

Homily – Spiritual Sacrifices

Rob Keim

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Twenty years ago my world fell apart. I had followed my wife to California, and the day after I arrived, she announced that she was filing for divorce.

Twenty years ago I was devastated on many levels including spiritually. I had been raised and taught that divorce was wrong, and a sin against God. While divorce was becoming more common, it was still something that many churches actively worked against. Some of you have experienced shunning from a church because of divorce, and my own impending divorce caused me great shame and fear.

I was also devastated because my marriage was allowing me to hide or overcome something about myself that caused me even more shame and fear. When I was twelve years old I realized I was gay, and I spent the next decades working very hard to hide and overcome this part of myself. And, twenty years ago my efforts to hide my sexual orientation seemed to be crumbling along with my marriage.

My marriage to Susanne was miserable. We were constantly tearing each other down, but I clung to it with everything thing I could muster, and I pleaded with God to save my way of life, my marriage, and my efforts to fight against part of myself. But, that was not a prayer that got answered in a way that I liked. Or, at least not a way that I liked at the time.

Now, my guess is that most of not all of us here today have had this experience. We plead with God to maintain something in our lives, but instead life crumbles.

An important relationship ends.

A loved one dies.

A job or career takes a halt.

Finances crumble.

A serious illness or injury occurs.

Age takes a toll on our minds or bodies.

Violence shatters our perception of safety.

Most if not all of us have had life events that can be marked with a before and an after. There was life before the event and very different life after the event.

Curiously, this phenomenon also happens for groups.

Before and after the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Before and after the assassination of President Kennedy.

Before and after 9-11.

Whether on a personal or a national level, we all have events that I will call “before and after events.”

Now, let me digress for a moment. This is not a sermon that says bad things happen for a reason. Nor, is it a sermon that says all things work towards good.

We have all heard the insensitive story of a well-intended person telling a grieving mother that good will eventually come from the death of a child.

Ick. Yuck. Not going there. Let me repeat, this is not a sermon that says all things work towards good.

Instead, it is a sermon in which I want to talk about a common experience most of us have had. When a “before and after event” occurs we get stuck in the middle of it as we keep grasping at moving back into the past.

And, have you ever noticed that it often takes a “before and after event” before we will let go of a significant belief or view.

With that thought let us turn to today’s third Bible reading, our reading from the first letter of Peter.

We are actually not sure of the writer, but tradition has it that the Apostle Peter crafted this New Testament letter. And, Peter’s letter is written to several communities of Jesus that have formed in the eastern part of the Roman Empire. These communities or early churches are facing hardships, and Peter is give both words of instruction and words of encouragement. It is believed that the letter was written at some point thirty-five to fifty years after the death and resurrection of Jesus, which is about the same time period in which the Gospel according to John was written.

Both the first letter of Peter and the Gospel of John were written after the razing of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 AD since both make direct reference to this destruction by the Romans.

Now, today, we still recognize the life, death and resurrection of Jesus as a “before and after event”. The world and even the universe were changed forever.

And though it has faded in our twenty-first century minds, the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem was also a “before and after event”. Jewish culture, religion and politics were forever changed. In addition, the early Christian communities, especially those with which the Apostle Peter was aligned, would have been grieving and reeling from the destruction. Remember, the cosmic God of the Jews and of the early Christians was located inside the inner sanctum of the Temple in Jerusalem. But, with its destruction, this whole belief system was destroyed along with the Temple and its priests.

And the writer of the first Letter of Peter reminds the early Christian churches that the Temple has been replaced. He gives them a vision of what comes after. As we see in today’s third reading, the stones of the Temple have been replaced by living stones also known as the followers of Jesus. The animal sacrifices have been replaced by spiritual sacrifices. The Temple priests have been replaced by the priesthood of all believers.

These are all changes that are familiar to us today, but I can assure you that two thousand years ago, the Jews and the early churches would have been ceaselessly praying for the return of the Temple and its priests. The Jews and the early followers of Jesus wanted to move back into the past.

It is not easy, is it, to be in the middle of a “before and after event?” It is painful.

Back when I was a finance director at Hewlett-Packard we went through a significant change in our corporate culture. The H-P way valued employees and research, but it could get bogged down in decision making and its cost structure seemed high. Senior management decided that the culture had to be replaced with a new more nimble culture that placed less value on employees and cost less.

However, it takes 5-7 years for a new culture to take hold, so there was a gap between cultures. Like I said, it is hard to be in the middle of a “before and after event” for you long for the past, and don’t yet know what the future is going to look like. And, this is what we felt at H-P.

This makes me think of our national politics. Are we in the midst of a “before and after event” that is reshaping our nation? Do we long for the past, and at the same time long for future that is still unknown? Again, it is not easy being in middle of a “before and after event”.

Two thousand years ago, the early followers of Jesus were reeling from the “before and after event” in the destruction of the Temple, but they were also still coming to grips with the death and resurrection of Jesus.

And, the overwhelming trauma, led... to innovation. They were learning what it means to be followers of Jesus. They were inventing things and trying things. There were probably some failures, some new things that were tried that led down false paths. The New Testament letters to the early churches, including today first letter of Peter, were chalk full of admonishes on things not do.

For me, as I think of the early church, the image of the phoenix comes to mind. This is the mythical bird that rises or is reborn out of the ashes of destruction. Though it took a while to let go of the past, the early church was rising out of the ashes of the Temple.

Now, one of my desires in life is to figure out how to have this rising and rebirth without the destruction.

I want to go directly from the before to the after without having the painful event in the middle. I would also like to avoid the waiting that can come between the before and after.

Have you ever noticed that some individuals and groups seem to be able to reinvent themselves without the painful event. Or, sometimes they know how to move through it as suitably as possible. Perhaps this is what senior management was trying to do at Hewlett-Packard. They were instigated a change in culture before the company actually fell down.

Now, in last week’s Thursday night spiritual formation class, Todd Long taught about the spirituality of the Apostle Paul. In that class Todd shared a quote from the poet, W. H. Auden that I think is appropriate to today’s topic.

Auden wrote, “we would rather be ruined than changed. We would rather die in our dread than climb the cross of the moment and let our illusions die.”

That certainly fits me. I “would rather be ruined than changed. [I] would rather die in [my] dread than climb the cross of the moment and let [my] illusions die.”

Repeatedly, my ego and my need to be right get in the way of what would otherwise be a less painful move to a better place.

And, perhaps some of you recognize yourselves as well. Would you rather be ruined than change or move on or let go?

Twenty years ago, I was eager to continue on in a very painful and destructive marriage rather burst my illusion or bubble about my sexual identify. My wife had to leave me, and I had to hit bottom before finally being humble or low enough to accept a new answer.

Why couldn't I have paid more attention to the teachings of Jesus. We are to humble ourselves in the same way that he did. We are to let go of our insatiable need to be right. Jesus shows us over and over that most of the things and even values that we place on a pedestal in life are really not that important. We would be better off if we would stop clinging to power, and to control and to the need to be better than others.

Some of you know this better than I do. When we are humble then the move from before to after is less painful.

And, here is an important thing. When we are humble we also focus on our own need for change rather pointing at all the other people who need to change.

Once again when we are mindful and humble we can steadfastly follow in the steps of Jesus as we move towards eternal life.

We all have more "before and after events" in our future and Jesus is our guide and our ever present help as we work through them.