

## Self Sacrificial Service

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2014

Prayer of St Francis (spoken as Call to Worship)

Verse: Philippians 3:10-11

I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.

Readings:

Hebrews 10:4-10

Philippians 2:16-3:1a

Prayer of St Francis

*Lord, make me an instrument of Your peace;  
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;  
Where there is injury, pardon;  
Where there is discord, harmony;  
Where there is error, truth;  
Where there is doubt, faith;  
Where there is despair, hope;  
Where there is darkness, light;  
And where there is sadness, joy.  
O Divine Master, Grant that I may not so much seek  
To be consoled as to console;  
To be understood as to understand;  
To be loved as to love.  
For it is in giving that we receive;  
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned;  
And it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.*

Sermon

Medics, doctors and nurses all over the world are asking themselves a most extraordinary question

Would I go to Africa to fight the Ebola epidemic?

Could I even consider it?

Would I possibly face the risk of contracting Ebola, in order to try to contain it?

Could I handle the increasingly extreme protection measures, both in Sierra Leone and when I return home?

Donna Collins and Sharon Mackie have returned to their homes in NZ after a couple of weeks there, sent by the Red Cross. Sharon reported that “30 of the hospital’s medical staff had already died from Ebola. The staff that did turn up to work were scared, depressed and tired. To be able to support, train, coach and reassure the staff that they were doing a great job was really important.”

They worked 14-hour days and in hot, humid conditions wearing Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) It was demanding  
“At times it got a little overwhelming.” said Donna.

### **You think?**

So what on earth would make ordinary Kiwi women do such a crazy thing?  
As they said before they went, “This is what we have trained and prepared for.”  
Donna and Sharon are cleared, they’ve been home 3 weeks already and are symptom free. But not all international medics have been so lucky. It is a highly contagious virus and the whole world is scared of it getting in.

Staying home and shutting our borders seems much more sensible.

There are two strong pulls tugging at each other in the depths of the human heart ... one pull is towards security, safety, so when we are under threat we pull back, retreat into our corner, shut the doors.

But there is another basic powerful pull, which is to care about the suffering of others, which pulls us away from worrying about our own needs and into a place of helping other people, working hard for something which might not even benefit us.

We are made to both on one hand want to protect ourselves, and on the other hand we are willing to sacrifice ourselves for something that matters to us.

Animals will sacrifice themselves for their children, or their pack  
but to willingly sacrifice for people you don’t even know is a uniquely human potential

It is, we would claim, in us because God made us that way,  
that being made in the image of God opens up in us this strange and wonderful desire, to serve a cause or even a stranger even if it puts ourselves at risk or costs us dearly.

Each of us here in this room have had our own experiences of self sacrificial service. I have had two wonderful conversations with folks just this week about it, and it is such a privilege for me to hear your stories, to learn what you care about so passionately that you have given of yourself, your time, your money, your energy and dedication.

I have had a taste of self sacrificial service this past 6 months. When my friend Lynn was diagnosed with terminal cancer my promise to her was, ‘I am here for you. Whatever you need, I’m here for you.’ I was willing to take leave from

my ministry work to care for her, but sadly she just didn't stick around long enough to need much of that. Obviously it was demanding and hard work walking those last couple of months with her. But actually it was after she died that the real hard work began. The biggest task was clearing out her house. My dear Lynn was an artist, as you know, and she was kind of magpie-like, collecting things that inspired her ... so she cut out photos from magazines and kept dried leaves and driftwood, she kept letters and cards and articles, she kept recipes and receipts and envelopes and baby things and op shop clothes and school newsletters and cracked cups if she liked the pattern on them ... boxes of it all from her past and cupboards and shelves full of it all. All of it treasure, to her. And mixed in with it all were art works and designs and writings that really were treasures.

Three months it has taken me to sort every box and every drawer and clean into every corner. And now there is a nice neat pile of 23 banana boxes of things her daughter may want the future, and 3 boxes of photos and her art works and fabric designs neatly folded and stored.

Serious this has been the biggest single task of my life.

And it has been sacrificial. It has cost me in time, really quite a lot of time, and energy – I really am quite tired. It has cost me financially, and it has impacted on my health – all that dust turned my 'bit of a flu' into a nasty cough & throat infection.

In some ways, though, the hardest to deal with is when our commitments affect other people ... my obsession with packing up Lynn's house has made me less available for my family, and also less available to you folks. The Stewards and Committee has been very understanding, and given me extra time off and you have all been wonderfully supportive. But what right did I have to expect you to take up the slack so that I could do that other work? I haven't done much pastoral visiting and we haven't initiated new mission projects, because my service to my friend Lynn has been sacrificial.

Me talking like this is what we call 'counting the cost' . And it matters that we know what it costs us, and what it costs those dear to us, when we choose to serve beyond what some might consider reasonable.

When Jesus called his disciples to follow him he didn't try to gloss over what it would cost them. 'Blessed are you' he said, 'when people reject and revile you for my sake'. 'Can you drink of the cup which I must drink?' he asked them.

Paul, too, doesn't fudge the cost of sacrificial service. He lists almost proudly his various hardships and persecutions, wears them as a badge of honour. In our reading today from Philippians he describes himself as "poured out as a libation over the sacrifice and the offering of your faith". Then he goes on to talk about one of his team, a chap called Epaphroditus. I don't think I've ever heard a sermon on Epaphroditus, but I think this bit about him is awesome.

So, Paul is sending Epaphroditus – he's carrying the letter, in fact – with a

strong affirmation of his ministry. “Welcome him in the Lord with all joy, and honour him” Paul writes, “because he came close to death for the work of Christ, risking his life”

The lovely thing about what Paul writes about Epaphroditus is how deeply relational this is. Epaphroditus had clearly been engaged in self sacrificial service, endangering his health and even his life for the gospel ... but what rings through the strongest is the bond of love between him and the people in Philippi. “He has been longing for you all and has been distressed because you heard that he was ill” ... and Paul anticipates the rejoicing that will break out when they meet again.

It is this powerful connection of people in relationship with each other that is the first point I want to make about sacrificial service. Sharon and Donna didn’t know anyone in Sierra Leone before they went, but surely the bond of love they now have with those local nursing staff will continue to deeply affect them. For me, there’s no way I would spend 3 months on my hands and knees cleaning out someone’s house, don’t be daft! ... but I did it for Lynn, because of my love for her and her daughter Jessica.

I’m sure for you, too, the times when you have given till it hurt, worked till you were exhausted, you did it for someone who mattered to you. We don’t serve institutions or abstract causes. We serve people, because we know they need us.

The second thing I want to highlight is that we serve sacrificially because we choose to keep faith with a commitment we have already made. When it does get hard of course we wonder why we are doing this, but we know the answer – we are doing this because we promised that we would. I promised Lynn that I would look after Jessica, and if that meant sorting the house well I just doggedly kept on going until the job was done.

What are the commitments that you have made, that might cost you to fulfill? How about us as a church? What are we passionately committed to? What are we willing to do no matter what it costs us?

My third point is that self sacrificial service is an act of freedom.

The old law of enforced sacrifice was abolished, claims the writer of the letter to the Hebrews, by Jesus. “we have been sanctified through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all”

The central sign and symbol of our faith is the cross – not because we worship suffering, but because through the suffering of one man all men are set free. God does not demand that you sacrifice yourself for him. God has instead sacrificed himself for you.

This deep deep strong theology matters in the day to day decisions of our lives. Freedom means that our service is offered out of our generosity, not to earn anyone’s admiration or gratitude, least of all God’s. You are no one’s slave, so don’t act like one! So it’s OK to say ‘No’, enough, ‘it’s not my

problem'. There's no condemnation in that. For me, I have told Lynn's sisters that I won't be helping them with the rest of the work on her house. I've done my bit for now and need to rest.

Fourth point. This is a team thing. Paul's letters tell time and time again of his experience of God's power at work, and especially God's power at work in Paul's own weakness, in those moments when he had exhausted his own resources and strength. Epaphroditus was healed from his life threatening illness and restored for more mission for Christ. When we go the extra mile God joins with us and sustains us. It is an amazing wonderful thing when people give purely in response to God's call, wholehearted, not caring about 'what's in it for me?'. In those moments we are living out of God's own heart and power, shown most powerfully for us in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross. God honours those moments in our lives. God meets us there and together the Kingdom happens there in those moments. ... when we discover that his power at work in us can do more than we could ever ask or imagine.

Which leads us back to praise. Humble, honest, surrendered praise. And so, lastly, sacrificial service in the name and power of Jesus Christ is tinged with joy. Even when it hurts, even when it costs, we can pause at any moment and lift our heart to God and smile. As Paul says, "Rejoice in the Lord" Though there's pain in the offering, Blessed be your Name

Our theme currently is about the mission of the church. When I get back from a couple of week's holiday I will be asking you to reflect on what our mission is here at Milson and how we are going as a church in fulfilling that.

At the heart of mission is self sacrificial service, for the church does not exist for its own sake but to serve. And so I'd like to finish with a poem that has become Bishop Justin's 'theme song', a call to self sacrificial service:

*"I am persuaded by the dandelion to take to the wings of the updrift to parachute into enemy country to fall to the ground to be walked on to lose beauty to die and so to give birth to a whole new generation of flyers"*