

## “The Grace of Sacrifice”

a message by Dr. Bruce Havens

BASED ON THE THEME, “DISCOVER GRACE IN YOUR RELATIONSHIPS”

Arlington Congregational Church, U.C.C.

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### Romans 5: 1-8 [ NRSV ]

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>2</sup>through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. <sup>3</sup>And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, <sup>4</sup>and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, <sup>5</sup>and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

<sup>6</sup>For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.

<sup>7</sup>Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. <sup>8</sup>But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.

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**I**s your life worthwhile? Isn’t that the most important, and maybe the most haunting question we can ask ourselves? I was listening to the story of the three people who survived the boating accident by clinging to their cooler for over two days in the Atlantic and I marveled at their mindset. In spite of sharks, boats that missed them, jellyfish and other obstacles, for them there was never any doubt or any despair – their answer was, Yes!

I have also met people who have suffered a great deal and who would answer that question with an emphatic, no! I have family members who I know might have answered that question no at one time or another. Maybe all of us would have answered no at one time or another because something we were

suffering at that time was too great, too heavy. I don’t want to glorify suffering this morning, even though I do believe Paul is right that suffering can produce some great spiritual results. But I think there is a difference between suffering and sacrifice and this morning I want to talk about that difference.

I don’t want to pretend that I know much about military service or the sacrifice people in our military make, except second – hand. I never served. But I am sure that it involves suffering, even if we are only talking about boot camp. I am sure it involves sacrifice even if it didn’t take one’s life, as it did those we remember this morning. But I do believe that military service can offer a glimpse, or illustrate to some degree the difference between suffering and

sacrifice and perhaps help us understand the grace of sacrifice.

I talk about this under the rubric or the theme of “Finding Grace in Relationships.” I believe that finding that grace requires a willingness to sacrifice. But I want to assure you that I do not recommend that suffering, especially abuse in any form, is a spiritual virtue in relationships. I do think there is a critical difference between sacrifice and suffering. I think the difference is choice. If I have a choice and I choose to sacrifice any suffering I may endure is redeemable. It is of value. It is admirable, but I must remember I chose it. If I am forced to suffer because someone else chooses to abuse me or you suffer because someone else chooses to abuse you I do not believe that is the pathway Christ calls us to when he says “take up your cross,” or what Paul is promoting when he tells us that the outcome of suffering is hope that “does not disappoint us.” Don’t mistake suffering and sacrifice as synonymous.

That said, let me suggest how I believe sacrifice is a grace that leads to greater relationships. There are certainly no end of stories I could share to inspire you when it comes to sacrifice. Certainly the stories of martyrs and soldiers who have their lives in sacrifice would bring a tear to any of our eyes. But let me go a in a bit of a different direction and suggest three types of relationships that can be blessed by sacrifice and how.

First, of course, our relationship with God is blessed by God’s own sacrifice. One might say that the relationship with God is an act of

sacrifice on God’s part. Think about it. I guess you could say that God would be pretty self-sufficient without us.

Theologians from long ago have written about God’s act of creation as an act of sacrificial love. God loved enough to make something that was not God, even though God did not NEED creation to be complete. In that same vein, to give us life was a sacrifice that made possible our relationship with God. Isn’t that an awesome thought? God is so loving that his love overflows into the act of creation – of making you and me, and then continues to love us so much that he wants to be in relationship with us? I don’t know about you but there are a lot of times when I don’t want to be in relationship with myself, let alone with anyone else, yet God never stops yearning for, working for, inviting us into, and otherwise sacrificing God’s love, energy, and we might even say dignity to be in relationship with us.

Why? So God can bless us! Isn’t that even more awesome? Sometimes when I listen to preachers they sound like God is trying to hunt us down to punish us for being what we are. I think instead that God is trying to hunt us down to bless us. And yet, I often find myself running as fast as I can away from God for reasons that are so perverse I cannot understand them myself. But that does not stop God’s act of sacrifice in seeking to be in relationship with me and with you and with all of creation.

So the blessing of this grace of God is that we come to understand, recognize, and celebrate this relationship, and we work at sharing it with others.

This is where the sacrifice on our part begins to come in. God invites us to be as sacrificial in our love as God himself is. So Jesus talks about things like forgiving 70 times 7 – number representing infinity. Jesus talked about God’s love as being like a father who loved both his sons so much that it didn’t matter if they left him like he was dead, wasted all his money, embarrassed the family name or acted like a self-righteous jerk and wouldn’t acknowledge his own brother, God still welcomed them both back into the never ending celebration at the family ranch. Maybe we could find ways to be at least half as sacrificial in our love for God.

The other interesting thing to me is the way in which the Bible connects God’s love with God’s justice. In Psalm 33 the writer says, “The LORD loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of his unfailing love.” Psalm 89 says, “Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne; love and faithfulness go before you.” Psalm 112 confirms that God’s blessing comes when we express our love for God with justice: “Good will come to him who is generous and lends freely, who conducts his affairs with justice.” In other words, to seek God’s justice is one of the ways we will experience grace in our relationship with God.

Then, of course, there are those more difficult relationships with people. Even those we love can be challenging, right? But one of the biggest ways we change the flavor of our relationships is to take an attitude of sacrifice as a way of expressing our love. Now, remember, I

have already delineated the difference between abuse, suffering, and sacrifice. But the sacrifice of love that is expressed in time, effort, or attitude can completely alter the trajectory of a relationship.

Are you having a difficult time with a relationship? Make a sacrifice of love. Are you feeling resentful, dissatisfied, or otherwise unfulfilled? Have you tried demanding, pouting, or other unproductive behaviors? Try an act of sacrificial love. The way of Christ is the way of sacrificial love and in truth it has the power to change the world and so it also has the power to change the climate and trajectory of your relationships. Instead of living with a sense of dissatisfaction, unfulfilled demands, and resentments, start asking yourself, “what can I do for this person that will bless him or her?” Remember I invited you to take this approach the first week of this series. I gave you a card that was set up where you could write down what you could do to bless someone that day. I invited you to ask someone – partner, child, parent, or friend what you could do that day to bless them and then do it.

But I want to move to another level with this. Maybe you are suffering. Maybe you haven’t been able to get past something in your life and you have not found the hope that Paul promises. Now this may be a small issue or a big issue but I want to suggest something for you to consider in relation to whatever this suffering in your life might be.

First, you must agree with me that suffering is our response to a problem, issue, person, or other difficulty.

Suffering is not required in every difficulty. Second, I want you to think about the fact that you and I have the power to choose to suffer or not. I know when we are in pain we suffer. I know when we have difficulties there are many times we suffer. But at some point we have to choose whether we want to continue to suffer or whether we want to find the hope that Paul says does not disappoint.

How do I find that you ask? Well, I think we can begin to turn from suffering to hope if we are willing to sacrifice. I mean that in two ways. We have to sacrifice our suffering to God – in other words, give up our suffering to God. Then we may have to sacrifice some lesser hope for a greater hope.

Lloyd Ogilvie, the great preacher and share a story that I think helps illustrate this. He said, “One of the most disturbing observations I have made about myself and so many others with whom I have talked in depth about needs in their lives, is that there often is a time lag between when we become aware of a problem and when we finally allow God to help us. We usually go through the process of what I call the four looks: the outward look to others for help, the inward look to muster our own abilities, the upward look to God when others and we cannot help ourselves sufficiently, and then the forward look to the future utilizing what the Lord has given us to help us. My prayer is that I would move to the last two looks more quickly. Or what’s better, to start with an immediate look to God for help.”

He said, “The other day, a woman in my church shared what she perceived to be an overwhelming problem. She was done in, tired out, and up tight in meeting her family’s needs. ‘Why not let God help you?’ I asked. ‘That’s a strange way of putting it,’ she responded. ‘Do you mean I have a choice?’

Ogilvie told her “Yes,” then added, “You have a decision to make: Are you going to manage this problem on your own or cry out to God for help?” The woman was shocked. “You’re suggesting that I may be blocking God’s efforts to help me. I’ve tried everything and everybody else. How do I let God help me?”

Ogilvie share with her how he had learned to surrender his needs, problems, and issues to the Lord more quickly in order to find that heavenly help. He admitted that his own “strong will” and determination to be “self-sufficient” often got in the way, but he admitted when he gave over his “control” God “never failed to give me supernatural power in response to a prayer of complete surrender. He helps me with wisdom to see deeply into the problem; discernment to know what to do; and faith, courage and endurance to follow through.” Then Lloyd Ogilvie says something that I believe very deeply. That is he said he has found that “sometimes God changes people and circumstances, but He always changes my attitude toward it.”

That woman joined Ogilvie in a prayer to ask God to help her give the problem over and to find hope in God. Ogilvie reports that she found strength to

trust God with her family relationship issues. Now, instead of blaming others or seek solutions on her own she first asks the Lord to show her his perspective on the issue and she says God has been faithful. She says God's grace has given her a new satisfaction in her relationships, even when she has to make sacrifices to bless them.

Paul proclaims the love of God, what we call grace, is evident in Christ's sacrifice. He says this is proof of God's love for us and he says we have peace with God through Jesus Christ. To me this is the final point we must recognize and come to believe. God is not the enemy waiting to punish us. We have peace with God and the more our relationship with Jesus Christ becomes central to our life the more we will find that peace and the more we will recognize God's love for us. It is God's will to bless us and to share that love with us in every moment.

Lloyd Ogilvie, "Let God Help You,"  
[csec.org/csec/sermon/Ogilvie\\_2718](http://csec.org/csec/sermon/Ogilvie_2718), jan 22, 1984.

God's sacrifice of love is grace. It is the greatest source of hope we have. If we turn to God in times of trouble and trial and difficulty we will find that God will help us know how sacrifice leads to grace.

Is life worthwhile? Can it be worthwhile in times when suffering arises? God says yes! God says yes to us and to life and to grace. God offers us that love and peace which passes all understanding that we

can move from suffering to sacrifice in the face of great difficulties. God has proved his love for us, how long will we wait to allow God to show us that love?