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Good Friday
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Sacrifice and Love

Propitiation. It's quite a word, quite a concept, an amazing reality. I grew up hearing this strange word every Sunday I attended church and heard the priest tell us about "the comfortable words of Our Savior Christ."

"Hear also what St. John saith: If any man sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the Propitiation for our sins." ¹

The first Book of Common Prayer in 1549 required this verse from 1John 2:2 to be used before the Eucharistic Prayer. Propitiation was the translation used not only for the Book of Common Prayer, but also for the first English Bible, the King James Version, from the early 17th century through much of the 20th century.

The Revised Standard Version changed this translation 70 years ago from propitiation to expiation. When the most recent Book of Common Prayer was published in 1976 this "comfortable word" was no longer required. It became an option in the Rite I service and the translation changed again to "perfect offering." If we were to look up the verse in the Bible we currently use, the New Revised Version, we would read yet another translation "atoning sacrifice."

For centuries, from the Greek to the Latin to the English translation, this day, Good Friday, is the celebration of the once and for all sacrifice made by Jesus, fully and finally. On this day we proclaim Jesus to be the atoning sacrifice, the perfect offering, the expiation, the propitiation for all humanity.

So, perhaps, today more than any other day in the year we think about sacrifice. What do we know of sacrifice? How is sacrifice a part of your life? What do we know is transformed by sacrifice?

Many of us first learn about sacrifice in our families—from our parents, even grandparents. My father's father sent his wife and 2 year old son to the United States from Estonia in the 1920's. My dad grew up the son of immigrants. He wasn't born here. My Grandfather Malm spoke very little English. He made huge sacrifices for his family, to get them out of Europe in a time of increasing chaos and war.

I was born 6 years after World War II ended. I grew up playing with toy soldiers and watching films and television shows about the war. I know my dad enlisted in the Army Air Corps shortly after his 19th birthday. Later, during the Korean War, he went back into the Air Force. The "Greatest Generation" reminds us all of the sacrifices made for this nation, for the world.

Those who play sports learn about sacrifice. My dad had a long scar down the side of his knee. I knew he seriously injured his knee playing football in college. Yet I still wanted to play. I'll never forget the iconic photograph from the early 1960's of the N. Y. Giants quarterback, Y. A. Tittle. He's slouched over, down on both knees, having his helmet knocked off, with blood streaming down his

¹ 1928 Book of common Prayer, p.76.

head. Tittle was 38 years old and in the last year of his 17 year pro football career, but he looked like he was 80 and close to death. All athletes know about sacrifice.

As a child and a teenager, I wasn't exactly sure how Jesus fit into my understanding of sacrifice. In fact, year after year as I came to Good Friday, even as I used these words throughout the year—perfect offering, atoning sacrifice, propitiation, expiation—I knew that this is a great mystery: God in Christ; Jesus, both man and God; Jesus, the Son of God; the King of Israel. Jesus willingly, freely accepted death on the cross. What does Jesus' death mean for me? For my understanding of sacrifice? How do I share in this propitiation?

Marcus Borg, the author and theologian writes, "Sacrifice and love often go together. People who sacrifice their lives most often do so because of a greater love...." He points to Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Archbishop Romero, 3 twentieth century martyrs who sacrificed for love.

"....We can speak of Jesus sacrificing his life, being willing to die because of his love for others, Without in any way implying that God required his death as a sacrifice so that we can be forgiven. It would be ludicrous to suggest that God required the deaths of Bonhoeffer, King, and Romero. No, They were killed because of their passion for a different and better kind of world. So also, Jesus sacrificed his life. He offered it up as a gift to God—not because God required it, but because He was filled with God's passion for the kingdom of God—a different kind of world."²

This is what we know about Jesus. He wanted a different kind of world. He was the Son of God, the King of Israel. His power and authority comes through his sacrifice and his love. His death changed the world. His death still changes the world. This sacrifice has changed you and me.

He "gave up his spirit." John writes that from the cross Jesus said, "It is finished," sometimes translated "It is accomplished." This is the work of saving the world from the power of death, from the power of evil and sin which distorts and uses death.

Martin Smith, our guest speaker during the Lenten Monday night series, writes that Jesus' "embrace of us had no limits, no exceptions...." Jesus' death shows us "the magnitude of his identification with us in our alienation...." In fact, Smith uses the prophecy about the suffering servant from Isaiah 53 as the title for his meditation for Good Friday, "He was numbered with the transgressors...."³

We live in a world where innocent children are gassed to death. We live in a world where Christians worshipping on Palm Sunday are bombed and murdered in their churches. We live in a world where cancer and other diseases and illnesses claim the lives of our loved ones at 8 or 48 or 80. We know tragedies, accidents and evil. We know the power and finality of death.

² Marcus Borg, Speaking Christian, Harper One, New York, 2011, pp. 104-5.

³ Martin Smith, A Season for the Spirit, Cowley, Cambridge, 1991, p. 155.

Our celebration today, our audacity at naming this day Good Friday, proclaims that we know Jesus' perfect offering. We know that God says "No" to death. We know Jesus' sacrifice leads us to sacrifice, or as John writes "If God so loved us, we also ought to love one another...." (1 John 4:11)

Perfect offering, propitiation, expiation, atoning sacrifice—call Jesus' death what you will. Know in this sacrifice is His love. This love is with us. This love empowers us. This love gives meaning to our lives, today and always.