

PERSPECTIVES AND PERVITIVES V

SACRIFICE

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Lately I looked into a volume of O. Henry's stories and was struck by the way that they have become dated. The snappy style, the surprise ending, the sentimental twist, the people who passed by the author's window in old New York at the turn of this century.

Among those people is the poor young couple who appear in the story known as The Gift of the Magi. They sell their most precious possessions to buy each other Christmas gifts only to discover that their gifts cannot be used because they were meant to go with the thing the other person had sold. O. Henry concludes the story by observing:

"I have lamely related to you the uneventful chronicle of two foolish children in a flat who unwisely sacrificed for each other the greatest treasures of their house. But in a last word to the wise of these days let it be said that of all who give gifts these were the wisest."

It is a long way from O. Henry to Paul of Tarsus. Yet there is a curious resemblance between those words I just read to you and something the apostle has to say in his first letter to the Corinthians. He writes that the cross of Christ is foolishness to the wise of his day, but for those who have appreciated its power, the cross is the wisdom of God. "For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men."

There are aspects of Paul's writings that also seem dated. In an age when women wear pants to church, who cares whether they wear hats? But at this point at least, I think that both Paul and O. Henry still speak the last word to the wise of any age, and that is the word of sacrificial love.

It is sacrifice that brings out the best in human nature. Such is the message of A Tale of Two Cities, when a dissolute young man rises above himself with an act of grand heroism. "It is a far, far better thing I do," he says, "than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest I go to than I have ever known." With those words Sidney Carton goes to the guillotine in place of the fiance of the girl he adores. That broke up the people in Dickens' day just as The Gift of the Magi broke up people in O. Henry's day. If we are not broken up that's because we post-modern people are a hard and heartless lot.

Yet with due respect for Sidney Carton's noble deed, we wonder if he would have volunteered to take the place of some old Marquis with a crotchety wife and ten children.

Sacrifice brings out the best in human nature, but that best is usually devoted to people we find attractive. That is one reason why Jesus is so unusual. He gives himself away in behalf of the outcast, the criminal, the great unwashed. He speaks of laying down his life for his friends! But such friends! What kind of friend was Judas when he betrayed Jesus, or Peter when he denied him? At Calvary we are a long way from the sentimental atmosphere of jeweled combs in a shop window, and from the romantic atmos-

sphere of Victorian gallantry. Jesus' sacrifice has about it an in spite of quality. It is made in behalf of unlovely people in spite of their unloveliness.

It is important to see, too, that the factor of sacrificial love was not tacked on to Jesus at the end. Even had he died a natural death, that factor would have been a key theme in his life. He was a man who continually gave himself away. "He who would find his life, must lose it." This was Jesus' own pervitive.

I have said that sacrifice brings out the best in human nature. Somebody is likely to think immediately, "But also the worst." Some people like to play the martyr. Yes, I know that. When we deal with human beings we always come up against these yes-buts. I have spent a lot of time recently reading a very large book about a man I have admired. The person who loaned it to me also admires this man, but thought there might be things in the book that qualify my admiration. There aren't. I have come to accept the fact that even regarding the best people we must always say yes-but. We must face the "buts", I think. Yet we must not let the buts disillusion us so as to blind us to the "yes". When it comes to sacrifice, we can always go into motives and find something self-serving. But this need not blind us to the fact that in many cases, sacrifice does bring out the best in people.

So let's keep the sermon neat and simple and make that point one.

Point two is that sacrifice also brings out the divine nature.

"The last word to the wise of these days," - to use O Henry's phrase - is that God also gives himself away. It is acts of sacrificial love that tell us the most fundamental thing about the world in which we live. It is through acts of sacrificial love that we get into the swing of whatever it is that gives meaning to life.

A lot of the language that Paul and other early Christians used about the crucifixion is problematic for many people today. Many of the doctrines spun out of this language are even more problematic. I don't like any of the doctrines very much. But I always find myself coming back to the conclusion that Paul and the other early Christians were right in zeroing in on the cross of Christ as the clue to who God is and what he is like. If I may be permitted to quote one of those ponderous German theologians whom we never seem to run out of, let me just read this brief passage by Jürgen Moltmann from his recent book, The Crucified God.

"When the crucified Jesus is called the 'image of the invisible God', the meaning is that this is God, and God is like this. God is not greater than he is in this humiliation, God is not more glorious than he is in this self-surrender. God is not more powerful than he is in this helplessness."

Or I might quote from another ponderous German theologian who probably still would be telling us how it is in two hundred word sentences were it not that he too was executed. In July 1944 Dietrich Bonhoeffer sent this strange poem to a friend from his prison in Berlin. It is called Christians

and Pagans.

"Men go to God when they are sore bestead,
Pray to him for succour, for his peace, for bread;
For mercy for them, sinning, or dead;
All men do so, Christian and unbelieving.

Men go to God when he is sore bestead,
Find him poor and scorned, without shelter or bread,
Whelmed under weight of the wicked, the weak, the dead;
Christians stand by God in his hour of grieving.

God goeth to every man when sore bestead,
Feedeth body and spirit with his bread;
For Christians, pagans alike he hangeth dead,
And both alike forgiving."

Maybe that communicates and maybe it doesn't. In the last analysis the theologians can't say it for us, not even the poetic ones. Sacrificial love brings out the best in human nature. It discloses the divine nature. But there is a third point that Dietrich Bonhoeffer proved, not in word, but in deed. The third point is:

You have to participate in sacrifice in order to appreciate it.

This is where that great invention of mine, the word pervitive comes in. I'm sorry I invented it because all it seems to do is distract people.

The word came about this way: I was trying to come up with a title for a series of talks along the same general lines of these sermons I conclude today. I wrote out the title, "Perspectives on God and the World." But I thought to myself "Perspectives is not a strong enough word. Perspective has to do with a way of looking. But I want to talk about more than looking. When I speak about hallowing, for example, I am not just concerned about looking at things in a certain way, but of becoming involved with them in a certain way. I am concerned about a way of living." So I invented the word pervitive, based on the Latin, vita, meaning life.

Now when it comes to discovering God through sacrifice this distinction becomes decisive. Both O. Henry and Paul tell us that the wisdom of sacrifice is strange. It is strange because you cannot understand it just by standing off and looking at it. You can only understand it by doing it, by being it. Sacrifice must become a pervitive.

This leads us right into the inner meaning of Jesus' saying that anyone who would follow him, must take up his cross and that he who would save his life must lose it. Ordinarily we think that what Jesus means is that if you want to be his disciple, you must pay your dues. Undoubtedly on one level of interpretation, he is saying that. He said the same thing more or less on several occasions. "Don't get on the bandwagon unless you are willing to pay the price, because when we get to Jerusalem, things are going to get messy."

But I think Jesus meant more than that. I think he meant to say, "You can't know me and you can't know the one I call 'my father' unless you live the way I do. You have to begin to take the risk of giving your-

self away. Nothing I say or do will have any meaning unless you yourself adopt my pervitive, personal sacrifice.

Let me draw an analogy that only works part way. Take motherhood. Now an obstetrician knows something about motherhood. So does a psychiatrist. So does a painter like Whistler. All these people know something about motherhood and they can provide us with some perspective on it. But there is only one kind of person who really understands motherhood in a direct, personal way. That kind of person is a mother.

Now somebody will object that there are a lot of mothers who don't seem to know much about motherhood. I agree. But the fact remains that the only ones who do know most directly are mothers.

Which means that some of us can't make it.

When it comes to discipleship the same principle applies. Only here there is no sex discrimination. Even people who wear pants can be disciples. But discrimination does enter in because being a disciple means participation in Jesus' own lifestyle of personal sacrifice. There is no other way. No other way to understand Jesus. No other way to understand the God that Jesus spoke about. You have to lose your life, not once in some moment of religious ecstasy, but again and again in moments of great struggle and unpleasantness you have to learn in practice what it means "to stand by God in his hour of grieving."

"He who loses his life for my sake will find it."

When Dietrich Bonhoeffer approached the scaffold with the sound of the army of liberation in the distance, he was only performing the last act in a pervitive which had become something more than theology. He sent back a message to an English friend:

"This is the end -- for me the beginning of life."