

Sacrifice
[Mark 12:38-44](#)
Rev. Curtis Bablitz
November 10, 2024

“In Flanders Fields,” by John McCrae, is one of the best-known poems from the First World War. In the poem, the dead speak to us – those who have made the ultimate sacrifice and laid down their lives for their nation call on the living to do the same: take up our quarrel with the foe, be yours the torch to hold it high. The dead ask the living to sacrifice in the same way they sacrificed to ensure their sacrifice was not in vain. And that is a request that only they can make. If you’ve made that kind of sacrifice, then - and only then - can you call on others to do the same; if you’ve stood in the trenches and faced down machine gun fire and shelling and chlorine gas. Because that same call and challenge sounds very different coming from those who have never sacrificed. In “Dulce et Decorum est,” another great poem from the First World War, Wilfred Owen describes the horrors of life in the trenches, the misery and suffering and death the soldiers experience each and every day, and then condemns those who sit in comfort back home and “tell with such high zest to children ardent for some desperate glory, the old Lie: Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori – it is sweet and fitting to die for one’s country.” It’s easy to tell people that it is sweet and fitting to die for your country if you have no intention of doing so yourself – if you’re just going to stay in safety and comfort and send others off to war

to suffer and die. If you're going to ask people to sacrifice – to give up their comfort, their safety, their lives, you'd better be willing to do the same.

And this is true of other kinds of sacrifices as well. Any group of people living together, working together, at some point they will face challenges, they'll be asked to make sacrifices, and if those sacrifices aren't shared – if the burden is only carried by one part of the community and the rest do nothing, there's going to be bitterness and resentment growing in that community, and it won't be long before things fall apart. During the COVID-19 pandemic, there were all these calls for people to make sacrifices, to give up their comforts and pleasures to protect each other and the vulnerable people around us from disease and death. And when everyone was working together, sacrificing together, that wasn't so bad – there was a common cause that we all committed to work for together for the common good. But when the same people who asked us to sacrifice weren't willing to do the same themselves – when the people making the rules acted like those rules didn't apply to them – then all of a sudden it was a lot harder to keep happily staying home. It's much harder to follow the rules when it feels like you're the only one following, when it seems like everyone else is pretending to be virtuous but really doing whatever they want. When you ask someone to sacrifice, to give up their comfort, their safety, their life, you'd better be willing to do the same.

Keep that in mind when you hear the passage we read this morning from the gospel of Mark. Maybe it's a story you've heard before – the story of the poor widow and her two copper coins. In countless sermons in countless

churches over the years, this widow has been held up as the model of generosity, the perfect ideal of how we are meant to give of ourselves to the service of the kingdom of God. She gives everything, every last penny, all that she had to live on, she gives it all away, she sacrifices it all. And then people like me, people with long robes and little white collars, we tell you to go and do the same, give until it hurts, give like this wonderful woman did. But when you actually read this story, when you actually pay attention to what Jesus is saying, you'll see pretty quickly that that is not what this story is about. This story isn't really about the widow. Because before we get to the widow, Jesus has a message for the teachers of the law, those pillars of the community who love to parade around in their flowing robes and little white collars, telling everyone around to give until it hurts. The leaders of the temple in Jerusalem are telling everyone around them to sacrifice, to contribute everything they have to keep building the temple bigger and bigger and bigger, because every penny they earn makes them wealthier and more important and more influential, more big building contracts to sell around to the local contractors, more bribes slipping into their pocket. The leaders of the temple ask everyone around them to sacrifice, but they're not willing to sacrifice anything themselves. They give only what they can afford to give, out of their surplus, out of their abundance, while squeezing every last drop of wealth from the poor, shamelessly cheating widows out of their property. When the widow drops in her last two coins into the temple treasury, she is being cheated, robbed by the temple leaders who demand sacrifice from others without being willing to sacrifice anything themselves. And ultimately, that sacrifice is wasted – the widow gives up everything she has to contribute

to building the temple, and yet if you keep reading just a few more verses, Jesus tells his disciples that the Temple is going to be destroyed – all these projects and plans will end in destruction and fire and ruin, all the wealth and money that's been ripped out of the hands of the poor and the widows and the suffering, it will all go up in flames.

So the point of this story isn't that we should give, give and give some more, that we should be just like the widow. Because if we're being honest, for most of our history, the church has acted a whole lot more like those corrupt, hypocritical teachers of the law than like that poor widow. More often than not, the church has used our power and influence to do exactly what Jesus was condemning that day in Jerusalem, to accumulate wealth and power and comfort and control. We've made the church all about us, and we've insisted that the world around follow our wisdom, obey our guidance, build everything around our sense of right and truth and goodness, when we don't even follow those standards ourselves. We've demanded sacrifice from others, without being willing to sacrifice ourselves. And that's not the way things are meant to be. That's not what the church is meant to be. We are the church of Jesus Christ, and as his disciples, his ambassadors to the world, we are supposed to be like Jesus. And Jesus never asks anyone to make a sacrifice that he wasn't willing to make himself. In everything that he did in his earthly ministry, Jesus sacrificed himself for the good of others, for the good of his disciples, the good of the poor and the suffering, the outcast and the unloved. In everything he did, Jesus gave of himself, emptied himself, sacrificed himself so that the people around him could encounter the kingdom

of God through his words, his actions, his love. Even though he had everything, all the power and influence in the universe, Jesus gave it all away, and laid down his own life on the cross for the sake of humanity, Jesus sacrificed everything, everything he had, for our sake, to save us from ourselves. So when Jesus calls on his followers to take up the cross, to walk a road through challenge and trouble and pain, he's not asking us to do anything he hasn't already done. He's not asking us to go anywhere he hasn't already gone. Whatever road we walk, we know Jesus has already been there. Whatever challenges we face, we know Jesus has already faced them and defeated them. When Jesus calls us to sacrifice, to give up some little part of our comfort and security, our certainty and pride, we can know that these are all sacrifices that Jesus has already made, he gave up everything so that we can begin to follow, so that we can begin to sacrifice in the same way.

And that means that here and now, as Christ's people here in this world, we have the opportunity to build a new kind of community. Instead of seeking our own advantage, trying to build up our own power and wealth at the expense of others, calling the rest of the world to sacrifice while we keep ourselves safe, through the power of Jesus Christ, we can learn to lay down our lives for the people around us, our family, our neighbours, our enemies. That's what it means to be the church – not to gain power, but to give it up, give away everything we have so that those around us can grow strong. When we follow Jesus and give up what we have for his sake, and for the sake of our neighbours, we are trusting that every sacrifice we make will be worth it, every gift we give will be used by Jesus Christ to build his kingdom and

share his love, to lift his beloved children out of trouble so they can share God's mercy and love as part of our family, part of this community of grace. When Jesus calls us to sacrifice, to give up our safety and comfort for the sake of the gospel, we know this is a sacrifice that Jesus has already made for us, and we know it is always worth it. In the name of Jesus Christ – Amen!