

## **We Need A Lamb**

January 19, 2014

John 1:29-42

One day, way back the good old college days, a professor was just about to start class when his wife walked in. She went up to him and the two of them had a very brief conversation -- probably something about, don't forget to bring home some milk and a loaf of bread.

As she turned to leave so that her husband could begin the class, one of the students, a Co-ed as we called them in those days, named Kathleen, stopped her and began to admire what she was carrying in her arms - a tiny baby just a few weeks old.

I'm not sure if Kathleen was trying to delay the start of what promised to be yet another very boring lecture in Philosophy 101, or if she really did want to admire the baby. But everyone in that class was thankful to Kathleen, because once she began to talk about what a beautiful baby that was, the professor, Dr. Paul Watson began to beam with pride, and rather than begin his class, allowed the students to see what a fine young son he had.

But it was Kathleen herself who interrupted this mood when she said, "Ahh, there is nothing more innocent or cleaner than a tiny little baby."

Dr. Watson, his eyes red from several weeks without sleep, and his wife, with her hair all frizzy and disheveled, looked at each other and began to laugh hysterically.

They knew what Kathleen did not yet know. There is nothing innocent about babies. They are the most self centered life forms in the galaxy. When they are hungry, you'd better forget whatever you're doing and stuff some food into them. And since what goes in, must come out, eventually you'll find out just how dirty these babies can get.

Kathleen, however, was totally confused about this laughter. She'd never had to care for a baby. She never had to care for a younger brother or sister. Her impression of babies came from playing with plastic dolls as a child, and from simply admiring babies for a few moments while they are cleaned and bathed and well fed and available for public viewing.

Dr. Watson tried to explain to Kathleen how much trouble this baby was. He spoke with the voice of experience, having two other boys already. He talked about how they get sick, how they fight, how they cost so much, how stressful being a parent is.

But Kathleen in her naive idealistic view of the world did not understand. She looked as if Dr. Watson had spoken heresy, and finally asked, "If babies are that much trouble, why did you have children in the first place?"

And then Dr. Watson said something that, no matter what else he may have taught in Philosophy 101, is still remembered to this day. "Young lady, you don't have any idea what life is all about. And you won't begin to know the meaning of life until you hold your own baby child in your arms, flesh of your flesh, and blood of your blood, and then that tiny little baby looks up at you, and with great gusto, vomits into your shirt pocket."

What Dr. Watson was trying to explain to Kathleen was not that children are a lot of trouble, even though they are. He was trying to convey to her that while they are a lot of trouble, they are worth it.

In life, we have often forgotten that the things that are most important are often the most trouble, require the greatest work, and demand the most sacrifice. This is true with children. It is also true of marriage, career, and most of all it is true of spirituality.

We isolate ourselves from the messiness of life. We like everything to be clean and sanitary. We want the joys of life, without the pain. We want to the pleasures of life, without the work. We want to enjoy the accomplishments, without learning from the failures.

It is as if we would want the biography of our life to have a strip of paper around it that reads, "Sanitized for your protection."

If I had to point to the one great flaw of our nation, it is that we have forgotten the value of sacrifice.

Back when I was doing youth ministry, the kids would often talk about their dreams to make something of themselves. A noble desire. One time a young teenager shared an essay in which he wrote in barely legible handwriting and with grammar that was poorly constructed, "Someday, I hope to be somebody. I want to be an NBA star and play basketball and make commercials. But I know this will be hard and I might not make it. So if I can't get into the NBA, I might just be a doctor instead."

Now, we can laugh or smile at those naive statements, but the sadness of that essay is that this young man did not see the need for the sacrifice. He wanted to play basketball, but only for the fun of it. There is nothing wrong with that, of course, but if you want to play on a team you have to sacrifice. You have to devote hours to practice. You have to submit to the directions of the coach. You have to exercise your body. He did none of that.

And as for settling for just being a doctor, the grades weren't there -- not because he didn't have the ability, but rather, because he didn't make the sacrifice and devote himself to study.

Many people would like to win the lottery. Come to think of it, who wouldn't want to win the lottery? But the problem with that desire is that it is symptomatic of how we no longer want to make the sacrifice. The lottery enables us to dream of becoming wealthy without making any sacrifice, or taking any risks.

But Dr. Watson was right. You really do learn something about life when you hold your baby in your arms and you watch your child throw up into your shirt pocket.

Life, and the things that matter in life, come at a cost. It is not always clean. It's not always easy. Sometimes things get messy. In the things of life that matter, we have forgotten the value of sacrifice.

But sacrifice is central to the Christian experience. Jesus, in fact, is the great sacrifice made for our behalf. The first letter of John says, "This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers."

In our New Testament lesson for today, it is John the Baptist who is the first to introduce Jesus to the world as being the Messiah. John could have called Jesus many things, including Messiah, Christ, Son of God, Savior. But what John calls him, is "Lamb of God."

The first time the Baptist sees Jesus in the Gospel of John he tells his disciples, "Look. The Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." John baptized Jesus and the next day he sees Jesus again and repeats to his disciples, "Look, the Lamb of God."

To call Jesus "the Lamb of God," is to call Him something that is not so clean and tidy as "Son of God," or "Savior." Because it realizes that things in life that matter most come with a cost. In the things of life that matter, we have forgotten the value of sacrifice.

Throughout the Bible, lambs are mentioned several times.

The first mention is probably in Genesis when Abraham takes his only son, Isaac, to the mountains to worship God. Abraham is under the impression that God wants him to sacrifice his son Isaac in this act of worship, but the father has not yet told Isaac of this. Isaac looks around and takes inventory. Let me see, we've got rope for the lamb. We've got wood for the fire to burn the lamb. We've got the knife to kill the lamb. "Father?"

"Yes, my son?" Abraham replied.

"The fire and wood are here," Isaac said, "but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?"

Abraham answered, "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." And the two of them went on together. (Genesis 22)

And as the story goes, as Abraham is about to thrust the knife into his son, an angel stops him. Off to the side is a lamb, caught in the bushes. God himself has provided the sacrifice. Behold. The Lamb of God.

In the history of Moses and the Israelites, there is a very exciting moment when God is going to send the most terrible plague of all on Egypt. The first born sons will die -- the first born of Egypt that is. Then Moses summoned all the elders of Israel and said to them, "Go at once and select the animals for your families and slaughter the Passover lamb." (Exodus 12)

Then they took the blood of the sacrificial lambs and put some on the door posts of their homes as a symbol that within this house lived a family of God.

John the Baptist was probably remembering these stories from the Old Testament when he looked at Jesus and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God."

Most of all, he may have been remembering what the prophet Isaiah had said about the coming Messiah, "He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter." (Isaiah 53:7)

So when John sees Jesus, he does not say, "Look, here is your Savior." Nor does he say, "Behold, the Son of God." Instead, he says, "The Lamb of God." A reminder that Jesus has come to pay a terrible price.

In the things of life that matter, we have forgotten the value of sacrifice. And sacrifice is central to the meaning of the Gospel. As the first letter of John says, "This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers."

In other words, Jesus made a great sacrifice for us, we in turn should be willing to make sacrifices for others.

Talk to any couple who have been successfully married for 30, 40 or 50 years. Listen to their stories. Sometimes, they will talk about the wonderful vacation to Paris, or the great house they lived in. But listen carefully to their stories. Most of them are about how tough it was. They fondly remember their poverty when they had to work hard to buy their next meal.

They affectionately remember their first apartment that could fit into their present day bedroom in which the air conditioner never worked, the roof leaked, and only one eye on the stove would heat up. They remember staying up all night with their children during the flu season. They remember being there for each other at times of trouble. It is the sacrifices they made for each other that make their love that much stronger.

It is the same in friendship, our career, and even our church. Years ago, President John Kennedy said at his inaugural, "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country." But now, over 40 years later, we ask what our country can do for us, what our church can do for us, what our career can do for us, what our community can do for us. In stead, we should have been asking, "what can we do for them?"

Did any of you ever see the movie, "Marvin's Room"? " Dianne Keaton plays a woman who has cared for her ailing father during the last years of his life. She has made sacrifices for others while her sister, played by Meryl Streep left home long ago so she could live her own life.

Now, years later, the sister played by Dianne Keaton is dying of cancer and she calls upon the help of her sister. In a key scene in the movie, Dianne Keaton reflects on her life with great satisfaction. She tells her sister, "I'm so lucky. I'm so lucky. I've had so much love in my life."

Meryl Streep comforts her sister by agreeing, "Yes indeed, you've had so many people love you."

Dianne looks at her sister with sincere surprise. "No, that's not what I mean. I'm lucky because I've been able to give so much love."

It is in making sacrifices out of love for others that Dianne Keaton's character's life found fulfillment.

Life without sacrifice is without meaning. And love without a cost is worthless. But sacrifice is central to the meaning of the Gospel. As the first letter of John says, "This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers."

The last I heard of Dr. Watson, he was desperately trying to sell his three month old car. Why sell a three month old car? Dr. Watson told the story. His wife had taken the children to the grocery store. The youngest seemed to be playing quietly, because from time to time she could hear the child say, "Ball. Ball. Ball."

She assumed she had a ball in his hand, but just as she was about to turn into the drive way of her home, she looked in her rear view mirror. That young child the class had admired was sitting in the back, right next to a bag of groceries. On top of the bags was a cartoon of eggs.

The child had taken them one by one out of the cartoon, and after looking at it and saying, "ball" had dropped the egg onto the carpet of the floorboard. There was one egg left, and the wife was unable to reach it before it, too, was dropped onto the floor, where it cracked and joined the other eggs.

Someone said to Dr Watson, "Must be hard to sell a car that smells like rotten eggs. How do you put up with your kids?" "Sometimes it's hard," he admitted. "But it's worth it."

As for Kathleen, she never married and never gave birth to children. But there was an article about her in Good Housekeeping a few years ago about the child she had adopted. It was not the innocent or clean baby she dreamed of in college. The child was severely disabled.

He was mentally retarded, emotionally disturbed, and physically he was unable to control his own body and even as a teenager continued to wear diapers. Caring for him had become a full time job. Kathleen was a minister and had taken a tiny little church where she lived in a small house owned by the church, and where she received a tiny salary for the pastoral care she provided her little church.

Most of her life, however, was wrapped around the care and nurture of this child, who was so different from the child she dreamed of so long ago.

In the article, the interviewer had asked, "How did you come to adopt this child?"

Kathleen talked about her early years of ministry in which she founded and operated a ministry to the homeless and the poor and the victims of abuse. She said, "One day, a mother placed this child in my arms and said, 'Here, you take him. I can't deal with this any more.' The mother walked away before I could say anything.

We work very closely with state agencies and so the state let us take care of the child while they tried in vain to locate the mother or some other relative. Then one day, I was holding the child and I felt such love for him. He was so sweet, so innocent. He'd just had a bath and he had that clean baby smell. Then he did something that made me realize how much I really loved this child."

"What did he do," the interviewer asked.

"He threw up in my shirt pocket," she said. "And it didn't bother me a bit."

Love demands sacrifice. Jesus Christ is the Lamb of God. He has paid the ultimate sacrifice in his love for us. Can't we therefore learn to make some sacrifices for him and for his children around us.