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Subject: Doctrine of Atonement

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Talking about this week's Bible Lesson:

Communication as sacrifice

By Elise L. Moore, C.S.B.

[from the Responsive Reading]

Hebrews 13:15-16

By him therefore let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to his name.

But to do good and to communicate forget not: for -with such sacrifices God is -well pleased.

Communication a sacrifice? This was news to me. I like to talk. In fact, my husband might think that I like to talk too much. So how could communicating ever be considered a sacrifice? In fact, being quiet sometimes seems the greater challenge to me.

How do communication and sacrifice fit together? Well, they fit in this week's Bible Lesson, which is on the topic Doctrine of Atonement. The Bible Lesson can be found on this website. Anyway, several verses from Hebrews 13 are included in the introduction. Verses 15 and 16 give a New Testament approach to atonement and sacrifice. From the King James Version, "By him therefore let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to his name. But to do good and to communicate forget not: for with such sacrifices God is well pleased."

The purpose of sacrifice is to atone or make amends for sin. Sin can be any mistake. The concept of sacrificing for sin is found in practically every ancient culture. Among the Hebrews, animals or crops were offered as a way of atoning for mistakes. The concept of sacrificing things to pay for sin is like a barter system with Deity. It's like bargaining with God, "I'll give you this if you'll forgive me for that."

The author of Hebrews offers a new view of atoning. Instead of the barter system, he recommends action. In fact, three actions are recommended. 1) Praising God by giving thanks; 2) doing good; and 3) communicating. Instead of outward sacrifice, this is inward thought resulting in outward action. What caught my attention was considering praise, doing good, and communicating as sacrifices. They didn't seem very demanding to me. Then I thought about the purpose of sacrifice in atonement. It is to draw people closer to God. Atonement would have individuals feel united or at-one with God. So the purpose of praise, doing good, and communicating would be to unite us to Deity.

Praising God certainly accomplishes this. I always feel closer to God when I'm thanking Him/Her for blessings received. Where's the sacrifice? It might seem a sacrifice to acknowledge God's actions in public. It may feel embarrassing. But when I take a public position and say out loud in front of others that God is governing the details and thank Him for tangible answers to prayer, I certainly do feel closer to God. And I may be helping others acknowledge that God is doing good in their lives as well.

The second sacrifice was doing good. I can see immediately how doing good can atone for sin. So long as a person doesn't vacillate between doing good and making mistakes. So where's the sacrifice? Maybe it is a sacrifice to do the right thing instead of ignoring a situation. Like the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10) where a stranger showed compassion on an injured man by stopping to care for him. The stranger, a Samaritan took the injured man to an inn and paid the innkeeper to continue the care, promising to pay for any additional expense. Perhaps it was a sacrifice of time, energy and money for the Samaritan. But Jesus' point in telling the parable was to assure his listeners that doing good instead of ignoring someone's need is the way to eternal life. Whatever the sacrifice, doing good brings us closer to God because God is good. Doing good is actually expressing God and unites us to the God of action.

The third sacrifice is communication. I was truly stumped how communicating could atone for sin, or bring me closer to God. So I looked up the word in two Greek dictionaries. The original Greek word translated communicate could also be translated fellowship, intimacy (Thayer's Abridged), literally participation (Strong's).

If communicating means intimately working together with others, it certainly does involve a sacrifice of personal opinions, desires and ego. Working together is always more challenging

than going it alone.

Suddenly I felt as if the author of Hebrews was speaking to me. I could feel closer to God and atone for past mistakes by striving to maintain a more intimate fellowship with others. Intimate fellowship doesn't necessarily mean continual agreement. It might mean sticking together even during disagreements.

That made me think of church. It might seem easier to work on one's spirituality by oneself. Why be involved in church when a person can commune directly with God. Praying for others without having to interact with them. Praying for the world without interacting with the world. Reading the Bible and keeping a spiritual regimen without communicating this spirituality to others in person. All this can be easier than developing a fellowship with people who might have differing views. Yet there is the promise that intimate fellowship with others draws us closer to God and is a sacrifice required for spiritual growth and progress.

It does seem easier not to communicate to others when new ideas or innovations involve change. Change is challenging. Change is a reliable source of conflict. But it's only through change, both individual and collective, that we progress. So if it seems a sacrifice to communicate in order to promote individual and collective spiritual growth, at least a person can be reassured that they are drawing closer to God. This has to be a blessing.

I'm adopting these three actions as my individual goal for the month—praising God in public, doing good, and active fellowship. I hope the sacrifices involved will have me feel more at-one with God. Perhaps the more I sacrifice, the closer to God I'll feel. I'll let you know.