

Preached by Rev. JF Hudson: 3/16/08
Scripture: Isaiah 53:1-3, 5-7, Matthew 21:1-11

"Sacrifice and Service"

From the text: "When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, 'Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, 'The Lord needs them.' And he will send them immediately.'"

His name is Peter Farley and his story was front page news in the Boston Globe yesterday. Now some of the facts of his 28-year old life aren't all that unusual. He still has a baby face and could be mistaken for an overeager college student. He's new in his career as a fourth grade teacher at the Hancock elementary school in Brockton. His students adore him. He just married his longtime girlfriend three weeks ago and he's a huge Patriots' fan. But one thing sets this teacher and son and neighbor apart from most other Americans. You see Friday was his last day in the classroom, at least for the next year, because come next week Farley will ship out for Iraq, as an Army Specialist and a member of the Massachusetts' Reserves. In Farley's words, after September 11th, "'It was a feeling inside of me that I couldn't kick, and it was something I needed to do or I would regret [it] for the rest of my life.'" So now instead of penning lesson plans Farley will be writing letters home to his family. Instead of a classroom, he'll face combat. Fatigues will substitute for a shirt and tie. All because Farley, like those rare few of our fellow citizens: he has freely chosen to serve and to sacrifice.

To serve and to sacrifice. This coming Wednesday marks the fifth anniversary of the Iraq war, the second longest war in United States history. Since 2003, 1.7 million of our fellow Americans have served. Nearly 4,000 have died. 60,000 have been wounded. 120,000 have been treated for mental health conditions; 68,000 have been diagnosed with post traumatic stress disorder. And I believe that regardless of how any of us feel about the rightness or the wrongness of this current war, war: that human enterprise and sin of violence and death, still there is something so haunting and so poignant about citizen soldiers like Farley who put good lives over here on hold, for a dangerous life over there. Real people, a nation's sons and daughters, going off into the hell of war, serving and sacrificing, for us.

What most amazes me as a human and as a Christian when I hear stories like Farley's is that more than ever before, the military is dependent upon citizen soldiers who must serve when called upon. The call goes out: we need you. And so they pick up and they pack up and they leave behind loved ones and they go straight into harm's way. One day pumping gas, or working as a nurse at a local hospital, or coaching our kids in Little League, or teaching in our schools: the next day off to sacrifice time at best, or a life at worst.

Sacrifice: such an old fashioned notion and ideal, not often talked about in our modern and too often self-centered and self-absorbed world. But on this Palm Sunday, as we conclude our sermon series on ritual and consider the ritual of sacrifice as central to faith; as we move into Holy Week and are confronted by the memory of a 33-year old

carpenter's son who freely gave himself unto death, to embody God's unconditional love for all humanity, for you, for me: let's talk about sacrifice: as a human virtue, a civic virtue and most important, a Christian virtue.

Sacrifice: the truth that at certain times in this life we as humans are called to give and not just get: to give our lives over to a cause greater than ourselves; to give ourselves in the service of others; to give because it is the right thing to do; to give because others are in distress or danger or harm's way and need our help; to give and often not for any immediate benefit or payoff.

The cruel tragedy of course is that it often takes something as hellacious as war to remind us of the miracle of self-sacrifice and the need for sacrifice in this life. For loving sacrifice can show itself less dramatic arenas than war, noble and beautiful places like a family. I think of parents, like my Mom and Dad who sacrificed so much that I might thrive and live. At the last church I served there was a young couple, Todd and Sue, whose six year old daughter Jane was diagnosed with cancer. She's cured today but for the better part of two years everything in that family was given up, given over, sacrificed so Jane could get better. Both parents left lucrative jobs and went to part-time to spend countless sleepless nights at Children's Hospital with their precious daughter, driving into the city every day, putting everything else, their entire lives on hold, all so that Jane could get better. They, like most parents never call such acts sacrificial or out of the ordinary yet: we need to name and give thanks for that kind of sacrifice in our lives. We need to remember and give thanks to God for the people, like our parents, like soldiers, who have given, that we might live.

So: who are those sacrificial people for you this day? The givers who got you here? Great-grandparents who left their countries and homes to come to America for a better life; spouses who gave up careers to stay at home and raise kids so our professional lives could soar, who helped pay for our education; parents who gave over thousands of hours of labor, heartache, and money to house, clothe and feed us and support our dreams. Single Moms and Dads who struggle to raise kids alone; adult children who care for sick and aging parents.

Here's the first spiritual truth we need to name today. All of human life: a family, a church, a community, a nation, a world: none of this can happen without some sacrifice on each of our parts, some self-giving, some commitment to give up, to give away certain things, maybe even our very lives, so that others might thrive, live, and prosper. As the Congregational minister Olympia Brown said, "He who never sacrificed a present to a future good or a personal to a general good can speak of happiness only as the blind do of colors."

Sacrifice: and so even in the midst of the triumph of Palm Sunday, imagine the struggles of Jesus' heart as he marched into Jerusalem to that messiah's welcome, into a crowd who one day cheered him and the next day demanded his execution. In John we are told that Jesus looked out over that city and, "He wept." You see he knew. Knew that to fulfill God's mission of radical love he would have to sacrifice his own life. Knew that by daring to care about the outcasts, the religious pariahs of his day, he risked the wrath of the entire Roman Empire crashing down upon his shoulders. In Saint Paul's words, "though [Jesus] was in the form of God, [he] did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born

in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.”

Before resurrection, before the empty tomb, before the lilies and the chocolate bunnies and spring, first there has to be sacrifice. Not easy. As I said the ritual of sacrifice, whether secular or spiritual, on Main Street or in our church community—it is a hard sell these days. We all applaud the theoretical concept of sacrifice but—do we really have to be the ones to give? As the story goes, “The pig and the chicken were on their way to breakfast, trying to decide what to have. The chicken said, ‘Let’s have ham and eggs.’ The pig replied, ‘Well, that’s fine for you to say: it’s a small donation on your part, but for me it’s a total sacrifice!’”

I know as a preacher I’m often timid, even afraid of preaching such faith-centered rituals of sacrifice. To ask us to give money to our church’s ministry and not just to give merely what we can, but to give until it hurts, to give until that pledge is really a financial sacrifice. To push us to give up weeknights at home so all the committees of our church thrive with full slates and can do their ministry effectively. To challenge us to sacrifice worship to teach Church School, to sacrifice Monday evenings to help at youth group, to give up Saturdays to build a Habitat house.

But my friends God invites into this place not just to be consumers of religious services but also as servants of one another and of God, right here at Pilgrim Church and out there in the wider world. God asks us not just to take but also to give, not just to watch but also to actively participate and to sacrifice. I truly believe such sacrifice is not an option of the Christian faith. Sacrifice is at the heart of faith. Of all life. Of anything and everything that has ultimate meaning and purpose and joy.

We give because in Jesus, God gave. God sacrificed God’s self on the cross. What will be our response to this Holy Week gift? As that old hymn proclaims, “Were the whole realm of nature mine, That were a present far too small; Love so amazing, so divine, Demands my soul, my life, my all.”

Sacrifice: we’ve received. Now it is time to give. Let all God’s people say, “Amen!”