**“Denying, Taking Up, and Following:  Do We Have To?”**

**Sermon by Pastor Tom Warren**

**Peace United Church of Christ**

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Baseball season is upon us, and I want to start out with a story about baseball.  There was a baseball player who walked up to the plate for his turn at bat, and the previous batter had gotten a single and was there on first base.  The game was tied, and it was the bottom of the ninth.  There were no outs, and only one run was needed to win the game.  The batter, before taking the first pitch, looked over at the third base coach, and a signal was coming in.  The batter saw the signal and winced.  The next season he was a free agent.  How much salary he could get would be largely based on his batting average, and he was a slugger, so he knew from the signal what he was being called to do.  Could he do it?  Would he do it?

He stepped into the batter’s box, and he prepared for that first pitch, and it was a beauty!  The pitch came as a fast ball right down the middle of the plate, just about waist high.  Would he swing away, or would he do as the third base coach had signaled him to do?  Being fundamentally a team player, he laid down a virtually perfect sacrificed bunt up the third base line. There was no play but to first base.  The batter was out, but the runner had moved on to second base and was now in position to make the winning score.

In baseball, the sacrificial bunt can be a very effective strategy, but it comes with a cost, most notably to the batter, and making a sacrifice, whether in a baseball game or in the course of life, always comes with a cost, and it is much the same in our lives of faith.

For many Christians, the central point of the Lenten season is to prepare for the death of Christ on the cross.  This death is understood as the “ultimate” sacrifice, and this death is what theologians refer to as substitutionary atonement, and substitutionary atonement is about this.  It has, as a concept, four components.  The first idea of why Jesus died on a cross is that God, throughout history, has been deeply offended and dishonored by human sin so, secondly, there can be no amount of finite human punishment that can atone for that infinite divine offense.  There is no way to set things straight historically except through substitutionary atonement.  What God does is he sends his own divine Son to accept death as punishment for our sins in our place.  Because of this death, God’s forgiveness is now freely available for all repentant sinners.

It is not just that Jesus offered his life in atonement for our sins, but that God demanded it as a condition for our forgiveness.  This understanding of the death of Christ is intimately tied up with an understanding of God as judge.

The idea of substitutionary atonement is not a new idea, but it goes back to ancient Israel’s central conviction that offering up material goods of value, of giving things over to God, was a sign and a symbol of the defining the importance of God for the well-being of the life of the community.  So, as a baseball player makes a sacrificial bunt for the team, ancient Israel offered up that which is costly and valued for God as a way of straightening things out.

Offerings in the life of ancient Israel could be given to celebrate their relationship with God.  They could be given as a way of restoring that relationship with God if it was broken.  They might give offerings for purification or for a simple guilt offering, so what we have in the Old Testament are practices which seem bizarre to us and even, at times, barbaric.

You may or may not know this, but there are at least seven references in the Old Testament to child sacrifice—that is, giving the best that we have to God.  There are also many references to the offerings of livestock and produce because, of course, ancient Israel was an agrarian economy, and there was, of course, what was called the Day of Atonement, more familiar to us as Yom Kippur, and the Day of Atonement was a fascinating ritual, and it can be read in Leviticus 16, where, first of all, all the sins of Israel were ritually placed on a live goat which then carried those sins outside the community in a ritualistic procession, so we would put all our sins on the goat and send that goat down to Friendly Avenue, and when that goat would leave, our community would then be holy and purified, and there would be no pollution in our midst.  Right relationship through sacrifice was the goal.  Give to God our best, and the relationship would be restored.

The offering of sacrifice was central to the life and faith of ancient Israel but, over time, this practice became distorted.  Sacrifices—giving things over to God—slowly, but surely, became the dominant expression of faith.  This is what they would do as their sign of faithfulness. They would give sacrifices, so offer a gift to God, say 20 “Hail Marys”, show up at church on Sundays, and you are “good to go”, but Israel’s prophets began to get nervous about this practice because it had usurped all the other pieces of worship.  It was as if we  just offered our best gifts and our faith lives were complete, but the prophets of Israel began to say something very different, so listen to the prophet Josiah in the sixth chapter.  The prophet asked the question “What shall I do with you, O Ephraim?  What shall I do with you, O Judah?”  Through the prophet, God says “For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice.  I desire the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings”.  So what Josiah is saying is, you are just playing around with these rituals and God wants something deeper than that.

Psalm 51 was a similar story—“O Lord, open my lips and my mouth will declare your praise for you have no delight in sacrifice.  If I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased.  The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit.  A broken and contrite heart is what you seek”.  The Psalmist is saying here that we need to surrender our lives to God, and that God is looking for humility and dedication, not just useless gifts.  There has been a change in the rhetoric of Israel, and then perhaps the most well-known word from the prophet Micah in the sixth chapter is this timely question, “With what shall I come before the Lord?”  How do we show our faith to God?  What do we do in order to be faithful people?  Micah asks “Shall I come before God with burnt offerings, with calves a year old?  Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with 10,000 rivers of oil?  Shall I give my first born for my transgressions, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”  The response is very clear.  God has told you, O mortal, what is good and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, show love and kindness and to walk humbly with your God.  Israel had made rituals, routines and public demonstrations of piety to be the center of their faith, and God had really called them to something more.

As we move towards Good Friday, a great temptation for us in our day is to make Christ’s sacrificial death on the cross the “be all and end all” of our faith and, yes, Jesus has died for our sins and, yes, Jesus has died because of our sins, but if we play close attention to the conversation that Jesus is having with his disciples on the way to the cross, we find that there is something else going on there.  In fact, three times in Mark, Jesus tells the disciples about his impending death, and three times they don’t quite get it.  Three times they either change the subject, or they ask about the weather, or they argue about who is greatest, who can sit next to Jesus, and Jesus is saying something very different. Jesus is saying “Take up the cross and follow Me”.

So, the message here is sort of hidden but in plain sight.  Jesus has been with these disciples for their last, perhaps, three years.  He has shown them a new way to live.  He has shown them miracles.  He has shown them healings.  He has shown them feedings.  He has shown them exorcisms, and they are asking “What are we supposed to do again?” and Jesus says “Take up the cross. Be a servant.  Be a servant to the least of these.  Serve your fellow human beings.  Follow Me and do what I have done.  Follow Me all the way to the cross, and you will find what I am talking about”.  So, what Jesus asks of his disciples just before he goes on to his death, and what Jesus asks of us today, is that we not stand around mesmerized by the gift of His sacrificial death, but that we enter into, and collaborate with, His life—the way he lived, the way he taught, the worldly powers that he confronted, the justice that he did, the loving kindness that he shared, and the humble and powerful walk that he took with God.
John Dominic Crossan is a New Testament scholar, who says this:  “Every year our Lenten season asks us to repent, to change and to participate in the building of God’s kingdom here on earth”.  Jesus, in the way He lived, in the way He taught, in His acts of healing and forgiveness, Jesus shows us how to take up the cross and Jesus invites us to go forward and do so.

So, we pray in the Lenten season that we can find new ways to follow Christ, to take up the cross, and to live our faith, and we give thanks to God for that model for our faith.  Amen.