

A Holy Lent: Holy Sacrifice  
John 12:20-27 & Isaiah 53:3-5  
March 17, 2024  
First Presbyterian, Luling

In the chapel at Austin Seminary, on the front of the pulpit, there is a needlepoint hanging, handmade by the Rev. John Evans, who worked at the seminary for many years, in the admissions and development and placement offices. It's titled "The Pelican in Her Piety," and depicts a pelican plucking her breast, with drops of blood, to feed her babies. Those of us who went on the Painted Churches tour last summer may remember that we saw several depictions of this same scene in those churches. {Here are a couple of them}.

This image comes from medieval Christianity. There was a legend that the pelican injured herself to feed her babies, an example of self-sacrifice in the animal kingdom. Medieval Christians saw this legend as a clear depiction of Christ's self-sacrifice on the cross, and they ran with it. Later scientists studied the pelican more closely and realized that the size of the pelican's beak means that they can't possibly reach their own breast with their beak. What they were doing was chewing up fish and sea creatures in their large beaks and then feeding their babies. The legend stuck, though, given its theological resonances. The deeper truth outweighs the scientific facts.<sup>1</sup>

Plenty of mamas in the animal kingdom put themselves in harm's way to protect or feed their babies. It seems to be built into mamas. Don't get between the mama cow and her calf. Or the mama dog and her puppy. Or the mama bear and her cubs. When the mama thinks her offspring are in danger, she forgets about any danger to herself in order to protect them. It's a self-sacrifice if it comes to that. She's stopped thinking about her own survival and put all her efforts into her babies' survival. Human mamas can get that way, too.

Jesus turns to a different metaphor to describe sacrifice. "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." (John 12:24). This, too, has a deeper truth. Of course the grain of wheat isn't making some sort of decision to fall to the earth and die. It just does. It isn't a conscious sacrifice, but a sacrifice nonetheless, a sacrifice of that one grain's life in order to produce many more grains, or fruit, to nourish the world.

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<sup>1</sup> Information in this paragraph from <https://devonchurchland.co.uk/blog/pelican-in-her-piety/#What-is-a-Pelican-In-Her-Piety>

We, I think, know what it is to make a sacrifice. We sacrifice our time, our own desires, our dreams, so that others can fulfill their dreams and desires. We sacrifice our health and well-being to take care of another's health. We might even sacrifice money to donate to a good cause, to someone who has experienced a tragedy. Generally speaking, we understand sacrifice, doing something for someone else at a cost to ourselves.

Jesus says "Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me." (12:25-26). In the other gospels, Jesus repeatedly tells the disciples that they must lose their lives in order to find it, or save it, or keep it. (Matthew 10:39, Mark 8:35, Luke 17:33, respectively). He's talking about two things at once. He's talking about his own sacrifice that is coming, the sacrifice of his life on the cross. He will lose his life like the grain of wheat, and when he dies, his death will give life to the world. In John, Jesus has full knowledge of all that is going to happen, and he's speaking about it all the time, even though the disciples frequently don't get it.

He's not only talking about his own sacrificial death. He's also talking about what it means to be his disciple. We talked about this a few weeks ago, talking about holy disappointment. Being Jesus's disciple isn't going to mean being powerful and on top of the social order. Quite the opposite. Being Jesus's disciple is going to mean making sacrifices. It will mean hating the life of this world; that is, turning away from the values of this world and toward the values of eternal life. It will mean sacrificing success and power. It will mean risking loss of family and friends. It could mean losing their actual lives. Whatever it takes to bear much fruit, to bring life to the world, that's what the disciples will be called to sacrifice.

We're willing to sacrifice, up to a point. That point varies from person to person, and among different circumstances. Most of us are willing to sacrifice quite a lot for our children, our families, our dearest friends. I know you're willing to sacrifice because I've seen you do it. You inspire me. We can inspire each other to sacrifice.

But what Jesus is pushing the disciples to consider, pushing us to consider, is that following him and being his disciple, and loving eternal life, is that he's calling us to sacrifice beyond our point, beyond what we would normally consider, certainly beyond what the world would deem reasonable. Hating our lives in this world is a lot.

A holy sacrifice is for a holy purpose. It's for the sake of others. It turns us away from the world and toward eternal life. It pushes us beyond what we think is reasonable. A holy sacrifice is not something we seek out. It's often not our own

idea. We resist it. A holy sacrifice, like all the other holy stuff we've talked about, is not to draw attention to ourselves. It may go unnoticed.

A holy sacrifice holds a deeper truth, that may not make sense in any logical, provable, scientific way. Like the pelican and the grain of wheat, a holy sacrifice allows others to live and thrive and bear fruit. A holy sacrifice brings life.