

SACRIFICE EVERY DAY – YIKES!

August 21, 2011

Good morning! Now, I think I know what you're thinking again: "She's baaack!"

I am. It was my honor to be before you two weeks ago, and it's a privilege to be here again this morning. Both Chuck and Peggy will be back with us next Sunday.

I want to make a confession. I'm a bit more nervous today than I was two weeks ago, and I'm reminded of my earlier days as a youth and my skydiving and how the second jump was the most terrifying. You know, I had survived the first time – why was I doing it again? Here I am. I am hoping that my ministry vocation will parallel that of skydiving, and I will have a long future ahead of me anyway in this ministry.

One of the things that I like about Chuck's sermons is that he often starts off with an interactive dialogue with you, and so I'm going to follow in his example this morning. There are a handful of people in our history that have changed the course of history – where one person has made a dramatic difference.

So if I were to say: Who hung his 95 theses on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenburg, Germany, you would say? Martin Luther. All right.

If I said (here's a little trickier one) if I said: "I will not know you, my dear Henry, until you've divorced Kathryn," you would say? Ah, Anne Boleyn, that's right, without whom England would have stayed connected to the Pope.

Who furthered Copernicus' work and said that the sun was at the center of the universe and not the earth? Galileo, who birthed modern science.

Well, let's jump ahead 300 years. What individual espoused the theory of evolution? Darwin, right, and he changed our understanding of ourselves and our place in the world and our relation to the rest of the world.

She was the first woman to win the Nobel Prize, and she was also the first person to win it twice under two different categories, rather. And she developed the X-ray machine. That's right, Marie Curie, and the X-ray machine as we know it is used around the world. It's saved countless lives.

Who said that we have an unconscious and began the development of the study of the mind? Freud, Sigmund Freud. Now, we might not agree with everything that Sigmund Freud said, but he certainly changed how we think of ourselves.

This thirteen-year-old wrote words of love and hope despite being confined to a secret hiding place. Anne Frank. (Our musicians know all the answers. They're good! They have many talents!) That's right, Anne Frank, and her diary is one of the most read books around the world.

All right, now these two brothers, acting as one if you will, made a historic flight in Kitty Hawk, North Carolina? Ah, the Wright Brothers, who developed the path for international travel and space exploration.

And in the twenty-first century, who changed the world with his line of Microsoft operating systems? Bill Gates, who now does philanthropic work – he and his wife – throughout the world.

So those are people who made a dramatic difference in our world. But one person can make a difference. And you may say, *Well, I'm no Einstein or I'm no Mother Theresa*, but each of us changes the course of history in our own way.

One of my students was a priest in Poland in his youth, and there the culture was that children with disabilities were kept inside. They didn't get to go out to stores or in the streets or even, you know, outside to the park. They were supposed to be kept hidden away, better to be not seen.

Well, he disagreed with this, and he rallied his church to raise funds, and they went out and they bought lots of wheelchairs. And they didn't stop there. They took the wheelchairs to the children, and then they pushed the children through the streets of Poland and out to the ocean and the hillsides across the country. For those children and their families, he made a difference. We don't read about him in the newspapers or in the history books or in the Forbes 400 list, but he made a difference to those children and their families.

In our scripture passage this morning, Paul, in his letter to the Romans, takes up this cause of making a difference. Paul is one man who made a big difference to the first century church. He's more known for his letter writing than he is for his preaching. He wrote some nine letters that are included in our Bible. He wrote Romans, First and Second Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, First Thessalonians, Philemon, Ephesians, Colossians and possibly – there's some debate – he wrote Second Thessalonians, First and Second Timothy and Titus. Paul, without a doubt, had a gift for writing.

Our passage today comes from the letter, or books, of Romans, and scholars think that Paul wrote this letter around 50 A.D. – so not too long after Jesus had died on the cross. And they think he wrote it while he was vacationing in Corinth. They think he was vacationing or resting because he had a bit more time to think and write out his theology in this letter. At any rate, Paul is at the height of his career and he's writing the church at Rome because he plans to visit Rome after he gets to Spain. But Paul never makes it to Spain, but that's a whole nother story and another sermon.

Paul tells the church in Rome to: ***Present your bodies as a living sacrifice to God. A living sacrifice.*** Paul's concept of being a living sacrifice is in contrast to the Jewish custom of slaughtering an animal and presenting its blood or the animal itself to God. But what does being a living sacrifice mean?

Well, Paul goes on to say that we cannot ***be conformed to this world but be transformed, transformed by the will of God.*** Paul asserts that the truest sacrifice that we can offer to God is that of living according to God's will. So, then to be a living sacrifice is to not live in this world – to not get caught up in the greed that maybe we hear about in the news, or to not live superficially, or to not fall prey to pettiness, to not act as though God is dead. No, rather, Paul urges us to be transformed by God's love: to live the whole, abundant life that God wants for each of us. Paul states that one person is not worth more than another, one person does not have a higher standing than another.

In Galatians, one of Paul's other letters, he writes that: ***There's neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*** So Paul urges us to live a well-lived life, with clear conscience and in a manner befitting what God wants for us even if that goes against what our workplace or our neighbors or even our family may say.

Paul urges us to sacrifice our pride, to sacrifice conforming to the world in which we live and live our life in accord with our faith, with Jesus as our model. Unfortunately...or fortunately...this means sacrificing every day.

I had a friend who played soccer competitively while in college, and her coach told her to sacrifice every day. She had to run every day, she had to eat certain foods every day, she had to practice kicking and dribbling every day. And maybe some of you have had this experience. Ray is a talented pianist and organist, and I would imagine he has to practice all the time. If they didn't practice daily, they probably wouldn't play as well. And I don't think my soccer friend or Ray would consider this practice, though, a burden.

What about us, here with our faith? Do we practice it every day? Occasional Christianity would be boring. If I only followed my faith for one hour on Sunday mornings, I would not find much meaning or joy in it. I have to practice it every day. Now, some days I'm better at it than I am other days, but I practice every day. Following Jesus, loving God is a journey. It's full of wonder and full of awe, and it's a way of living – a daily sacrifice and a transformation according to Paul. Transformation is a word that comes from the Greek word ***metamorphoo***. And we've all learned about metamorphosis, about the caterpillar that winds itself up in a cocoon and through metamorphosis becomes a beautiful butterfly.

Well, in my work as a chaplain with a hospice in Virginia, I was privileged to meet a man I will call John. John was angry. He was resentful. He had been a high school sports star, and he had dreamed of making the pros, and he had sacrificed to be one of the best on his team. But he tore his knee up in one hard, devastating tackle, and he never fully recovered. His dreams were broken. He dropped out of high school and began working in a tobacco factory where he worked for 37 long, hard years. And he never picked up a football again. He lived alone, and in his 54th year he was diagnosed with a terminal illness. This only confirmed for John that his life was unfair and that his misery was unending. John was mad at God.

Luckily for John, his neighbor loved him, didn't even realize that he loved him, but he did. His neighbor began to cut his grass, and then he began to bring him food, and then he even began to come in and watch an occasional football game with John. His wife and his neighbors thought

he was a little crazy for spending that much time with this angry man, but he took care of John despite John's negativity and his general grumpiness until the day John died. John never really worked out his anger with God, but John's neighbor was transformed. He came to the funeral and he said that the time that he had spent with John changed him forever, that he had always been wrapped up in his own life and his own worries, unable to see really past his own cares. And he was changed by the simple, sometimes not so simple, acts of caring for another who was scared and all alone. He learned to reach out, to reach out to something bigger than himself, to not be alone in the world, but to be anew – sacrificing and practicing.

Well, Paul goes on to say in our passage that *we, being many, are one body in Christ*. Paul declares this notion that we're all in this together, that we need one another, and through Christ we are one. One reason why I like the UCC denomination is for our motto: *That all may be one*. We are a diverse lot. Look out amongst you and there's rich, poor, young, old, conservative, liberal, funny, somber – and yet, because we follow Jesus' example, we believe in God's love for all of us. Paul exhorts us to be there for one another – not just for those who are like us – but for anyone.

Another man who changed the world said: *I have a dream that my children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character*. Judged not by what the world upholds, but by our living sacrifice, by our striving to love another. Love because we all are one.

We are all in this journey of life together, and we need each other. In the last verses of our passage today, Paul talks about us each having been given gifts. When I was a youth, I used to lament that I had no gifts. Other kids could sing; I can't sing well. (If you sit near me in the pew, you'll notice because even though I can't sing, I sing loud.) Other kids could play the guitar in my youth group, but not me. Other kids could play some sport really well. (Well, I could play sports, but I didn't really excel at any of them.) And it bothered me that I had no talents.

It wasn't until much later that I realized that I did have gifts, gifts like intuitiveness, writing, compassion. I'm glad I have gifts and that I can use those gifts to further God's kingdom right here in the here and now. I'm also glad that other people have other gifts because I know that together, we are stronger and can accomplish greater achievements. We need each other's gifts, and Paul says we need each other.

In my family of origin, I was taught good Western culture values to depend on myself, to be self-reliant, to be resourceful. And while these are excellent, good concepts, I missed the lesson about needing others. I thought I had to be complete and stand on my own, and it's taken me a long time to realize how much I need others, how much I need relationships.

I met Carl when he came into our hospice program. He told me one day, he says: *I'm 87 years old. You think that's a long time don't you?* I reluctantly said: *Oh, yeah.* And he said: *It goes by like that.*

Carl had talent. He was a painter, and he painted for the U.S. Army, and he traveled all across the world painting various pictures for the Army of military events and such. And when he retired, he settled into a nice home and he continued painting, but he made no friends. He found himself sick, and old, and all alone. He worried what would become of him as he got sicker until one day a long lost cousin arrived on his doorstep. Now this cousin had no home, but Carl did. And Carl and his cousin soon became the best of friends, and Carl's joy in life just grew tremendously. You could see it in his face and in his banter, and Carl was no longer alone. An amazing thing happened. His paintings kind of took on a whole new character, and he began to share them with others and today they hang in restaurants and cafes throughout Richmond. In his dying days, I would venture to say he was more alive than he had ever been. He had discovered the joy and the need for another human being.

Research has shown us that babies, babies like Ada Mae who was just baptized, that they come into the world hardwired for language and relationships. Doctors have discovered that newborn infants prefer their mother's language. They prefer the language or the accent that they heard while still in the womb.

And there's a YouTube on video that I think is called the *Still Face Experiment*?. It's a two- or three-minute interaction between a mother and her baby. And the baby is lying in a carrier facing the mother, and the baby laughs and coos to the mother and they engage in some playful carrying-on. And they reach for each other, and they smile at each other. And then, for the experiment, the mother's face just goes blank. And she doesn't respond to the baby. And at first the baby just looks at her. And with no response from the mother, the baby begins to smile and laugh. And again getting no response, the baby begins to reach for the mother and no response. And then the baby starts to squirm and arch its back, and she starts screaming and crying and trying to connect with the mother. And when that doesn't happen, she just begins to wail. And eventually the mother cannot take it any longer, and she reaches out with soothing words and caresses the baby and holds on to the baby tightly. We are hard wired for caring relationships. From our very beginnings, we need each other for survival, and we want to and have to engage with one another.

Paul tells us that Christianity is a daily sacrifice, a daily turning away from conforming to the ways of this world. He tells us that in this way we experience a daily transformation, a transformation in knowing that God has hardwired us to need each other, to be in relationship with each other, and to need each other's talents and gifts, to act as one.

Each of us changes the world on a daily basis; each of us makes a difference in our world by our actions, by the way we live, by the relationships that we make. So, let us all go today and sacrifice joyfully. Amen.

Diane Tugel
Union Congregational United Church of Christ
Green Bay, Wisconsin
August 21, 2011