

A Living Sacrifice
Leviticus 9:1 – 7, 16:29 – 34; Hebrews 10:1 – 22
Sunday, October 6, 2019

Today is World Communion Sunday, and we are going to share the Lord's Supper in just a little bit. But as we move toward that, I want to start by asking you – what is *this area* called? Some say *altar*, some say *table*, some say *chancel*. I think it's important to understand these words that we're using, because in understanding what we *call* this area, it actually tells us something about *God* – about *who God is* and how we *relate* to God.

More often than not, you hear people refer to this area as the *altar*. Altars are the place in a temple or space of worship where *sacrifices* are made. It started off thousands of years ago, when human beings first started coming to the realization that there were forces at work in the world around them that were beyond their control. They needed *food* in order to live, and in order for the crops to grow, they needed *rain*. If there was *too much* rain, it would wash the crops away, and if there was *not enough* rain, the crops would wither and die. So they were dependent on *rain* that they could not control. Or if they went out to hunt for food, sometimes they would find an animal right away and kill it and bring it back for everyone to eat. But sometimes they would be gone for days at a time, and they would come home empty handed. There were elements of their survival and of day-to-day life that were outside of their control.

So they got the sense that there were forces at work in the world around them. There were *gods* that had power over things like rain and the sun and animals and fertility and all these other aspects of their lives. And those gods were kind of *fickle*. If they were *happy*, then everything would go well, and there would be rain when they needed rain and sunshine when they needed sunshine and successful hunts and children born. But if those gods were *unhappy*, then things would *not* go so well. There would be terrible storms when they needed sunshine or droughts

when they needed rain or they would *not* be able to have children. So people started thinking, “We need to *do something* to keep these gods *happy*; to show them that we are *grateful* for what they have *provided*, or that we’re *sorry* for what we have done *wrong*.” And what they did was, if they had a good harvest or a good hunt, they wouldn’t eat it all. They would set a little aside as a *sacrifice*, and they would *burn* it or somehow *offer* it to the gods as a way of saying *thank you* to the gods who made it possible.

Well, there was an inherent *flaw* with this. If they had a *good* harvest, they would offer some of it to the gods. But then the *next* year, if their harvest was *twice* as big, they couldn’t just offer the same amount they had offered the year before, right? The gods might be offended. “We gave you even *more* than last year, but you just offered us the *same amount*?” Or if they had a *worse* harvest than the year before, had they done something to *anger* the gods? Had they *not* offered enough? “Do we need to offer even *more*?”

So what happens is, you get into this system where it’s *never enough*. There is always *more* and *more* and *more* that you have to sacrifice in order to appease the gods. And they would get to the point where, “If we sacrifice any more of our crop or any more of our animals, we aren’t going to have anything left to *eat*, and we will *die*.” So if the gods keep requiring more and more and more, but you don’t have more to *give*, what can you do to appease the gods? They started offering their own blood to the gods, or they would sacrifice their *children*. That which was of greatest worth to you, *that* would make the gods happy.

In order to *make* these sacrifices to the gods, they built *altars*. They started off as piles of stones that served as a staging place where these sacrifices could be made. Over time they got more and more elaborate, as a way of showing the gods that they were revered and respected and

important. But you always had to go back to the altar. There was always another sacrifice to make in order to appease the gods. Always one more thing you had to do.

This was the situation that the people of Israel were in that we see outlined in the book of Leviticus. Leviticus is primarily concerned with how sacrifices are made. It was like a guidebook for the people of Israel. “If *this* happens to you, or if you do *this*, then *here* is how you offer the appropriate sacrifice to make amends for it. Here are all the things you need to *do* in order to be in a right relationship with God and your neighbor.”

And so Moses receives these instructions from God, and he shares them with Aaron and the people of Israel. Moses says, “Take a bull calf for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering, and offer them before the Lord. Take a male goat for a sin offering; a calf and a lamb, yearlings without blemish (it has to be a *good* offering; it can’t be your *worst* lamb; it has to be of *value* to you), and an ox and a ram for an offering of well-being to sacrifice before the Lord; and a grain offering mixed with oil...This is the thing that the Lord commanded you to do, so that the glory of the Lord may appear to you...Draw near to the altar and sacrifice your sin offering and your burnt offering, and make atonement for yourself and for the people.”

And how often do they have to *do* this? God says, “This shall be a statute to you *forever*: In the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month...atonement shall be made for you, to cleanse you from all your sins...This shall be an *everlasting* statute for you, to make atonement for the people of Israel once in the year for all their sins.” On a particular day of the year...*every year*...you have to make this sacrifice in order to be right with God; to *appease* God. There is always *one more sacrifice* that you have to make. And what happens if you *can’t* make that

sacrifice? Or if the priest says that what you have offered isn't *good enough* for God? What happens *then*? God does not *forgive* you? God does not *bless* you? God does not *love* you?

It's easy for us to think of this as an *antiquated* system. "Those poor, primitive, ancient people. How could they *believe* that? They just didn't *know* any better. They didn't have the knowledge and understanding that we have today." But how often do *we* live by that same understanding? How many times have *we* wondered, "Did this bad thing happen to me because I did something *wrong*? Did I get hurt or sick because God is angry with me? Did I do something *wrong* that I'm being *punished*? Is this *karma* or the universe somehow getting back at me? I need to go to *church* more or *pray* more or *read the Bible* more or *give* more to get on God's 'good side,' and *then* things will get better." In all kinds of subtle ways, we still operate in this same mindset; that we have to *earn* the favor and blessing and love of God. We are the most technologically advanced society in the history of the world, and we are not that far removed from our ancestors.

I think that's why we still talk in terms of *altars*; why so many people still refer to this area as an *altar*. Because we are still living in this world where *sacrifice* is needed to atone for our sins. There is always *one more* sacred lamb that we have to offer to make things right with God.

But look what happens at the beginning of John's gospel. Jesus appears on the scene one day, and John the Baptist sees him and says, "Here is the *lamb of God* who *takes away the sin of the world*." God enters into this system of endless sacrifice, and God *becomes* the sacrifice. The author of Hebrews says it this way, right before the part we read today, "Jesus appeared at the culmination of the ages to remove sin once and for all by the sacrifice of *himself*." Hebrews goes on to say, "The same sacrifices offered year after year cannot make perfect those who approach...These sacrifices are just a *reminder* of sin, year after year (it never fully goes away),

for it is *impossible* for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins...It is by *God's will* that we have been *sanctified* (made holy and righteous) through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once and for all. Priests stand day after day, offering again and again the same sacrifices that can *never take away sins*. But Jesus Christ offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins...By a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified.”

In his death on a cross, Jesus Christ became the ultimate sacrifice – the sacrifice of *God's own self*. Jesus, who was *without sin* – without spot or blemish – bears the sin of the world on the cross, and while he's doing so, he says, “Father, *forgive* them.” And his last words on the cross, “It is finished.” This whole system of sin and sacrifice and atonement, year after year, forever, *it is finished*. *God* has made the sacrifice for our sin. In Jesus' death, we are forgiven once and for all, *forever*. That thing you did last week? Forgiven. That thing that happened five years, six months, and two days ago? Forgiven. That thing that's going to happen next week? Forgiven.

So we don't *need* to make *sacrifices* anymore. We don't need *altars* anymore. That's why *this* is not called an *altar*; we refer to it as the *table*. An altar is where you go to make sacrifices to appease God. That's *done*. The ultimate sacrifice has been *made*. A *table* is where you share a *meal* with *friends* and *family*. And Jesus invites us to come to this table and share in this meal in which we are reminded of his body broken and his blood shed, the sacrifice of his body that was made for the forgiveness of *all* our sin.

Author Brennan Manning tells the story of a woman who had been having visions of Jesus. The stories about this woman were spreading all over, and they reached the archbishop, who decided to go see what this was all about. So he travelled and met the woman and asked her, “Is it true that you have been having visions of Jesus?” She said, “Yes.” Well, he was skeptical, so he said

to her, “The next time you have a vision, I want you to ask Jesus a question. Ask him to tell you what sins I confessed in my last confession.” The woman agreed, and he left. Some time passed, and the archbishop started hearing rumors that she had had more visions. So he went back and found her and said, “Did you have another vision of Jesus?” She said, “Yes.” He said, “Did you do what I asked you?” She said, “Yes, I asked Jesus to tell me what sins you confessed in your last confession.” The archbishop leaned forward and narrowed his eyes and said, “And what did Jesus say?” The woman took his hand and looked him in the eyes and said, “He said, ‘I can’t remember.’”¹

I can't remember. The writer of Hebrews quotes God’s promise through the prophet Jeremiah, “I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and *I will remember their sins no more.*” When God looks at you, God does not see your sins, because *you are forgiven.* You are *covered* by the grace of Jesus Christ *forever.*

But there is *still*, Hebrews says, one more sacrifice that is left. It says, “Jesus suffered...in order to sanctify the people by his own blood. Through him, then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God.” And how do we *do* that? “Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.” The prophet Micah says, “God has *told* you what is good and what is required of you – to do *justice* and to love *kindness* and to walk *humbly* with God.” We do this not to *earn* God’s forgiveness and favor and blessing and love. We do this *because*, in Jesus Christ, God has *poured out* forgiveness and favor and blessing and love upon us all. This is a sacrifice of *praise*, a way of saying, “Thank you, God! Your goodness in my life has been made possible, not by *my own* effort and sacrifice, but by *yours!*”

¹ Brennan Manning, *The Ragamuffin Gospel* (Multnomah: Colorado Springs, 2005) pg. 118.

We do not come to an *altar* to make a *sacrifice*. We come to a *table* to share a *meal* with a *friend*. And through this meal, we are nourished and strengthened to go out and live in ways that give thanks for the goodness and grace that we have been given. We are now called to *be* the sacrifice that we remember in this meal; to *be* broken and poured out for others, as Christ was for us. To be a *living sacrifice* to the glory of God.