

# The contradictions of sacrifice

Sacrifice is a weird concept. We gather each Sunday to celebrate Jesus' most perfect sacrifice and resurrection. Googling "movies about sacrifice" results in a list that runs the gamut of characters from Aslan the Lion (a Christ metaphor) in "The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe" to Batman in "The Dark Knight Rises" (which is not so much a Christ metaphor).

The point is: those examples have a way of skewing our idea of what sacrifice is. Here are three faith-driven ideas to help us rethink our notions of sacrifice this Lent:

## 1. We Let Ourselves Off the Hook Too Easily

The implication of sacrifice can make us feel that if we can't sacrifice everything, then our sacrifices cannot possibly add up to very much. Because we can't single-handedly solve homelessness or hunger, we stay on the sidelines when we're asked to volunteer. Because we can't give \$100 million to build the new library, we don't give the amount that we can give. Our myths about the impact we can have sometimes allow us to rationalize doing nothing at all. It's in these times that we are called to remember that Jesus didn't just die and rise, he also washed his disciples' feet.

## 2. We Simultaneously Sell Ourselves Short

In direct contrast to No. 1, we also don't give ourselves credit for the sacrifices we do make. They may not feel like sacrifices to us, so we gloss over them. When my mother encouraged me to visit my grandmother in her nursing home, she didn't consider it a sacrifice: "Go for you, Cory. Don't go for her." It must have taken extraordinary courage for my mom to visit Grandma Clare, who was plagued with dementia and

never recognized any of us. What it must have cost my mother to watch her mother decline week after week, year after year – those kinds of sacrifices matter.

### **3. It's Often Not Ours to Define**

And, it seems, in direct contradiction to No. 2, we are often not the best judges of our own sacrifices. People who go to great lengths to tell us how much they've sacrificed are the ones who likely haven't sacrificed much at all. It all comes back to that business about rewards in heaven rather than rewards on earth (see Mt 6:1-21). Poet Robert Hayden nails this idea in his poem "Those Winter Sundays." He regrets how ungrateful he was growing up in his working-class home in Detroit as his father got up early to a cold stove and "had driven out the cold / and polished my good shoes as well." Hayden's father would never call these "austere and lonely offices" a sacrifice. It's only years after the fact that Hayden could do so.

This Lenten season, let's all try to live with sacrifice's messy and contradictory rules: Give until it hurts. Give yourself credit. Give it up to God.

After all, it's sacrifice – it's not supposed to be easy.