

Giving Everything

Ruth 3:1-5; 4:13-17; Mark 12:38-44

Sacrifice, giving everything, giving all that you have, whether it be great or small, comes in many forms. Let me tell you the true story of Francine Christophe.

Francine was born on 18th August 1933 – the year Hitler came to power in Nazi Germany. She was deported with her mother to the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in 1944 – they were Jews. She still has the yellow Star of David that all Jews in occupied Europe had to wear. It was a huge thing for an eight- year-old girl to wear.

When she was in Bergen-Belsen an amazing thing happened. As children of prisoners of war, they were privileged, and permitted to bring something from France into the camp: a little bag with two or three small items. One woman brought chocolate; another some sugar; a third a handful of rice. Francine's mother packed two little pieces of chocolate. She said to Francine, "We'll keep this for a day when I see you've collapsed completely and really need help. I'll give you this chocolate and you'll feel better."

One of the women imprisoned in Bergen-Belsen was pregnant. You couldn't tell, she was so thin. But the day came and she went into labour. She went to the camp hospital with Francine's mother. Before they left, Francine's mother said, "Remember that chocolate I was saving for you?"

"Yes, mother", said Francine.

"How do you feel?"

"Fine mother, I'll be okay."

"Well then, if it's all right with you, I'd like to bring your chocolate to this lady, our friend H  l  ne. Giving birth will be hard. She may die. If I give her the chocolate, it may help her."

“Yes, mother. Go ahead.”

Hélène gave birth to the baby. A tiny, feeble little thing. She ate the chocolate. She did not die. She came back to the barracks with Francine’s mother. The baby never cried. Never! She didn’t even wail.

Six months later the camp was liberated. They unwrapped the baby’s rags and the baby screamed. Francine said that that was when she was born. They took the mother and child back to France. A puny little thing of six months.

A few years ago Francine’s daughter asked her, “If you deportees had had psychologists or psychiatrists when you returned, maybe it would have been easier for you.” Francine replied, “Undoubtedly, but we didn’t have them...but you have given me a good idea. We’ll have a lecture about the topic.”

Francine organised a lecture on the theme, “If the survivors of concentration camps had had counselling in 1945, what would have happened?” The lecture drew a crowd. Elderly survivors, historians, and many psychologists, psychiatrists, and psychotherapists. Many ideas emerged. It was an excellent event. Then a woman took to the podium and said, “I live in Marseille, where I am a psychiatrist. Before I deliver my talk, I have something for Francine Christophe.” She reached into her pocket, and pulled out a piece of chocolate. She gave it to Francine, and she said, “I’m the baby.”

Sacrifice, giving everything, giving all that you have, whether it be great or small, comes in many forms. Our Bible readings tell the story of Ruth, struggling with her mother-in-law Naomi, to make ends meet. Ruth effectively gives herself to the rich farmer Boaz, she gave all that she had in order that she and Naomi might survive. In the end, the story works out well. The farmer already had seen Ruth, liked her, married her, and she became the grandmother of David, the

great King of Israel; so she was an ancestress of Jesus. But it started with a woman, sacrificing greatly, giving everything, for the good of others.

In Mark's gospel we read that tiny little story of the poor widow going to the Temple. Nobody noticed her; nobody cared much about her. She put in the two coins that she had – *all* that she had, because that's what her faith led her to do. She could have put in one coin, nobody would have minded. But she gave all that she had out of gratitude. It was what she felt was right for her to do. Her offering made no difference to anybody. No one would miss her sacrifice. No one would care if she had kept the money, except for Jesus. "There", said Jesus. "See that? That is the kind of contribution I have been waiting for. That is my idea of giving."ⁱ A woman offering her whole livelihood, sacrificing all she had, giving everything.

On this Remembrance Sunday we have stood in silence remembering other sacrifices. Great and small, not only in the World Wars but in all wars, and we might add to that tally the lives of those in the emergency services and workers in other areas of life who have given so much, sometimes even their own lives, so that freedom, security, and peace might have at least a chance. Not all heroes and heroines. Not all on the front line, or in the air, or at sea. Some in their working lives, or in their homes; some in concentration camps like Francine Christophe and her mother, giving the little they had, all that that they had, everything that they had, to give hope and to show that the world, however it may seem at times, is not all bad, and that the human spirit, no matter how bruised and degraded and abused, still flickers with hope.

Day in and day out, our lives are enhanced and undergirded by myriads of small, less dramatic acts of self-giving. They are sacrifices only to the observer, not to the agent of the act (like Ruth, or the poor widow, or Francine Christophe and her mother, or Jesus Himself).ⁱⁱ

At times it seems that sacrifice is best when someone else is doing it. We marvel at such figures as Mother Theresa, or Nelson Mandela, or Malala, or the families of forces emergency

personnel after some tragedy, or those people who are able to forgive the murderers of their sons and daughters, and husbands and wives. We lift them high on the pedestal with Ruth, or the poor widow, or Jesus, keeping them distinct and distant from our daily lives. The focus is on ***their*** giving and the inadequacy of ***ours***.ⁱⁱⁱ

Until we hear the story of Francine Christophe. Two little pieces of chocolate, in a Nazi concentration camp. It was all that they had, and it was given up in the faith, and the hope, and the love that it would help, somehow. And it did. It may not be true every time, but I wonder how many times it is true that when people give up everything, make the sacrifice, not for themselves but for others, more, so much more, is received in return.

People giving of themselves; people sharing their time, and their talents, and even their money. Maybe only a little from the great amount that they have; maybe everything that they have. But giving of themselves so that others might be helped, and have hope, or comfort, or inclusion, or peace. If we lived in a society, if we lived in a world, that was willing to make sacrifices, give more, share more, of everything, I do wonder what kind of society and what kind of world we would live in.

Christians are not the only group in society who model sacrifice. Francine Christophe comes from the Jewish community. But the Christian Church is called to be a sign in and for the world of the new reality which God has made available to people in Jesus Christ...By healing and reconciling and binding up wounds...ministering to the needs of the poor, the sick, the lonely, and the powerless...engaging in the struggle to free people from sin, fear, oppression, hunger and injustice...giving itself and its substance to the service of those who suffer...The Church is called to undertake this mission *even at the risk of losing its life.*^{iv}

On this Remembrance Sunday, as we hear stories of sacrifice and people giving everything, look at the possibilities of your lives, rather than focussing on your shortcomings and inadequacies. Here is your invitation to give something of yourself, possibly even all that you have, in the dedication of your life for things that are good, and honest, and generous and true. And if that's two little coins, or two little pieces of chocolate, then that just might be the beginning.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen

ⁱ Deborah Rahn Clemens, Feasting on the Gospels: Mark, p396

ⁱⁱ Dwight M Lundgren, Feasting on the Gospels; Mark, p397

ⁱⁱⁱ Emilie M Townes, Feasting on the Word, Year B Vol 4, p 286

^{iv} The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA) Part II, Book of Order 2005-2007