

Sacrifice's Yield

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
November 11, 2018—Veterans Day

- [Isaiah 2:1-5 Good News Translation](#) ¹ Here is the message which God gave to Isaiah son of Amoz about Judah and Jerusalem: ² In days to come the mountain where the Temple stands will be the highest one of all, towering above all the hills. Many nations will come streaming to it, ³ and their people will say, "Let us go up the hill of the LORD, to the Temple of Israel's God. He will teach us what he wants us to do; we will walk in the paths he has chosen. For the LORD's teaching comes from Jerusalem; from Zion he speaks to his people." ⁴ He will settle disputes among great nations. They will hammer their swords into plows and their spears into pruning knives. Nations will never again go to war, never prepare for battle again. ⁵ Now, descendants of Jacob, let us walk in the light which the LORD gives us!
- [Hebrews 10:19-25 Good News Translation](#) ¹⁹ We have, then, my friends, complete freedom to go into the Most Holy Place by means of the death of Jesus. ²⁰ He opened for us a new way, a living way, through the curtain – that is, through his own body. ²¹ We have a great priest in charge of the house of God. ²² So let us come near to God with a sincere heart and a sure faith, with hearts that have been purified from a guilty conscience and with bodies washed with clean water. ²³ Let us hold on firmly to the hope we profess, because we can trust God to keep his promise. ²⁴ Let us be concerned for one another, to help one another to show love and to do good. ²⁵ Let us not give up the habit of meeting together, as some are doing. Instead, let us encourage one another all the more, since you see that the Day of the Lord is coming nearer.
- [Sermon-in-a-sentence](#): Jesus died on a cross to show us what love looks like in action.

Veterans Day is a civic holiday, not a religious one. It originated as a commemoration of the signing of the Armistice which brought World War I to an end. Of course, it wasn't called "World War I" at the time. Back then it was usually referred to as "The War to End All Wars" or "The Great War" --not "great" in terms of something admirable or highly desirable. It was a "Great War" because of its scope involving so many nations, so much destruction, so high a number of combatant and civilian deaths.

Veterans Day doesn't often fall on a Sunday, and what's particularly distinctive about this Veteran's Day is that today marks the 100th anniversary of that moment "on the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month" when "...47 miles northeast of Paris in the Forest of Compiègne, German delegates met with Allied commander Ferdinand Foch and signed the armistice that ended the war."¹

It was the poet and author Maya Angelou who was credited with saying, "'How important it is to recognize and celebrate our heroes and our she-roes.'" Indeed we recognize this morning those who donned the uniform of our country. It's appropriate to offer our gratitude, to express our admiration. Of course, we don't make them the focus of our worship because that is reserved for God alone through our Lord Jesus Christ. But still... I think we can learn something about the Christian Faith from their example.

Our nation's heritage has been built upon the sacrifices made by veterans.

- We rub elbows with many of our military veterans as we go about our daily lives. Some veterans are whole and well, while others bear physical or emotional scars resulting from the trauma of their service.
- Some veterans are deceased. Many lived out the fullness of their years, while some had their lives cut short while in service to our country.
- And of course, there are men and women who are serving today. Each week in our printed bulletin we acknowledge those with ties to our church. Those currently in our armed forces – future veterans, if you will – are serving us as we sit here enjoying the freedoms this nation offers us.

¹ Geoffrey Johnson, "War and Remembrance," *The Rotarian*, Vol 197, No. 5, November 2018, 40-43

The society in which we live and breathe is the product of the legacy resulting from the sacrifices of our nation's veterans, combined with the courageous vision of our Founding Fathers and Mothers, along with generations of public service by elected leaders.

- Our nation is a government of the people, by the people, for the people.
- We cherish a free press with a mission of public service to inform and hold accountable.
- Our freedom of association allows us to come to this place this morning without fear of intimidation or reprisal.
- We can cross our state border into Pennsylvania or West Virginia or Kentucky or Indiana or Michigan without having to prove our identity or receive prior approval.

Most of us, most of the time, take all those things for granted. But they are the legacy of the sacrifices made by our nation's military veterans—sacrificing months and years away from family and friends, sacrificing the comforts of home, sacrificing injury and illness, and in the case of 2.9 million men and women, losing their lives in service to America's ideals of "liberty and justice for all."²

With the image of our nation's veterans in mind perhaps we can gain a new appreciation for what Jesus did for us in his life, and particularly in his death.

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The prophet Isaiah proclaimed a vision of what God wanted humankind to become. Isaiah described the unmatched majesty of God's will as being like a mountain towering over all the hills around it. People would realize that God's way was so far superior to the ways of humankind. People from many lands would flock to it, do whatever it took to ascend that mountain so they could learn God's will for all people and embrace it and live according to it. With *God's will* as their focus and not their own self-serving views, they would discover that there was no more need for conquest and defense and war. They could "hammer their swords into plows and their spears into pruning [hooks]."³

To make this promise even clearer to humankind, at a point in human history God entered into the realm of human activity, becoming incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth—the Hebrew term "Immanuel" describes this action succinctly: "God with us." In the three years of his itinerant ministry Jesus preached and taught and demonstrated what life looks like when we live according to God's will and not according to our all-too-human, self-serving desires. In Jesus we saw God.

But there was still something holding us back from embracing God's way completely: our fear of losing, of not having enough, of being taken advantage of. We knew what our "worst selves" are capable of, and we feared that someone else might act like that toward us. So while we admired Jesus' ethic of justice and compassion, we weren't quite ready to make ourselves vulnerable by surrendering to him completely. Consequently we can still act in self-serving, unloving ways. Not always, but sometimes.

Mark Sandlin is the pastor at Presbyterian Church of the Covenant in Greensboro, NC. He's written *When we act in unloving ways, we distance ourselves from God – and that is the one and only sin: actions that separate us from God.* At the heart of considering whether or not an action separates us from God... is the question of love. Does this action come from a place of love? And that question brings us... to the cross. "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." –John 15:13 (NRSV)⁴

We don't often talk about Jesus dying on the cross unless we're in the season of Lent. But Christ's death on the cross is a central tenet of the Christian Faith, right along with "He was born of Mary" and "He was raised on the third day."

So as Jesus pursued and encouraged an ethic of justice and compassion, that threatened the privilege and power of the political and economic and religious leaders of his day. Jesus knew that his commitment to living out of love would offend those who profited from injustice. Jesus knew that his

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_military_casualties_of_war, accessed 11/10/2018

³ Isaiah 2:4b Good News Translation

⁴ <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/thegodarticle/2015/03/god-did-not-kill-jesus-on-the-cross-for-our-sins/>, accessed 11/10/2018

compassionate actions would “comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable,” as the saying goes.⁵ Since the powerbrokers of his day didn’t share his ethic of justice and compassion, they showed their “worst selves” by acting to protect their interests rather than consider the needs of others. Hence, crucifixion.

Jesus lived a life of love. His unconditional love and mercy and forgiveness and generosity challenged the ways of the world. But he did it anyway. In the way our military veterans sacrifice a measure of personal freedom and precious time, their health or even their lives for the sake of their country, Jesus sacrificed his life because he was determined to show love in what he said and did.

Because of his sacrifice, we saw God. We saw God’s love, God’s will, God’s desires for humanity. The Bible has a curious way of saying that. In Hebrew Chapter 10, verse 20 we heard, “[The death of Jesus] opened for us a new way, a living way, through the curtain – that is, through his own body.” ‘Through the curtain’?!? What does *that* mean? Well, it’s a reference to the story of the crucifixion as told in Mark’s gospel. And to understand that, let me paint a very brief picture of ancient worship practices in the Jerusalem Temple.

The innermost chamber of the Temple was called the “Holy of Holies.” It contained the Covenant Box or Ark of the Covenant which you’re familiar with because of Indiana Jones and the movie “Raiders of the Lost Ark.” For the forty years the Israelites wandered in the wilderness and before they built a temple in the Promised Land, their worship center was a portable tent or tabernacle that they could put up and take down as they traveled. The Ark of the Covenant was basically an ornate, gold-encrusted box containing two copies of the Ten Commandments, a pot of the manna which God provided as food in the wilderness, and Aaron’s walking stick. The ark was about four feet long and maybe two feet high and deep. It was carried by men holding poles that slid through brackets at the bottom corners of the box.⁶

Eventually the portable tabernacle was replaced by a temple built in Jerusalem, and the Ark of the Covenant was placed in the innermost chamber called the “Holy of Holies.” The Jews were clear that the box was not God – that would have made it an idol – but the Ark came to symbolize God’s invisible enthronement. By the time it was placed in the Holy of Holies the Ark was considered so special that it was believed you would die if you saw it. So they installed a curtain in front of the Ark. And when the Temple’s high priest made his once-yearly offering in the Holy of Holies, his life was spared because that curtain prevented him from seeing the symbolic presence of Almighty God.

Now, to Mark’s gospel.... In Chapter 15, verse 37 Mark states that Jesus died. The very next verse says this: “The curtain hanging in the Temple was torn in two, from top to bottom.”⁷ If you didn’t know about the Jewish Temple’s Holy of Holies and the Ark of the Covenant, that statement about a torn curtain would make no sense at all. But now we understand the symbolism: in his sacrificial death Jesus revealed that God is love. The shroud of mystery is removed, the curtain is torn apart, and we clearly see through the sacrifice of Jesus that God is love – generous, unconditional love that’s not dependent on who we are or whether we’re deserving. What Christ’s sacrifice shows us is what love can look like when we try to live the way Jesus did.

It looks like healing people who are hurt. It looks like feeding people who are hungry. It looks like loving people who are shunned. It looks like defending people who are overwhelmed. It looks like friends sharing food together. It looks like grieving over the loss of a friend. It looks like a conversation over a drink of cool water. It looks like helping the celebration along at a wedding. It looks like helping the lost find meaning in life. ...Jesus’ death showed us how far love will go, what love looks like when it is played out to its fullest.⁸

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⁵ Originally written by *Chicago Evening Post* journalist and humorist Finley Peter Dunne, the quote appeared in the 1902 book *Observations by Mr. Dooley*, per David Shedden, October 7, 2014 at <https://www.poynter.org/news/today-media-history-mr-dooley-job-newspaper-comfort-afflicted-and-afflict-comfortable>, accessed 11/10/2018

⁶ Pat Alexander, ed., *Eerdmans’ Family Encyclopedia of the Bible*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1978, 138

⁷ Mark 15:38 Good News Translation

⁸ <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/thegodarticle/2015/03/god-did-not-kill-jesus-on-the-cross-for-our-sins/>, accessed 11/10/2018