

PUTTING OUR BODIES ON THE LINE

The Rev. Dr. Charles D. Mayer
The Fourth Sunday of Advent
December 19, 2021

Then [Jesus] said, “See, God, I have come to do your will, O God.” (Hebrews 10:7).

What is God’s will, really? Our world today is coming apart at the seams. There are fifty-five civil wars going on, many with several foreign countries participating on opposite sides. Disease, food insecurity, and housing insecurity are rampant. The international aid system is unravelling. All while COVID and climate change bring ever greater disruption and unpredictability (International Rescue Committee Website).

How do we Christians in Westchester County at the end of December 2021 face all of this and respond in faith? What is God’s will for us?

Let’s take a deep dive into our Epistle Lesson from Hebrews as a way of starting to answer this question. Hebrews is not a letter; its Greek title is simply *pros Hebraious*--“to the Hebrews”--and it is best thought of as a very long sermon or exhortation. It may even have been delivered as a synagogue sermon for the ninth day of the Hebrew month of *Av*, the day on which the two destructions of the Temple in Jerusalem were recalled. (*The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, p. 460) Today’s passage would very much make sense in this context. Jesus is presented as quoting from Psalm 40, which we don’t see him doing anywhere in the Gospels but may still be a memory of something he actually did. The verses Jesus speaks express God’s desire not for sacrifices and offerings, but for “a body you have prepared for me.” (Hebrews 10:5) (*Preaching Through the Christian Year, Year C*, p. 23). The verses are in keeping with the broad theme of Hebrews, which is that Jesus’ sacrifice of his own body replaces once and for all the need for the sacrifices that took place in the Temple.

To fully appreciate the significance of this, we need to appreciate the magnitude of the Temple sacrificial system. There is considerable evidence from archaeology of massive, almost unimaginable, numbers of animals being slaughtered daily (250,000 or more on some days). The Temple was full of the smells and sounds of animals as their lives were ending and their bodies burned. Further, this sacrificial system was a driver of the economy in Jerusalem. Animals were often raised specifically for the purpose of being sacrificed. Participating in the sacrificial system was mandatory for all Jews at certain junctures in their lives. Gentiles also routinely brought animals for sacrifice at the Temple. (See “Sacrifice and the Temple” in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, pp. 658-662, and “*Science News*,” *NBC News Website*, September 4, 2013).

So, to say that the one sacrifice of Jesus’ body was intended to *replace* all of this was much more than a theological point; it upended a way of life. I’ve searched my mind for analogies, and something like ending the stock market system or the banking system in contemporary society is roughly equivalent to what Jesus is said to have contemplated in Hebrews. It was a radically disruptive vision, to say the very least.

This vision was not new to the Book of Hebrews, either, as we have already noted. The idea that prayer was the sacrifice God truly desired is present in the Psalms and the Prophets. While the Temple sacrificial system contained at least the *ideal* of devotion to God and deepening relationship with God through that devotion, the specter of abuse within the system was a concern throughout Jewish history.

But ... it never seemed like a practical idea. It was often an idea that occurred in conjunction with apocalyptic thinking, with the idea that the Messiah was coming and with this a new and transformed world. In this sense, Hebrews is an Advent text *par excellence*. The whole text is asking the question, "If this impossible overturning of life as we know it were to take place--if, in this case, the basis of the economy was curtailed-- how would we live?"

Listen to Jesus again, quoting Psalm 40: "a body you have prepared for me." (Hebrews 10:5) The sacrifice of Jesus' body is somehow going to be sufficient to make things right in a world whose way of life has been upended completely.

I have a difficult thing to say about the whole idea of sacrifice for us Christians today, in our contemporary context. It is this: while Jesus' sacrifice did indeed replace the daily slaughter of thousands of animals as the central religious activity of Judaism, it was still a killing, an act of violence. I think we need to be very careful about a theology based on an act of violence as humans in a world in which unimaginable violence--towards people and towards the planet--is carried out every day. This is for a long book, not a short sermon, but there are many ways in which the Church has participated in violence and has justified itself as the Body of Christ, doing the will of the One who died for the Church.

It is only if we emphasize the love involved in Jesus' sacrifice--the fact that his death was finally about life, not about violence--that we can really appropriate the Letter to the Hebrews for ourselves today. Let's each take the words of Psalm 40--"a body you have prepared for me"--and think about them as words for each of us personally today. If loving God means serving "all people, the earth, and every living thing," as our amazing Mission Statement says, we do well to think about what it means to love God with our own bodies, individually, and as a parish. And what this means today, I believe, is living as deeply as we can into not participating in the systems that perpetuate violence against people and the planet.

The bad news is that this is a very tall order, because we Westchesterites are all quite enmeshed in these systems. The good news is that opportunities for us to make different choices about how we live are everywhere. "What is God's will, really?" was the question we asked at the beginning of this sermon. If we are listening to the Book of Hebrews, our answer today is to await Jesus' Coming by scrutinizing all of our choices and weeding out our participation in violence wherever we can. What we eat, where our food comes from, how we travel, who we vote for, what we do with our money, how we interact with one another: *all* of our choices, large and small, are opportunities to be a part of a great movement away from violence and towards love. Jesus will come, and God will bring it all to completion; but let's delight God with how we live while we wait.

Advent blessings to all of you.