

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

If we know anything about the Word of God, we know that it is full of the language of sacrifice. Sacrifice is everywhere. From Cain and Abel, and before, to Noah, to Abraham, to Moses, Aaron, David, Solomon, to the prophets: Elijah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and even into the New Testament where we are exposed to the continuation of the sacrificial system, Jesus' own sacrifice, the offering of our own selves as living sacrifices, and of course the book of Hebrews.

Sacrifice is literally EVERYWHERE in Scripture; it's unescapable, unavoidable. And so for us Christians it is important that we understand what sacrifice is all about, so that we rightly understand the faith as taught in God's Word.

Now we all know the story of Cain and Abel pretty well. And if some of you don't, well you just heard it in the Old Testament lesson for today. Cain and Abel were the first born of Adam and Eve, Cain being the eldest son and Abel being the youngest. They both offered a sacrifice to the Lord, Abel's being of the first of his flocks and Cain's being from among the fruit of the ground.

The Lord accepted Abel's offering but not his brother Cain's. This infuriated Cain, which finally led him to murdering his brother Abel.

Sacrifice. Not only was there a righteous sacrifice, but there was also an unrighteous sacrifice. But the question is, what makes Abel's sacrifice acceptable but not Cain's? Was it because Abel offered up sheep instead of fruit and God wanted sheep that day? I don't think so. For the Lord it was about the heart of the matter, and particularly the hearts of both Cain and Abel.

Abel's heart was pure, full of faith, while Cain's was not. Abel's heart was right with God; he understood his place before the Lord of all creation, where Cain's heart was corrupt, rotten, pretentious toward the Lord.

And let's be honest: The Lord judges our hearts and our sacrifices the same way, be they our sacrifices of money – our offerings, be they our sacrifices of time, of talent, of willingness, and the like.

God judges the heart.

Well we must ask the question: what sort of heart is one that is right with God, and what sort of heart is one that is NOT right with God.

Hearts that are not right with God are those hearts that, as with Cain, are content with doing the deed, going through the motion, with no true concern for the sacrifice. Cain brought from the fruits of the ground, but unlike Abel, Cain didn't bring from the best of the ground or the first fruits of the ground. Cain thought that it was about the act, the motion. Cain said to himself "well at least I'm thinking about the Lord anyway; that should be enough."

This reminds me of a story (tell story about Jim Boatmann)....

And like Jim Boatmann, like Cain, when we approach the Lord with a heart of indifference, a heart that says "well at least I'm giving something", a heart that says "I've done what I should do now I'm going back to my own life; leave me be, God," then our sacrifice will also be judged accordingly.

We're going to be talking about stewardship all through the month of November. And my primary focus with you won't be to guilt you into giving more money to the plate, but instead to teach you that everything you have, every last dollar you have earned, is the Lord's – not yours – and He has given it to YOU to be used for His kingdom, and

that generosity, sacrificial stewardship, stewardship like Abel's, not only benefits His kingdom, but it benefits you as well.

And as uncomfortable as it is to talk about money, dollars and cents is only a fraction of what our text today is really all about.

Do you notice in our Gospel reading today, we have Cain and Abel? Do you see that? We have two different hearts peeled open, layered back, exposed to us through the double-edged words of Jesus.

We have a Pharisee who truly believes that his works, his good deeds, his offering, his sacrifice, will earn him a safe place in the Lord's judgment of the world. And there you have Cain.

Is that you? Are you that Pharisee, are you Cain, are you Jim Boatmann? Are you more interested in NOT being here in church, NOT having to put money in the plate, NOT having to listen to these long boring sermons, NOT having to sing the hymns, NOT having to do the liturgy (unless it's the one you personally like), would you rather be someplace else right now, but you showed up anyway because, "well, if there is a god, I better be on his good side..."

After the Lord accepted Abel's sacrifice, Cain was indignant. His pride was damaged. That the Lord would accept "my little brother's" sacrifice and not mine, was just too much for Cain to bear. And out of his anger and his resentment, his refusing to repent, Cain killed his brother, not only by shedding his blood, but by hating him so much that he would.

The Lord warned Cain, told him that sin is crouching at the door, but in his stubbornness, Cain refused to listen; he would not repent. Instead he allowed his anger to fuel a deeper sin, a deeper evil, more disobedience, more faithlessness, murdering his brother Abel, and then being even more indignant toward the Lord afterward.

Cain was more concerned about himself, his safety, his own life, and like Adam and Eve who hid in the bushes, Cain hid from the Lord behind pretense and pride.

Do you hide from the Lord as Cain? Do you, like the Pharisee in the Gospel reading hide behind your good works, your bragging about how wonderful you are, hiding behind how much you've helped this church or sacrificed for the cause? Will such an offering of vanity truly save you?

We know that Cain was finally cast away by the Lord. Still a mark was placed upon him so that he would not be killed by anyone who saw him and knew what he had done. Even in the depths of Cain's sin and unrepentance, the Lord found reason to protect him.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, let us pray that this sort of heart not be our hearts, but that the Lord instead give us a heart like Abel.

And what was it about Abel's heart? What was it about his sacrifice which pleased the Lord?

Abel's heart was filled with faith. Instead of thinking to himself "I have to keep for myself, hoard for myself, protect myself, make sure I have a good retirement, make sure all my bills are paid, make sure I have enough to get that new shepherd's staff I've been eyeing, and from what's left I'll give a little to the Lord," Abel, by faith, understood that the Lord watches over him, protects him, cares for him, and provides for him everything Abel needs. He knew that he didn't need to hoard; he knew that he didn't need to worry about his life, what he might eat or his possessions, what he might wear or acquire.

Abel had a heart of faith which said "The Lord is in control – and He will not let me fall. Even in death, still the Lord will be my savior."

Now did Abel create this faith within himself; did he wake up one morning and convict himself to having true faith and trusting in God? No. That's not the way it works.

Think of the wretched tax collector in our Gospel – the “Abel” of Jesus' story. He didn't approach God with all his “good deeds” and his “wonderfulness”, but he, by faith, fell before the Lord in humility, asking only for mercy because he was the sinner. And he went away the righteous one because faith filled his heart.

Both Cain and Abel were taught the faith by their parents, Adam and Eve. They were both brought up being taught faith, sacrifice, trust, and being reared in the Word of God. But Abel's heart believed it, faith grew in his heart by the Holy Spirit, but Cain's heart rejected it. Abel's heart was caused to be opened and filled with God's love and grace and through faith, Abel believed that the Lord would provide for him such that he gave back first to the Lord out of thankfulness. Cain's heart rejected everything the Lord offered, even to the point of hating his own brother, murdering his own brother.

You see, all people throughout all history are born into sin, born not believing in God, born, as St. Paul writes, hostile to God, enemies of God. And it is only through the power of God's Holy Spirit that anyone can believe and be saved. The Lord's power worked in Abel's heart to bring about faith and hope and love, whereas Cain who rejected it only had hate and faithlessness, and inwardness.

The heart – the Lord saw into their hearts and on account of faith accepted Abel's sacrifice.

And the Lord has given us the same sort of hearts. Like Abel, we have been brought up in the Christian faith, taught about the love and grace and mercy of Christ our Lord who died to forgive our sins. We have

been baptized in the name of the God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and we have received His true body and blood for our forgiveness in the Lord's Supper.

Through this faith that we have each been given, we have grown to believe that our BEST sacrifices, our FIRST fruits, and only our best and our first are worthy of the Lord, and by faith we give to the Lord joyfully, faithfully, even eagerly as we await His return.

So, what are our "first fruits"? What are our "best sacrifices?"

Well we don't have to slaughter the fattened calf or give a tenth of our fruits and vegetables anymore, as Abel did or as the Israelites did, because Jesus has offered Himself up and ended all that sort of sacrifice.

Instead we give from what we have, our time, our talents, and our treasures. We should not give begrudgingly as Cain gave, but we give joyfully, knowing first that what we have is not ours to keep, but that we are the Lord's stewards and He has given us what we have, all of it, to be used for His kingdom, His glory.

But we also offer ourselves as living sacrifices, offering up our own bodies, our own lives to the Lord, asking our Lord to use us to bring the Gospel to others.

We don't sit and worry about what WE want, what WE like, what WE prefer, but we instead empty ourselves of such things so that the Lord can fill us with faith leading to good works. We don't make demands of our Lord and, like Cain, only be willing to give of ourselves if every detail meets our needs, and when things don't go the way we want, we fight back by refusing to be generous with our lives of time, talent and treasure.

But we offer everything we have and are, knowing that God is in control, believing that the Lord will provide for us, has provided for us, and will not stop providing for us.

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord, the greatest and most worthy sacrifice given so that we would be free, we are now filled with the Holy Spirit, washed in our baptisms, forgiven by the body and blood of Christ, created, sustained, cared for, and protected by our generous, endlessly giving heavenly Father, so that we can now each be living sacrifices to Him, holy and pleasing in His sight, generously giving of ourselves wherever and whenever the Lord requires. Amen.