

*War, Worship, and Sacrifice*  
Series: Seek Peace and Pursue It  
Romans 12:1-8  
Sermon by Mark Schloneger  
June 19, 2022

*So, brothers and sisters, because of God's mercies, I encourage you to present your bodies as a living sacrifice that is holy and pleasing to God. This is your appropriate priestly service. Don't be conformed to the patterns of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds so that you can figure out what God's will is—what is good and pleasing and mature.*

*Because of the grace that God gave me, I can say to each one of you: don't think of yourself more highly than you ought to think. Instead, be reasonable since God has measured out a portion of faith to each one of you. We have many parts in one body, but the parts don't all have the same function. In the same way, though there are many of us, we are one body in Christ, and individually we belong to each other. We have different gifts that are consistent with God's grace that has been given to us. If your gift is prophecy, you should prophesy in proportion to your faith. If your gift is service, devote yourself to serving. If your gift is teaching, devote yourself to teaching. If your gift is encouragement, devote yourself to encouraging. The one giving should do it with no strings attached. The leader should lead with passion. The one showing mercy should be cheerful. (Romans 12:1-8, CEV)*

June 19.

June 19, 1865.

On that date, Union soldiers arrived in Texas, the remotest state in the former Confederacy and proclaimed to both enslaved people and slaveowners that the war had ended and that all slaves were free.

That's what Juneteenth commemorates.

The Smithsonian National Museum of African American History & Culture calls this national holiday "our country's second independence day."

So how can we celebrate Juneteenth?

Well, we do exactly what the holiday calls for –  
we celebrate the contributions of African-Americans  
in our country and community  
even as we remember that those contributions  
often have been given through great struggle  
and often have been unwelcome.

And second, we can educate ourselves about our history.

The freedom brought about by the end of the Civil War  
was and continues to be a far cry from true freedom.

The war was over. Thanks be to God.

But who was really free?

There once was a man named Manoah,  
from the tribe of Dan,  
who lived in the town of Zorah,  
about fourteen miles west of Jerusalem.

Manoah and his wife were unable to have children,  
until an angel of the Lord appeared and said,  
“You will become pregnant and give birth to a son,  
and his hair must never be cut.  
For he will be dedicated to God as a Nazirite from birth.  
He will begin to deliver Israel from the Philistines.”  
(See Judges 13:1-5).

When the child was born, they named him Samson.  
Now Nazirites were people who were set apart for a service to God.  
They took special vows that gave them their special identity,  
including not drinking alcohol, not cutting their hair,  
and, for Samson, not eating anything unclean.  
As Samson grew up, the story tells us,  
the Lord blessed him with wisdom and strength.  
And that’s how he took his place among the line of judges of Israel.

These judges led the tribes of Israel  
after they had entered the Promised Land –  
this was before the rise of the monarchy, the kings.  
They were not judges as we think of judges.  
No, the judges of Israel were charismatic leaders  
who God raised up from time to time to deliver Israel from its enemies.

But when you read through the book of Judges,  
you will find history repeating itself.  
The people of Israel do evil in the sight of the Lord,  
and their enemies come and conquer them.  
Then they cry out to God for relief,  
God hears their cries,  
and God raises up a judge to deliver them from their enemies.  
They enjoy years of rest and peace . . . until the judge dies.  
Then the people again do evil in the sight of the Lord,  
their enemies again come and conquer them,  
they again cry out to God for relief,  
God again hears their cries,  
and God again raises up a judge to deliver them from their enemies.  
They enjoy years of rest and peace . . .  
until the judge dies, of course.  
And then they do evil in the sight of the Lord.

When you read this history,  
you feel like you’re caught in a time loop filled with violence,

repeating the same patterns over and over,  
wanting to break free but unable to move on, completely.  
For some Jewish rabbis and scholars,  
Samson's life embodies this time loop of repeating history.  
Samson's feats of strength and his successes in battle  
testify to God's power, God's protection, and God's deliverance of Israel.  
But Samson's sins testify to Israel's increasing sins during that time.

Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord by not keeping the covenant.  
In the same way, Samson only casually regarded  
the three Nazarite vows that set him apart for service to the Lord.  
Because of his recklessness, he ended up breaking all of them.

Israel entered into covenants with foreign nations and worshipped foreign gods.  
In the same way, Samson lusted after, pursued,  
and used foreign women for his own gratification.  
God raised Samson up to be a leader,  
but Samson's entire career  
was devoted to personal vendettas and bloody acts of revenge.  
In the way that the book of Judges tells Samson's story,  
there's good reason to think he was a narcissist.

The thing is, his was a life that began with so much promise.  
A visit from an angel of the Lord.  
A promise of deliverance.  
A miraculous birth.  
Blessed with strength and wisdom.  
But then, he was betrayed for pieces of silver,  
he was handed over to his enemies by his own people.  
he was beaten, tortured and mocked,  
and then he was paraded in front of the crowds as a spectacle to be laughed at.  
Chained between two temple pillars,  
with arms outstretched,  
Samson prayed his final prayer,  
"O God, please strengthen me just once more,  
and let me with one blow gain revenge on the Philistines  
for [gouging out] my two eyes." (Judges 16:28)  
And down came the temple, burying Samson and three thousand Philistines with him.

Judges, chapter 16, notes that Samson  
killed many more when he died than when he lived.  
He was the last judge of Israel,  
but I think he's a particularly American hero.  
A solitary warrior to the end,  
possessing overwhelming power inspiring shock and awe,  
when he was trapped and had his back against the wall,

he delivered a devastating death blow upon his enemies.  
And he sacrificed his life to do it.

What are you willing to die for?  
For what, for whom, will you sacrifice your life?

“Fourscore and seven years ago our fathers brought forth,  
on this continent, a new nation, conceived in liberty,  
and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.”

So begins Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address,  
a speech that has called both  
“one of the most one of the most powerful statements in the English language”  
and “one of the most important expressions of freedom and liberty  
in any language.”<sup>1</sup>

When Lincoln gave that speech,  
he was dedicating a national soldiers’ cemetery,  
just four and a half months after Union armies  
defeated those of the Confederacy at the Battle of Gettysburg.

Lincoln called those grounds consecrated – meaning, made sacred, made holy --  
by the sacrifices of the soldiers who fought and died for the cause of freedom.  
And he went on to say that it is for us, the living, to increase our devotion to that cause.  
Why? So that the ones buried in that cemetery shall not have died in vain.  
Our devotion, our sacrifices, should follow their sacrifice,  
so that, in his famous words,  
our “nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom  
-- and that government of the people, by the people,  
for the people shall not perish on the earth.”<sup>2</sup>

Consecration, sacrifice, new birth, shall not perish.  
This is religious language, and, I’d say, particularly Christian language.  
Lincoln identifies the soldiers’ sacrifices with the sacrifice of Christ.

There is a certain solemnity in all cemeteries,  
and I think it is right and good for us to remember soldiers who have died  
and the terrible consequences that have been brought  
upon their families and loved ones.

We can and should join with others in remembering those things.

Yet, it is also important to recognize the ways in which Lincoln’s words  
and the idea behind them have fueled many more wars.  
They all have been fought for the cause of freedom,  
They all have been ought to protect democracy,  
They all have been fought to ensure that all those soldiers in prior wars did not die in vain,

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<sup>1</sup> <https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/gettysburg-address>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

and that we, indeed, are worthy recipients of their sacrifices.  
At least, that's what we're told when war is at the door.  
For a nation that has been at war for twenty-one consecutive years,  
and has fought in some kind of armed conflict  
for 228 of its 246 years of existence,<sup>3</sup>  
war is our most common experience, connecting us to the past,  
giving meaning to the present, securing our future,  
and pulling together different peoples for a common cause.  
War clarifies, emboldens, gives purpose, and offers meaning.  
War has its own liturgy, its own practices, its own rituals, and its own morals.  
Wars are built upon the idea of sacrifice.  
Some people talk about religious wars,  
but I think war itself is a religion.  
It's a religion, and its altar keeps calling, keeps beckoning for more sacrifices,  
more bodies, even as it holds the ashes of past sacrifices.

And when you read this history,  
it feels like you're caught in a time loop of violence,  
repeating the same patterns over and over  
wanting to break free but unable to do so

Is there any hope to move on, to see the dawn of a new day?

The thing is, his was a life that began with so much promise.  
A visit from an angel of the Lord.  
A promise of deliverance.  
A miraculous birth.  
Blessed with strength and wisdom.  
But then, he was betrayed for pieces of silver,  
he was handed over to his enemies by his own people,  
he was beaten, tortured and mocked,  
and then he was paraded in front of the crowds as a spectacle to be laughed at.  
Nailed between two cross beams,  
with arms outstretched,  
Jesus prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

We cannot hear the story of Samson,  
and that endless loop of violence that keeps repeating itself,  
without remembering how God chose to deal with the axis of evil  
that runs straight through our own hearts.  
Jesus' arms, outstretched on the cross,  
atoning for our sins, praying for forgiveness, not revenge,  
practicing what he preached to his disciples,  
"Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves  
and take up their cross and follow me.

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<sup>3</sup> See <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/595752-the-us-has-been-at-war-225-out-of-243-years-since-1776>.

For whoever wants to save their life will lose it,  
but whoever loses their life for me will find it.” (Matthew 16:24-25)

In view of God’s mercy, Paul writes to the Christians in Rome,  
I urge you, brothers and sisters, to offer *your bodies* as living sacrifices,  
holy and pleasing to God – this is your spiritual act of worship.” (Romans 12:1-2)

In the first eleven chapters of Romans,  
Paul announces God’s love and grace in Jesus.  
Through Jesus, Paul writes, God has broken sin’s power to corrupt  
and to destroy our lives and relationships, once and for all.  
This has been done through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.  
Not through the Law, not through an ethnic identity,  
not through our might, not through our intellect,  
not through our wealth, our worthiness, our work, our will.  
But through Jesus Christ, Lord and Savior. Period.

But then, Paul pivots his focus from what God has done to our proper response.  
Therefore, in view of God’s mercy, offer your bodies as a living sacrifice.  
Living sacrifices, not dead ones.  
Paul calls this “our true and proper worship.”  
Do not be conformed by the patterns of this world,” he writes and I would add,  
by the endless loop of violence that keeps repeating itself,  
“but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.  
Then, then, you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is.  
Why does this living sacrifice help us discern God’s will?  
Because it lives into Jesus’ sacrifice.  
It connects us with God’s will.

Christians in Rome lived among competing cultures,  
loyalties, beliefs, and moral commitments.  
They lived in an empire that asked for their pledge of allegiance,  
and they were protected by the world’s most powerful military.  
The Roman legion was fighting wars and suppressing revolts and uprisings all around its empire.  
To these people, in this empire, Paul wrote, offer *your bodies* as living sacrifices.  
This is your spiritual act of worship.

As Christians, we have been incorporated into Christ’s sacrifice for the world,  
into his blood, into his body.  
Christ is the end of the whole sacrificial system, and so are we who follow him.  
This is not simply sentimental feeling.  
It’s not a hypothetical event that could occur sometime in the future,  
It’s not an apathetic pacifism while bullets fly upon other peoples.  
It’s not a sofa-sitting opposition to war while being protected  
by the most powerful military in the world.

No, it is a reality that is made possible by the hard wood of the cross of Jesus,  
revealing that God's love runs deeper than the repeating loop of violence we all see.  
The Church is the people with which we practice this victory of radical love,  
the victory that Jesus achieved and demonstrated on the cross.

And how do we practice it?

We live into Jesus' sacrifice --

sacrificing the need to be liked.  
sacrificing our personal ambition for steadfast faithfulness,  
sacrificing, sometimes, our need to be right, to win,  
sacrificing our reputations and money and time and our defenses,  
and, sometimes, sacrificing our lives for the sake of others.

You see, to love is to sacrifice.

There is no love without sacrifice,  
for you cannot love without opening your heart  
to the possibility of deep hurt and deep pain.

God's love shows us that.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is that the great war is over.  
Through Jesus and his victory on the cross,  
through the practice of forgiveness and suffering love,  
God has raised up a redeemed people to free us  
from that time loop of repeating violence..

The alternative to war?

The alternative to the repeating loop of redemptive violence?

Where can we turn?

It's worship. We worship of the one who breaks it.  
Christians to not have a plan or a policy to end wars or to make them less horrible.  
Rather, the church is the alternative to the sacrifice of war in a war-weary world.  
The church is the end of war.<sup>4</sup>

Samson tore down the Philistine temple,  
the temple of doom, to heap revenge on his enemies and himself.  
Jesus said, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days."  
But the temple he had spoken of was his body.  
After he was raised from the dead,  
his disciples recalled what he had said.  
Then they believed the Scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken. (John 2:19)

Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you? (1  
Corinthians 3:16)

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<sup>4</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, "Why War is a Moral Necessity for America or How Realistic is Realism?", *Criswell Theological Review* 4:2 (Spring 2007), 94.