

**Better Reasons to Give
Gratitude: The Offering of Shalom**
Leviticus 7:11-18

Once again this week we are in the Torah, drawing meaning for today out of the worship traditions of the past. We read Leviticus chapter 7, verses 11-18:

¹¹This is the ritual of the sacrifice of the offering of shaloms that one may offer to the Lord.

¹²If you offer it for thanksgiving, you shall offer with the thank-offering unleavened cakes mixed with oil, unleavened wafers spread with oil, and cakes of choice flour well soaked in oil. ¹³With your thanksgiving sacrifice of shaloms you shall bring your offering with cakes of leavened bread. ¹⁴From this you shall offer one cake from each offering, as a gift to the Lord; it shall belong to the priest who dashes the blood of the offering of shaloms. ¹⁵And the flesh of your thanksgiving sacrifice of shaloms shall be eaten on the day it is offered; you shall not leave any of it until morning. ¹⁶But if the sacrifice you offer is a votive offering or a freewill-offering, it shall be eaten on the day that you offer your sacrifice, and what is left of it shall be eaten the next day; ¹⁷but what is left of the flesh of the sacrifice shall be burned on the third day. ¹⁸If any of the flesh of your sacrifice of shaloms is eaten on the third day, it shall not be acceptable, nor shall it be credited to the one who offers it; it shall be an abomination, and the one who eats of it shall incur guilt.

Bet you've never heard that scripture read aloud in worship, have you? What do we do with that? It can be hard for us to get our heads around the fact that so much of the Torah – the Books of the Law – is devoted to animal sacrifice. How could anyone kill one of God's creatures as an act of worship? Right? So let me start there. Here are some things that might help. First, people in biblical times were not as squeamish about slaughtering animals as we are. Today people can live their whole lives blissfully unaware of the bloody process that took place before our steaks and hamburgers arrived in neat packages at the grocery store, but no one in biblical times could be that oblivious. No one thought slaughtering animals was cruel, and no one was grossed out. It was where food came from. Second, those animals weren't just food; they were currency. Coins were barely in use at all when the Law was written and not at all among common people, so the economy ran on barter. To do your shopping, you didn't need cash so much as you needed to know the oxen-sheep exchange rate. So, in bringing animal sacrifices to the temple, people were bringing their offerings in the only way they had. And finally, you should know that these animals were not just burned up. Only portions were burned on the altar – generally the less edible portions – and the rest was set aside as food for the priests and their families. So these sacrifices weren't just food, weren't just currency; they were also ministerial salary. Which is, you know, not necessarily a bad thing.

And besides all that, *everyone* worshiped this way. There must be something archetypal about this, because around the world, in every culture, as soon as people conceived of gods, they started sacrificing animals to them. Among Israel's nearest neighbors – Egypt, Babylon, Canaan, Phoenicia, even as far away as Greece and Persia – all worshiped by means of animal sacrifice. In those religions, sacrifices were understood as bribes to the gods – gifts in return for which the gods would grant some favor. So whatever you wanted and couldn't provide for yourself – rain, victory in battle, healing, children, a good harvest – there was a sacrifice for that. Some religions

even offered deluxe packages. For a small additional fee, a specially-trained priest could look at the sacrificial animal's liver and tell your future, too. (I'm serious. Archeologists in Iraq have found clay models of livers that were apparently used in training priests in this skill. That art has been lost, though; nobody reads livers anymore. If you go to one of these Woke seminaries today, they don't even offer it as an elective!) Where was I? ... oh, yes, what I mean is that in the Ancient Near East, worship *always* involved animal sacrifice. It would have been weird if Israel hadn't done so as well.

Now I'm not suggesting that we resume this practice, but I hope that this background helps explain why the first seven chapters of Leviticus are all about animal sacrifice. It's not a weird obsession with blood; it's simply the ancient Hebrew version of the *United Methodist Book of Worship*. It's a step-by-step guide on how to do church as they understood church. Those chapters detail what animals to use, how much of the animal to burn, what to do with the rest of it, how much goes to the priests, and what to do with the blood. It also distinguishes between different kinds of sacrifice: there's the whole burnt offering (or holocaust), the sin offering, the guilt offering (which is *not* the same as the sin offering; long story), the grain offerings, the drink offerings, the wave offerings, and finally the one we just read about and that I want to talk about today: the "offering of *shalom*."

Now if you were reading the King James Version, that offering would be called the "peace offering," and if you were in the New Revised Standard, you would find "well-being offering." Both translations are partly right; neither is adequate. *Shalom* is one of those Hebrew words that has no English equivalent. The closest I know in any language is the Hawai'ian *aloha*. *Shalom* means wholeness, in every part of our being: fullness of heart, wellness of body, comfort of mind, firmness of will, health in relationships – and most of all, it means that all those parts are consistent with each other, that we are one person. *Shalom* means integrity. The opposite of *shalom* is the state of having a divided soul – being indecisive, torn, resentful, envious, easily influenced by others, rootless, inconsistent, incomplete. Like *aloha*, the word *shalom* is often used in scripture as a greeting: "Is it shalom with you?" meaning, "Are you well? Or is anything lacking?"

What does all this have to do with an animal sacrifice? Why is there a *shalom* offering? What does it for? Primarily, it gives thanks to God. The *shalom* offering is a freely-given offering of thanksgiving for God's blessing, for answered prayer, and for help in keeping our vows to God and to each other. The *shalom* offering is an act of completion. A worshiper found himself lacking something; he cried out to the Lord, who blessed him, who filled his void; and now he acknowledges God's blessing with gratitude, bringing a gift to the Lord. To bring a gift of thanks to God from the blessing that God has given to us is to bring *shalom* to the cycle. To give thanks is to complete *shalom*, wholeness, in the conversation with God that is worship.

Another interesting thing about the *shalom* offering. The other offerings described in Leviticus designate which parts of the offering are to be set aside for the priests' food, but the *shalom* offering is a little different. In the *shalom* offering, the portions that are not burned on the altar are to be *eaten at once by the priests and the worshiper*. The *shalom* offering, alone of all the Levitical sacrifices, is to be followed by a community potluck. Everyone's invited. *Shalom* – wholeness – is for all. It's too important not to share.

I've just spent about 80% of my allotted sermon time on detailed historical biblical background information. I hope that hasn't been too boring, but, hey, sometimes I do that. Ask

Rebecca. But now I need to take a moment for application. The general title of my sermons this November has been “Better Reasons to Give.” Most of you, in your time, have heard calls to give to the church out of duty, or out of loyalty to the institution, or out of need. And those things are not wrong. We do have a duty to each other, and we should have loyalty to the church where we worship and serve, and the church does need our support. But I think there are deeper reasons for us to give. Last week I talked about the importance of investing ourselves in our worship and our discipleship. To encounter God in worship and to grow in faith both require that we dedicate something of ourselves to that process. We are not to appear before God empty-handed, because we do not grow in faith if we stay in the cheap seats watching from a distance. Today I add another reason. Our gifts are an expression of thanksgiving to God for what God has already done for us, and when we acknowledge God’s blessings to us, we bring completion – *shalom* – to that conversation. As you consider your giving to the church, the family of God, for the next year, consider first how God has blessed you. How do you respond to God’s generosity? Leviticus suggests a freewill offering of *shalom*.

And this week, as you gather at your thanksgiving meals – wherever, and whenever, and with whomever they may be – may your gratitude be *shalom* to you. As you return thanks to God, may you find wholeness, and in that *shalom* may you rejoice.

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I spent a lot of time in this service explaining why it was normal for Israel to worship through sacrifices, like all their neighbors. But I can’t just leave that there. What is amazing about the Old Testament sacrificial law is not all the ways that it was similar to Canaanite worship. That was to be expected. What’s amazing are the ways that it was different. For instance, the Hebrew priests didn’t read livers. Fortune-telling was banned by the law. If God wants you know the future, he’ll send a prophet. Until then, focus on now. But most of all, in the Hebrew sacrifices, there was no *quid pro quo*. While every other religion treated sacrifices as a way to purchase favors from God, the Torah makes it clear that God doesn’t play that game. God doesn’t do that. Hebrew offerings are not bribes but thanks for what God has already done. Followed by a potluck. Happy Thanksgiving. *Shalom* to you all.