other religions. One of my favorite pieces of sacred writing is the Bhagavad Gita, which is translated in English as “the Song of the Lord”. It is a Hindu text that some scholars believe was written roughly 2000 years ago in India. It purports to be a recording of an exhortation by Lord Krishna, a human avatar of the Hindu God Vishnu, given to a young man named Arjuna, who was a prince. The text is comprised of about 700 verses of Sanskrit poetry, and is found within the much larger epic poem called the Mahabharata.

There are many religious teachings worth our while in this text, especially about letting go of our desires and obsessions and finding a way to act in the world and in life in a manner that does not cling or grasp to impermanent or unhelpful things in life.

One of my favorite moments in the text is when Lord Krishna is teaching Arjuna about what people gain from worship to him. In chapter 9, verse 26, Lord Krishna says, “if one offers to me with devotion a leaf, a flower, a fruit, or even water, I delightfully partake of that article offered with love by my devotee in pure consciousness.”

What I have always liked about this verse is the way it expresses the mercy of God to accept what gifts we give, even very simple offerings. Of course, the wealthy are always able to make large, expensive offerings, but here Krishna insists that he will receive whatever a poor person offers, be it a leaf, or a flower, or some water. These are things that the poor person could not pretend that he has come up with, or created, or generated. They are beautiful things, but merely things at

hand. All that matters to Krishna is the devotion the person has. I find it comforting, and a beautiful idea, that God is so merciful as to honor the devotion of the poor in this way.

Among the various religions of the world, the idea of sacrifice is very common. Indeed, even in ancient Judaism, devout Jews would go to the temple in Jerusalem in order to make a sacrifice for their sins in the temple. This backdrop of sacrifice to God stands behind and inflects the teaching of Paul in today's second lesson, that we are to present ourselves, our own bodies, as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God. Paul calls this our spiritual worship.

As far as the practice of sacrifice goes, the offering that a person brings to the temple is a substitute for themselves. In Jewish sacrifice at the temple, a person would go to the temple, and in the precincts of the temple, one could purchase the sacrificial animal that would be offered. If you remember the famous scene that appears in all four Gospels called the Cleansing of the Temple, when Jesus overturned the tables of the money changers, it is related to this sacrificial system of the Jerusalem Temple. When pilgrims arrived at the temple in Jerusalem, they needed to exchange their Roman money for Jewish money so that they could buy the animal that would serve as their sacrifice. Once they purchased the animal, they presented it to the priests in the temple, who would then kill the animal, and the blood of the animal would represent or stand in for the life of the person making the offering. That person's sin would be absolved by the giving of the life of the animal as a substitute.

Of course, that system of sacrifice has been obsolete since the year 70AD, when a Roman battalion sacked Jerusalem and destroyed the temple. It has never been rebuilt. But already before the Jerusalem temple was destroyed, Christianity had started to reinterpret the temple sacrifice in terms of Jesus' death and resurrection. To Christians, Jesus has become the Passover lamb, the final sacrifice whose blood takes away the sin of the world. For Christians, there is to be no ongoing sacrifice of substitutes for our sins. Jesus has already accomplished that. From now on, sacrifice is re-interpreted as something done out of a desire to show devotion and worship. Anything we do that is sacrificial in any way, is to be offered in devotion to God for what Jesus has done. As was clarified in the Lutheran Reformation, 500 years ago, doing something as a sacrifice to justify ourselves before God was seen as a work which was no longer required for

salvation. Now sacrificial self-giving, or anything done as an offering, could only be exemplary, not mandatory.

And this is a trajectory that Paul establishes in the 12th chapter of his letter to the church in Rome, in our second lesson today. Paul exhorts those Christians in Rome to “present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.” Instead of using substitutes for our personal sacrifice, we are to offer ourselves, our own life in devotion to the one who made the one true sacrifice for all humanity.

Now, the idea of Jesus’ death as a sacrifice to propitiate the wrath of an angry God is, as I have said before in my sermons, a problematic interpretation of the meaning of Jesus death. But I am not going to deal with that today. When I say that Jesus has performed the last sacrifice, I am envisioning not just the moment of his death on the cross. Jesus’ sacrifice is his whole life, the event of the Son of God, the second person of the Holy Trinity, entering the world, becoming flesh and blood, and dying and rising again in order to prove to us what is the extent, the height, depth and breadth of God’s love for us. That sacrifice of exchange, of exchanging his heavenly identity in order to share it with us, is the final sacrificial act that corrects our relationship with God. It restores balance to our relationship with God, and with ourselves. No longer do we have to pay the penalty for our sin, which we could never really pay anyway. God had to give his righteousness to us, *carte blanche*. What we are focused on is Paul’s teaching of what comes next, his exhortation to offer ourselves as a living sacrifice, which is our spiritual worship.

Think back to some of that imagery from the Bhagavad Gita. Giving what you can, what you have available to you, and doing so in true devotion, is a holy act. It is an act of devotional sacrifice that honors God and which God will honor in return. Especially when done out of a sense of devotion to God, even the smallest, humblest offering is honorable. This recalls the teaching of Jesus in the Gospel story that is called the Widow’s Mite. This scene occurs in both the Gospel of Mark and Luke. In this story Jesus enters the Jerusalem temple and sits opposite the temple treasury. He watches many people bring their offerings, but also notices the poor widow, whom he knows has given all she owned. Jesus says to his disciples that she has given more than all the other givers combined. God sees

the extent of our hearts, and not just the extent of our offerings, and God judges on the basis of the former.

Now, this is not to be simply an exhortation about financial gifts to the church. This would miss the meaning behind Paul's exhortation. What Paul's exhortation focuses on is our bodies. It's about what we do with our whole lives, in thought and word, yes, but also in deed.

But we must remember too, that this is an exhortation to living a certain way that comes after God's forgiveness, grace and mercy are already established. Paul's call is to righteous living, not in order to gain Christ's salvation, but as a grateful response TO Christ's salvation.

After all, who showed devotion first? It was God who was so devoted to us, and to the world, that he came into the world in the form of a person to rescue us from our stuckness, our captivity to sin. In Jesus Christ, God showed how devoted to us he really is. As Paul says in another place in this letter (5:8), "God showed his loved for us in this; while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

Again, our motivation for acting in such a way that our life becomes a living sacrifice, comes from our gratitude to God for God's grace. Our grateful living, because of God's gracious giving. Now our lives become an open arena for gratitude. Every aspect of our lives can become an opportunity for our grateful living, because of God's gracious giving. In loving our families, in loving our neighbors, in our support for local, national and international causes, in our politics, we think of our involvement and our motivation to participate as a response to God's love for us in Jesus Christ. Then our activities, our causes, our involvements, don't become the things that justify us. We are not justified in our selves by these activities or ways of living. They do not make us any better human beings before God. And they do not become substitutes for our guilt, or feelings of shame or inadequacy. They don't become substitutes for our sacrifice. The sacrifice instead becomes an offering of our very lives, lived in gratitude for what God has done.

Also, in grateful living, we are more open to what God wants from us, because we are willing to respond to life in a more open way. Psalm 138, verse 8, this morning proclaims, "You will make good your purpose for me; O Lord, your steadfast love

endures forever; do not abandon the works of your hands.” Because of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ, our purpose in life is not something we need to figure out or find. Rather, our purpose is found in realizing God’s purpose for us. And this has different aspects. It is personal. It is vocational. But it is also communal. Thus when we present ourselves, our bodies and minds, our personal gifts and characteristics, as free for God’s purpose, we find our purpose among God’s growing and ever expanding community of love. The trick is that it is very much a matter of the present moment. Renewed in our minds, transformed in our thinking, grateful in our living, we become open in the moment, and in an ongoing way from moment to moment, to God’s purpose for us. We then become God’s instrument through our openness to others and the world.

Finally, this will be the way we proclaim who we believe Jesus really is. Jesus asks the disciples in the Gospel lesson today, who do you say that I am. Lord, you are the Messiah, the son of the living God. May our confession of this truth, and our living out of this truth be our act of living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God. May we be transformed by the renewing of our minds, so that we may discern what is the will of God for all people, what is good, what is acceptable, what is perfect. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.