

On sacrifice and suffering

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Lent was a fairly new concept for me when I was in college, and one year I decided to make the ultimate sacrifice—chocolate. I still remember standing in the ice cream parlor, looking at the luscious rocky road and chocolate swirl and brownie chunk ice cream—and choosing butter pecan. Butter pecan. Such is the suffering I was willing to endure for Jesus.

I think now that the whole endeavor was a bit melodramatic. (I gobbled up a candy bar at 12:01 on Easter Sunday morning—when I should have been asleep.) It's not that giving up chocolate is a bad discipline in and of itself. I just think that sometimes we act like the point of our Lenten fasts or sacrifices is to make us suffer—and it's not.

As Christians, we can be far too quick to equate sacrifice with suffering.

Sacrifice is something that Jesus asks of us: lay down your nets, leave your father and mother, give all you have to the poor, deny yourself. Jesus does not hesitate to ask his followers to make sacrifices.

But, in asking us to make sacrifices, Jesus is not calling us to deprive ourselves; rather, he is calling us to lay aside certain activities, attachments, attitudes, so that we are more free to follow him, more free to live out the abundant life he offers. Christ-directed sacrifice is a means to abundant life.

Jesus' call to sacrifice is not a call to suffering. Yes, he calls us to take up the cross; he also says that his yoke is easy and his burden is light. Yes, he says to lose our lives; he also says that in losing our lives we gain our lives.

And yes, sometimes the sacrifices we make as followers of Christ lead to suffering. But the suffering itself is not a part of Christ's call or God's desire for our lives. The suffering happens because this world is tragically out of line with the good news of the kingdom.

It is vitally important that the church gets this right. Asking people to give things up for the sake of their faith can be life-giving. Telling people that God calls them to suffer is death-dealing. This pro-suffering theology supports domestic abuse in the home, facilitates sexual abuse cover-ups in the church, and contributes to unwarranted apathy about economic and racial injustices in our nation.

It is vitally important that the church gets this right. Jesus does not call us to suffer. We suffer anyway, of course. And the good news of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus is that God's own self is intimately present with us in our suffering.

So during this Lenten season, whether you have given up TV or Facebook or alcohol or chocolate, remember that this sacrifice is not meant to make you suffer, but rather is a way for you to move toward abundant life in Christ.

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