

Remember the gift, remember the Giver


A sermon on Leviticus 1

Melissa Florer-Bixler

Sacrifice as gift

Gifts return. And there is something unique, something precious about a gift that comes from sacrifice, from giving that comes spontaneously, out of joy, enough to take a piece of us and give to another.

The book of Leviticus lets us trace the contours of a gift of sacrifice. This book contains the regulations for worship in the tabernacle, the place where God dwells among God's people, Israel. Part of this book includes a list of laws for how to offer gifts—for how to give things away—only this time the intended receiver is God.



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The great anthropologist Mary Douglas described this system of sacrifices as a series of metaphors. Offerings

work in all sorts of way, but most of the time the effect is on people. In Leviticus gifts are the way people draw near to God. The Hebrew word for *sacrifice* means “to come near.” Offerings are about proximity—to God, to neighbor, to guilt, to fear—and how people managed through ritual a profound need for connection to God.

The first ritual in Leviticus, the burnt offering, is likely the original offering of the community, with the others added on later as more needs arose, as different parts of human life required redress. We suspect that pieces of the ritual were taken from the pagan tribes with whom the Israelites interacted, traded, and went to war. And we can also see in between the lines that Israelites practiced ritual sacrifice in ways that were meant to set them apart.

One difference is that the burnt offering is just that—burned up completely. God does not eat these sacrifices. God does not need to consume

food or imbibe wine. God is complete as Creator. All that we have belongs to God. Offerings do not satiate God or appease wrath. The sacrifice of Leviticus works differently.

God cannot be bribed or threatened or convinced to love God's creation because God is love. God's being emanates love; creation simply follows in its wake. And so it is that God expresses concern and even rage when people begin to use creation to manipulate God. Most the prophets are critical of sacrifices in one way or another. Here is what we read in Psalm 51:

*O Lord, open my lips,
and my mouth will declare your praise.
For you have no delight in sacrifice;
if I were to give a burnt-offering, you would not be pleased.
The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.*

And yet, none of the prophets wishes to abandon the system of sacrificial offerings completely. Why is that?

I suspect it is because gifts to God act in a mysterious way. And we get a glimpse of that when we see God's response to burnt offering: God smells the smoke of the sacrifice and is pleased. Smelling something is pleasure and recognition—or warning and revulsion. Newborn babies, long before their eyesight develops, recognize the smell of their caretakers. An infant can pick out the particular scent of her own mother's breastmilk. We do not need aromas to survive, and many people live happy and whole lives with amnesia, the inability to smell. Scent is something else. Our olfactory sense assists our memories and our emotion.

In the Mesopotamian tribes surrounding Israel, the priests were involved in the care and feeding of their gods with elaborate feasts and incantations, all attempts to convince the Divine to have mercy, send rain, bring success in war or childbearing. For the God of Israel, there is no need to convince God. Leviticus starts out with these words: "when you give a gift." When. Not *you must* but *you may*. You can give a gift, and here is the way that will work, how to do it in a way that is good and whole, in a way that brings God joy.

In Leviticus 1, God is happy to extend the bond of care to all people. The burnt offering could be offered by anyone—men and women alike, by sojourners, even gentiles raised in the community. A burnt offering is given not to forgive sins or clear away feelings of guilt. There are offerings

that offer this psychological balm. But the purpose of the first gift in Leviticus is to be gift and nothing more. It is for the pleasure and enjoyment of God. There are no threats. Nothing is taken away if such an offering is not presented. And there is no quid pro quo. God does not give out



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special benefits or prizes for bringing a burnt offering to the altar.

This is a gift of response, the gift given purely for the joy of its offering, a gift that comes as gratitude and love. Sensing the need for all people to participate, Leviticus includes instruction for a gift of birds, what the poorest Israelites

could offer. This is the burnt offering Mary and Joseph, the impoverished parents of Jesus, brought to the temple. Anyone can draw near. Anyone can bring joy to God. Each offering in Leviticus is describes as a gift, a *qarban*. God receives the same joy and pleasure from any gift, whether it is large or small.

The breadth of the gift of burnt offering—its power to encompass the poorest and the wealthiest in Israel—offers more than a relationship with God, as important as that is. The gift also creates a people, a people whose possessions are liminal, who shift their sense of ownership about their goods and even their lives.

Gifts constitute a people

There are places among us that preserve the possibility of gifts constituting a people. Decades ago, a historian recorded stories of the Northern Cheyenne powwow that took place on Lame Deer Mountain. At the powwow, possession is altered through gift. For four days people gathered outside to dance and talk and sing. Everyone received rations of frozen buffalo, peanut butter, and Cokes. Each person had food, no one with more and no one with less.

One day Mr. Red Bird, the announcer, gathered everyone for a ceremony. Here is how the historian recounted what happened in that circle:

A young Cheyenne, perhaps fifteen years old, named Harry Has Many Horses, was joined in the center of the circle by a married couple from the Sioux Reservation at Standing Rock, South Dakota. The couple, Red Bird explained, lost their son in action in Vietnam. They had come to the powwow hoping

it would help them shake off their grief. They watched Harry Has Many Horses dance. He danced just like their son. So they asked him if he would let them adopt him, thus taking the place of their lost boy. It is an old Indian custom, for parents who are bereaved to adopt someone else who reminds them of the lost one. Harry said yes. So did his parents. The adoption took place then and there, and Red Bird announced that after the powwow Harry was going to his new parents' home at Standing Rock for a visit.¹

I read several stories about this adoption process within the Northern Cheyenne tribal community. Each time the act is accompanied by a giveaway. People give away their possessions to one another—furniture, clothes, a war bonnet, money, or blankets. Other gifts are returned. I read one story from a woman named Belle. After her husband died, she and her sons held a feast and a giveaway for all the people who attended the funeral. “This is the way you show your respect for the person who has died,” she said of the seven tables of gifts. “It comforts you to give away.”²

The practice of the giveaway relativizes ownership. Gifts are swapped. What you have is only yours in a limited way, before it becomes a gift to someone else. Likewise, what we lack is returning to us, a gift to another passed on to meet our need. Our ownership of anything is temporary. We simply utilize in a liminal space between transactions.

A gift economy


The giveaway and the burnt offering are absurdities in capitalist systems that depends on vast accumulation. Capitalists will look at the burnt offering and see extravagant waste. The best parts of the animal are burned to cinder. Nothing is used, nothing useful for trading or feeding or eating. “Then the priest shall turn it to smoke on the altar.”

Drawing near to God, to offer God the opportunity for joy from the spontaneous and freely given sacrifice—there is no calculable economic good here. And this incalculable gift is one we continue to practice today, alongside our Jewish sblings. We gather on Sunday mornings to waste our time.

1 Stephen Ambrose, *Personal Reflections of an Historian to America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002), 33–34.

2 “Gifts of Love and Gratitude: Belle Highwalking,” <http://montanawomenshistory.org/gifts-of-love-and-gratitude-belle-highwalking/>.

You could be making money on Sunday mornings, working your job or trading your stocks. The marketplace has done everything it can, has thrown the book at attaching your meaning and purpose to your work, to your job, to your career. You are what you earn, what you create, what



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you produce. Each moment must be calculated for its potential for earning. You only rest if this rest will make you more productive.

Companies recognize the power of spirituality to connect our purpose to our labor. So they are hiring corporate chaplains to provide emotional and spiritual care for their employees, deepening their reliance on the workplace. You can now employ a company to create rituals for your employees, to blur the line be-

tween church, family, and office. Corporate bosses want their employees to believe in their product, to invest their whole lives in the company. You are what you sell.

Judaism and its cousin Christianity are constantly pushing against a form of life that resolves our career, work, and earning into the meaning of life. As if anticipating our attempts to blur the lines of work and leisure, God institutes a day of rest, providing a structure for what is and is not allowed on the Sabbath. As if anticipating the attempts to smudge the lines of worship and product, God introduces a gift that serves no other purpose than to bring joy, that appears as waste to commerce and trade.

We gather in church to waste our time, to proclaim that your life is not calculable by its production value. Instead, this is what you were made for, to be freed from your life as reducible to a dollar figure, what you earn for the stockholders.

What looks like waste to others is the source of riches for those who participate in the ritual of the burnt offering. It produces a different kind of economics, a givenness—we are given to creation and for creation, all bound up in the love of a creative and creating God. And this means something different for our community, for the communal life we share. Our ownership of anything—houses and land, goods and products—is liminal. We are holding on before passing on.

Remember, Joy Harjo reminds us. Remember the burnt offering calls out. Remember all of this is gift passing between us, all of it gifts on their

way to some place else. “Remember the plants, trees, animal life who will have their tribes, families, their histories, too.” Remember the gift, remember the Giver.³

About the author

Melissa Florer-Bixler is the pastor of Raleigh Mennonite Church, North Carolina. A graduate of Duke University and Princeton Theological Seminary, she is a member of L’Arche North Carolina and a steering committee member in broad-based organizing in her county. Melissa has written two books, *Fire by Night: Finding God in the Pages of the Old Testament* (Herald, 2019) and *How to Have an Enemy: Righteous Anger and the Work of Peace* (Herald, 2021), and her writing has appeared in *Christian Century*, *Sojourners*, *Geez*, *Anabaptist Witness*, *The Bias, Faith & Leadership*, and *Vision*. She and her spouse parent three children.

3 Joy Harjo, “Remember,” <https://poets.org/poem/remember-0/>.