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St. John's Lutheran Church of Burlington  
29 March 2024

Sermon on John 19:17-18a

Worship Theme:

**RETHINKING RELIGION: RETHINKING SACRIFICE**

In most religions the gods demand sacrifice. Followers are to surrender something of value to that god. Money. Time. Possessions. Some religions have even called for human sacrifice. In Christianity, however, you meet a God willing to die for you. On Good Friday we see that the true God does not make our relationship with him conditional on how much we sacrifice for him. Instead, we are at peace with God because he sacrificed himself for us. It is one reason why we call today “Good Friday.”

Sermon Theme: “Marvel at the Cost”

How can you tell what something is worth? There are any number of criteria we could use to determine that. We would probably consider things such as how reputable the maker is, how well the item is made, how rare an item is, if it has any flaws in it, and how useful it will be to us. While all these things are absolutely worth discussing when determining something's worth, at the end of the day it all boils down to this: an item worth whatever someone is willing to pay for it.

So what is your life worth? If we ran through the same criteria, we could determine quite a bit. We are made by the most reputable Creator there is: God the Lord. We are *fearfully and wonderfully made* by him. (see Ps. 139:14) And we are among the most rare items in the world – there's only one of each of us; God made every one of us absolutely unique. So if we are fearfully, wonderfully, and uniquely made by a God who cannot do anything less than perfect, we should be worth quite a bit, right?

Except for one problem: we are terribly flawed. Of course, that has nothing to do with our Creator – he still has a 100% record of untainted work. But sin has taken the perfection of what God made and has ruined it completely: the sin which humanity has been committing since the very first act of disobedience in Eden... the sin which became part of the very nature of humanity...sins which not a single one of us is able to undo, fix, or remove. And these aren't just little flaws either. The sinful nature we are all conceived and born with corrupts us completely. Every sin we commit during our lifetimes only makes it worse, and the longer we live, the longer our list of sins becomes.

So what should God the Creator do with such flawed creatures? It's not a difficult question to answer, though it certainly is a terrifying one. He should throw us away like garbage. Worse yet, he should give us what our sins rightly deserve. It's not as if his laws were unclear! When God created his world, it was perfect. When God created people he had the clearest expectation – we were to love and honor and worship him with our lives, praising the One who so graciously ruled over his world for its good. If any rule is to be enforced, however, there must be a

consequence for breaking it. And the consequence for sin would be of the highest severity. Because a sin wouldn't just ruin the person who did it, or even just the human race; no, one sin would shatter the perfection of the entire creation. And God could not overlook such a horrific catastrophe.

This line of thought naturally leads to the most horrible future imaginable, for in his holiness and perfection God the Righteous Judge has every right to condemn lawbreakers to the eternal torture chambers of hell. We stained our robes with rebellion and sin and nothing in all the world could make them clean again, even if we worked and scrubbed and washed those robes from the moment of birth until our very last breath. We wouldn't even come close. And if the stain of sin remains, hell must become our forever home. Because nothing requires God to save rebels or include them in his Kingdom, he could rightly banish them from his presence and closes the gates to paradise forever.

But then the unthinkable happens, the very reason this day is called "good" – someone is interested in paying the price to fulfill our impossible debt and to set us free from eternal bondage. As we look at this logically, we quickly realize how illogical it is – we're flawed and useless! And the amount of our debt and the severity of our punishment – they're unfathomable! Immeasurable! Unpayable!! Yet the one who longs to have us for his own is willing to pay a very high price, in fact, he offers the highest payment this world has ever seen: Jesus is willing to pay the price of HIMSELF.

Our sins are so many that if we sacrificed ourselves and spilled every last drop of blood we have, the payment would not have even begun yet. Even if we shed every drop of blood on earth – sacrificing every single animal and every single human being – even just one sin would still not be paid for. Because flawed and tainted blood isn't worth anything – it can't pay the price.

But holy blood can. Holy blood would be a sufficient price. So God the Son enters time and space, taking on a human body just like ours. And he must live his time in absolute perfection, obeying every single law and command of his Father, never having even a disobedient thought. If he succeeds and his blood remains holy and untainted, an acceptable sacrifice can be made. How much is riding on the success of this mission? It's not an exaggeration to say "literally everything." The only way humanity is saved is if a perfect Savior takes our place, shedding his blood instead of ours. Jesus obeyed perfectly. Jesus remained holy.

And Jesus was willing to trade places. As he looked at our stained robes and our flawed sinful lives, he exchanged everything with us: he gave us his holiness, his perfection, his unstained robe, even his status as child and heir in the Kingdom. And Jesus became the flawed, the sinner, the unholy, the stained, the condemned. As the Savior of all people drew ever closer to the cross, the impossible was about to take place – an immortal God was going to shed his blood and die.

Do you realize what his life was worth? Jesus wasn't just made by God, he IS God. Jesus wasn't flawed in any way, he was perfect. Jesus isn't useless – he rules over all creation!! How rare is he? He's the one and only true God in the entire universe, the only Being without a beginning and end, the Creator and

Maker of everything. If anyone were to compare the worth of Jesus to the worth of any other human being in history, the difference would be indescribably extreme. Our worth is nothing; his worth is everything.

Except for one thing: value and worth are determined by what someone is willing to pay. And God was willing to pay everything for you. So Jesus died.

I invite you to spend 30 seconds in silence with me to **Marvel at the Cost** which God was willing to pay to save you.

The exchange is accepted and the payment is made. The formerly sinless and holy Son of God is condemned as an enemy of the Kingdom and as the worst sinner there has ever been, no – more than that: condemned as the **ONLY** sinner there has ever been. The Father turns away from his Son, unleashing all his built-up holy wrath over sin, and Jesus dies. As he does, the formerly sinful and unholy people of the world are welcomed as citizens of the Kingdom, yes even as children and heirs in the Royal Holy Family itself. For as we're told in 1 John 1, *the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.* The payment is made and the deal is done.

In a moment, we're going to sing a truly beautiful hymn called "His Robes for Mine." Pay close attention to the words as we sing it, because this is what God says you and I are worth. We are unique human beings made by him, and now because of Jesus we are no longer flawed or sinful. Rather we stand before the throne of God, wearing the robe of Jesus Christ, forgiven and free forever. How did that happen? Two big words in the hymn explain it all. "We are saved by our Lord's vicarious death and life", which means the life Jesus lived and the death he died on our behalf and in our place. And "sin's wage is paid, propitiation won", which means God is appeased and his wrath is satisfied.

So we "Cling to Christ, and **marvel at the cost:** Jesus forsaken, God estranged from God. Bought by such love, our life is not our own. Our praise, our all, shall be for Christ alone." (CW'21 #568, refrain) God was willing to pay the highest price for us, demonstrating his matchless grace and love, taking away every last one of our sins, giving our lives unimaginable value and worth, dying so that we would live with him forever.

The Holy Gospel according to St. John:

*Carrying his own cross, Jesus went out to the place of the Skull (which in Aramaic is called Golgotha). There they crucified him.*