

LEVITICUS 1:1-9

The Lord summoned Moses and spoke to him from the tent of the meeting, saying:
Speak to the people of Israel and say to them: When any of you bring an offering of livestock to the Lord, you shall bring your offering from the herd or from the flock.

If the offering is a burnt offering from the herd, you shall bring it to the entrance of the tent of meeting, for acceptance in your behalf before the Lord. You shall lay your hand on the head of the burnt offering and it shall be acceptable in your behalf as atonement for you. The bull shall be slaughtered before the Lord; and Aaron's sons the priest shall offer the blood, dashing the blood against all sides of the altar that is at the entrance of the tent of meeting. The burnt offering shall be flayed and cut up into its parts. The sons of the priest, Aaron, shall put fire on the altar and arrange wood on the fire. Aaron's sons, the priests, shall arrange the parts, with the head and the suet, on the wood that is on the fire on the altar; but its entrails and its legs shall be washed with water. Then the priest shall turn the whole into smoke on the altar as a burnt offering, an offering by fire of pleasing odor to the Lord.

Shirley Jackson, 1948

WHO, ME?

Leviticus 1:1-9

There is an old seminary joke that went, "The trouble with a living sacrifice is that it keeps crawling off the altar." What it was intended to express was the difficulty we have with the entire notion of sacrifice. Indeed, by its very definition, a sacrifice is something of value we give up in order to attain something of greater value. Believing that the Almighty was fond of the aroma of roasting meat (who isn't?), giving up a prized bull to atone for one's sins was an acceptable deal. Besides, you got to eat the tasty flesh. And I hate to tell you this, but the priests chowed down on the best parts while the owner packed up the rest as a giant take-out

order with the stipulation that it all had to be consumed within 48 hours. So the sacrifice was really more ceremonial than it was painful. Prize bull gone, but sins atoned for and everybody got to feast. (Who's bringing the baked beans?) Not a bad deal.

Jesus' sacrifice, on the other hand, was not so agreeable. A horrible death on the cross as an atonement for the world's sins. One could argue that he received eternal life as the reward, but which of us would assent to that trade off? There is always a cost/reward equation that must be considered.

Depending upon who or what is being sacrificed and for what purpose necessarily leads to a "Who, Me?" question from either a horrified or a joyful perspective. One who just found out that she was going to be sacrificed against her will would pose the question in one way: *Who, Me?* while one who was requested to make a sacrifice he would embrace as an honor would ask the same question quite differently with a big smile as if he had just won the lottery: "**Who, *Me?***"

Indeed, the entire notion of sacrifice is fraught with ambiguity. There is the self-serving part of us that never really wants to give up anything for anyone unless there is a big payoff to do so. And the sacrifice itself better not be that painful. And then there is the spiritually mature part of us that recognizes we are all in this together and that the good of everyone outweighs the good for myself and is willing—even joyfully—to give away for the whole even though it may hurt. As Jesus cried in Gethsemane, *Let this cup pass from me, but not as I wilt, but as Thou wilt.*

I don't know how many of you may be familiar with Shirley Jackson's short story, "The Lottery", which was originally published in the New Yorker back in 1948. Many of us read it in high school English class. You can google it up and read it in about 15 minutes. It is very powerful!

The setting is a small farming town of about 350 people somewhere in the rural Midwest. And for many years they have had an annual ritual that involves a lottery which they all assent

to. The entire population gathers in the town's center on the same date each year and a box is prepared in advance into which are placed folded pieces of paper—one for each citizen—which will be drawn a person at a time until the box is empty and everybody has one. A singular ballot will contain a black dot. When the mayor gives the order, with palpitating hearts, they simultaneously unfold their slips to discover who has the black dot which inevitably leads to a shrieking, “**Who, Me?**” And then the “winner” (if you want to call it that) is summarily surrounded and stoned to death. The sacrifice has now been made as atonement for the annual sins of the townsfolk assuring them of a good harvest.

But there are other rites of sacrifice which sound a joyful chord of “Who, **Me?**” As you probably know, the game of soccer was not first played in Europe as many Europeans would have you believe. It was actually played in Peru by the Aztecs. Teams consisted of three players rather than 11 and the ball was quite heavy. You got a goal by bouncing it off an elevated post.

Now the Aztecs believed that their gods required an annual blood sacrifice for their nourishment. So in order to appease them, an annual soccer game was played which symbolically represented the living against inhabitants of the underworld. The captain of the *winning* team was then beheaded to appease the deities. But it was a very different “**Who, Me?**” question for the captain because he considered it an honor to give his life for the nation.

If you stop to think about it, the “_Who, Me?” question has now made its way into our national conversation. Mitch Albom, columnist for the Detroit Free Press posed this question in a recent article: “Ask yourself this: If America could return to normal life tomorrow, but one of your family members had to die, would you say ok?”

I’m assuming the answer is no. Now a second question: If America could return to normal life tomorrow, but a family member of your next door neighbor had to die, would you then say yes?

How about someone on your block? Or someone in your town? At a certain point, as

we pull the lens out, the honest answer for many Americans (although few will say it out loud) is, I'll take that deal."

That really does seem to be the answer many Americans are giving to this hypothetical inquiry. In a hurry to return to normal, many states ignored CDC guidelines and opened too soon too fast. And now the rates in contamination and death are spiking in those states. And at the root of it is our conflict with sacrifice. We have lots of excuses: Staying out of bars and nightclubs just seems like it's too much to ask. Wearing a mask while shopping is an infringement on our rights for free expression. Besides, we gave up our normal lives for three months...enough is enough! My risk is pretty minimal. The scientists are exaggerating...and I am an O blood type. "Who, Me?" Why should I sacrifice any more?

But ask yourself this: what is an acceptable number of deaths from this virus? The hundred and thirty thousand we almost have? Three hundred thousand? Maybe even a million? The United States leads the entire world in total deaths and infections. The countries that acted quickly and decisively flattened the curve in weeks and have kept it there—but not us. How did this become a political issue and not a public health issue?

For me, it is a spiritual issue. Sacrifice must come up in every real conversation about faith. The Who, Me? is unavoidable in everyone's life and comes up all the time. We either ask it with defiance or we ask it with willingness. If Christ is our model, then we must consider the world's needs alongside of our own in every instance. To sacrifice for the world's sake is a gift to the world. Consider the Talmudic text made famous in the movie, "Schindler's List": "Whoever saves one life, it's as if he has saved the whole world." And then there is the adjunct text: "Whoever destroys one life, it's as if he destroyed the whole world." Who, Me? Yes, Me!

Reverend Thomas Dunlap July 12, 2020