

Ann Garrido
St. Joan of Arc Parish
Lenten Evening Prayer Preaching
Romans 12:1-10

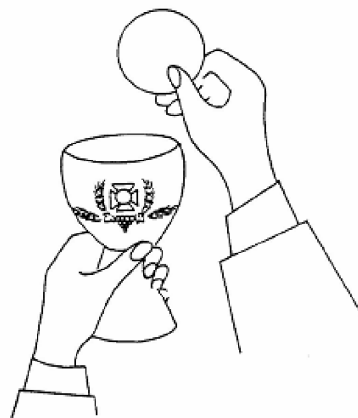
A Reading from the Letter of Paul to the Romans

I urge you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, your spiritual worship. Do not conform yourselves to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect.

For by the grace given to me I tell everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than one ought to think, but to think soberly, each according to the measure of faith that God has apportioned. For as in one body we have many parts, and all the parts do not have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ and individually parts of one another.

Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us exercise them: if prophecy, in proportion to the faith; if ministry, in ministering; if one is a teacher, in teaching; if one exhorts, in exhortation; if one contributes, in generosity; if one is over others, with diligence; if one does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness.

Let love be sincere; hate what is evil, hold on to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; anticipate one another in showing honor.



Preaching Notes:

If this reflection tonight seems a bit unpolished, it is because I wrote it only in the last 24 hours. I want you to know that I had begun thinking about it long before that. In fact, I had a script pretty much ready to print, but then something happened yesterday morning that so illuminated the topic at hand for me, so clarified it in my mind, that I decided to throw away what I had written and start over from scratch.

It happened in a conversation with a group of children ages 9 and 10. I belong to a small Christian community of children and adults (called Catechesis of the Good Shepherd) that meets together every Sunday morning for 2 hrs. before going into Mass. We read scripture with one another and reflect on the liturgy. Yesterday morning we were concluding a study that we'd been doing for numerous weeks on the story of Abraham in the Bible, a study that had included significant discussion of the story of the sacrifice of Isaac – which created a lot of debate among the children. I have very mixed feelings about reading this story with children. On one hand, I find it very difficult to explain how someone who we've lifted up as a hero of our faith for several weeks almost kills his son. Hard to answer questions on that one. On the other hand, I am always immensely curious to hear what their response to it will be; what sense they will try to make of it.

Yesterday, a group of four of us who had finished reading about Abraham's life were trying to look for patterns in the scripture and in our lives today. We were doing this by looking at several pictures set next to each other. I had a piece of artwork from a church ceiling depicting the sacrifice of Isaac and a picture of the crucifixion of Jesus and a picture of the moment in Mass at the end of the Eucharistic prayer when the priest raises the bread and wine – a moment we call the Offering. (basically the pictures you have with you in the pew)

I asked them if they saw any connections between the pictures. Immediately, Claire (age 9) noted a link between the first two. "Isaac reminds me of Jesus," she said. Claire, of course, was not the first person in history to make such a connection. Our Church artwork is riddled with allusions that link these two men each of whom carried the wood upon which he would be killed. "We call this the sacrifice of Isaac," she continued, "and this the sacrifice of Jesus."

"Yes, there definitely is a way in which these are similar. Is there any way in which we could also say they are different?" I asked.

"Well, in Isaac's case, his father was going to sacrifice him like he earlier had the animals," said Patrick (age 10), "but in Jesus' case no one else was deciding for him; he was offering himself." A debate ensued about the temple leaders and the Romans -- as it rightly should -- about how they were really the ones who arrested and killed Jesus, but something important had emerged: Jesus had been arrested because he loved the Kingdom of God so much that he wouldn't stop talking about it, even when he knew that this would put his life in danger. The Passion of Jesus

on the cross was connected to the true *passion* of Jesus – which was the coming of God's Reign on earth. This was a fate he probably could have avoided if he had kept his mouth shut. In Jesus' own words from the Gospel of John (10:18) : "No one takes my life from me; I lay it down on my own." No one snatches my life away from me; I give it. Jesus was not a victim to whom these things just happened. Unlike Isaac, he was a full actor, making decisions about the plot line of his life.

And I began to think about how one of the things that distinguishes Christianity is the elevation of human freedom, of choice. Unlike Isaac, whose life was almost taken from him without him speaking a word about the matter; Jesus does speak a word: "*I commend my spirit.*" I give myself, as a gift.

Now let us make no mistakes, Jesus doesn't go looking for bad things to happen to him. But he does choose to take the bad things that are happening to him and transform them. To the soldier who took his shirt, he said, "Here take my cloak as well." To the one who demanded he walk a mile, he said, "I'm going two." Or as my son said to me yesterday when we were talking about this at lunch – in reference to the recent movie version of Les Mis – "This man did not steal my silverware; Look, you forgot the candle sticks I gave you." Even in the worst of situations, Jesus remained forever free. No one took anything from him that he had not already in the secrecy of his heart, already chosen to give as a gift... even his life.

"Tell me about this picture," I said to the children, pointing to the offering gesture in Mass. "Do you see any connections here?"

"We call the bread and wine Jesus' body and blood," James (again, age 10) noted. "When they are lifted up to God, it is like when Jesus gave his life over to God on the day he died. It makes me remember the crucifixion."

"So what are we offering to God in the Mass? Are we offering Jesus to God?" I asked.

"Only Jesus can offer himself," they said.

"So we remember his offering that happened long ago now, but what can only we offer?" I asked.

"Ourselves," Claire said.

"Our lives," James said.

"Our body and blood," Patrick said.

And this is when the topic of tonight's reflection suddenly emerged with new clarity in my mind. I could hear echoing in the back of my head the words of St. Paul – the words that we read tonight: "I urge you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God,

to offer *your* bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, *your* spiritual worship.”

Paul’s words sound like such a scary thing to those who associate sacrifice with splitting animals in two, but for those who have been baptized to live lives of freedom – what a remarkable thing. Like Christ, we are invited to live our lives with passion: to find that thing, that work, that vocation that most claims our heart and then give our lives over to it. To pursue our greatest joy without counting the cost.

And how often I have seen this around me of late. The child who draws until her pencil becomes but a nub. My son who writes and plays music with such constant zeal that sometimes his fingernails bleed. Or my youngest brother, who I visited last night – a guy who loves nothing more than to watch football games with a couple of beers on a Sunday afternoon, who has spent the last three months surrounded by only the beeps and whirrs of the hospital as he snuggles his firstborn son, born three months premature. He tangoes amidst tubes, trying not to get the oxygen cord wrapped around his legs as he goes to change a tiny diaper smaller than a wallet, and still ends the dance with a kiss planted soundly on the top of little George’s head. Who counts the cost when George is there?

In these moments, no one *makes* us do these things. No one takes our lives from us. We give them as gifts, motivated only by love. And it gives glory to God. As the preacher Frederick Buechner said, “Vocation is that place where one’s own deepest joy meets the world’s deep need.”

Which brings us to the Second Vatican Council and the connection it forged between the Passion of Christ and the impassioned lives of the faithful and the moment of offering in Mass. Tonight I highlight just one passage from the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, perhaps best known by its Latin title “Lumen Gentium.”

“To [the baptized] whom he intimately joins to his life and mission, [Christ] also gives a share in his priestly office of offering spiritual worship for the glory of the Father and the salvation of humanity. Hence the laity, dedicated as they are to Christ and anointed by the Holy Spirit, are *marvelously* called and prepared so that ever richer fruits of the Spirit may be produced in them. For all their works, if accomplished in the Spirit, become spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ: their prayers and apostolic undertakings, family and married life, daily work, relaxation of mind and body, even the hardships of life if patiently borne. In the celebration of the Eucharist, *these* are offered to the Father in all piety along with the body of the Lord. And so, worshipping everywhere by their holy actions, the laity consecrate the world itself to God.” (Lumen Gentium #34)

There is so much in this passage worth sitting with and pondering. Can we look at it closely one more time?

“To [the baptized] whom he intimately joins to his life and mission, [Christ] also gives a share in his priestly office of offering spiritual worship for the glory of the Father and the salvation of humanity.

As we heard from Paul tonight: through Baptism, we become part of the Body of Christ. He is the head; we are his body. Intimately joined. And just as Christ's life was all gift / all offering to God; so are our lives to be gift / free offering.

“Hence the laity, dedicated as they are to Christ and anointed by the Holy Spirit, are marvelously called and prepared so that ever richer fruits of the Spirit may be produced in them.

Again, it is through baptism that we become part of this body. When that cross is signed on our foreheads like a branding; when we go into that font and come out anointed in Spirit – this is what makes our offering of ourselves possible. I love it names this baptismal call as “marvelous.”

“For all their works, if accomplished in the Spirit, become spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ: their prayers and apostolic undertakings, family and married life, daily work, relaxation of mind and body, even the hardships of life if patiently borne.

It's not just our attendance at Mass or parish functions that is the gift we give to God.... It is EVERY aspect of our lives that we offer. Every moment of our days that we want to make into a gift.

“In the celebration of the Eucharist, these are offered to the Father in all piety along with the body of the Lord. And so, worshipping everywhere by their holy actions, the laity consecrate the world itself to God.”

When we go to Mass, and this gesture is done (raising of hands), it is the whole of our lives that we are symbolically lifting up to God – uniting our offering of ourselves to Jesus' offering of himself.

Truly such a “marvelous” thing we are invited by baptism to do. To live our lives not like Isaac, bound unknowingly, confused, without a voice in his own future. But like Jesus, free to make of ourselves living sacrifices, using whatever gifts we've been given to actually become a gift.

So here is the question I leave you with tonight: how do you live your life in such a way that it is not “just one damn thing after another” / not snatched away in years that just become a blur... but aflame with passion even unto death. What risks shall you take? What costs won't you count? In making your life into a work of art for the household of God.