

Sermon: A Fragrant Sacrifice to God

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, Sep. 10, 2023)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

There something about summertime barbecue that brings people together. I prefer roasting over open fire, but for the sake of convenience most people use gas stove with charcoal. However a grill is set up, once you put a few food items on it, oh, you can just stand back, watch and smell that magical transformation. It doesn't even have to be meat, vegetables like mushrooms, zucchinis, peppers or tomatoes are just as good. But throw on a Triple-A sirloin steak, or a few pieces of marinated chicken thighs or drumsticks, watch and smell the rising smoke, oh heaven!

There is something about barbecue smoke, maybe it is imprinted into our DNA. In his book *Catching Fire*, Harvard professor and anthropologist Richard Wrangham develops the thesis that harnessing fire for cooking fast tracked the human evolutionary jump to become big-brained mammals with small intestinal tracts. You see, food cooked by fire is softer, easier to digest than raw food, thus enabling human beings to focus their energy elsewhere. Applying fire to food is a skill that, among the animal kingdom, is uniquely human. In a literally sense, our evolution, according to Wrangham, smells like smoke¹.

My dad loves to host summer barbecue at his backyard in the South Shore of Montreal, overlooking the St. Lawrence river. He knows his way around the Barbecue, and his is not a bad cook. But, once he became acquainted with these two brothers, who had immigrated from Taiwan to Argentina in their early years, and later relocated to Canada, my dad happily yielded his chef duty to them. Boy do they know how to cook a barbecue! They know how to marinate with simple ingredients in creative ways. They are experts in controlling fire, smoke and temperature. The briskets they produce over fire are just mouth-watering (I am literally salivating thinking about it). Dad's barbecue dinners were always well attended, by neighbours, people from the church, sometimes strangers

¹ Adam Hearlson, "A visit to the Hava NaGrilla Smoke BBQ Festival in Philadelphia," *The Christian Century*, February 12, 2020, <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/features/visit-hava-nagrilla-smoke-bbq-festival-philadelphia>

who would quickly become family friends. There something about barbecue smoke that brings people together, that gathers a community.

The Scripture passage we read today, describes a community forming barbecue on an unimaginable scale, of roughly 100,000 lambs roasted over open fire, on a late afternoon, before the evening of the Passover of the Lord.

In Exodus 12, we catch up with Moses (and Aaron) in the land of Egypt. They had indeed returned in earlier chapters, confronted the Pharaoh, demanded that the Hebrew people be set free (so they can go to the wilderness to worship the Lord). Of course the Pharaoh said no! Which ruthless and powerful dictator do you know, would be willing to generously and graciously release an enslaved population, simply because they were asked nicely? What followed were plagues after plagues, one affliction after another set loose by the Lord God against Egypt, all nine of them. The people and the land suffered, but the Pharaoh said no!

So we come to chapter 12, the final and all terrifying plague whereby the Lord's angel will passover the land of Egypt, striking down all firstborn, from human to animal. The Lord God of Israel is about to reveal its terrifying glory, bringing to their knees both Pharaoh and false gods of Egypt.

What about the Hebrew people? How will the Lord's angel differentiate the Hebrews from the Egyptians? So God gave strict instructions, through Moses and Aaron, that the whole congregation of Israel shall prepare for themselves a lamb for each household. If a household is too small for a whole lamb, it shall join with its closest neighbour in obtaining one. The lamb, shall be without blemish, one year-old, of either a sheep or a goat. They are to be slaughtered at twilight of the fourteenth day of the month.

The Hebrew people shall take some of the blood and put it on their own doorposts, so when the Lord sees the blood, the Lord will passover that household, thus sparing them from the terrible destruction to come. This *pasach* blood, or the blood of the Passover Lamb, would be picked up later by the Christian community as the type, signifying the blood of Christ shed on the cross. We will come to that later.

There are other details that is worth noting. The whole lamb was to be roasted over the fire, with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. The people shall eat with travel ready, with sandals on their feet, staff in their hand. They shall eat it hurriedly, but leaving nothing remain for whatever

that is uneaten shall be burn with fire. The Hebrew people were on the threshold, they were about to embark on a journey—a journey out of Egypt, a journey through the Red Sea, a journey into the wilderness, a journey of following the pillar of cloud by day, and the pillar of fire by night. This journey will transform them, from an enslaved people to become the people of God, free yet covenanted. The bitter herbs will remind them of the bitter memory of being enslaved. The unleavened bread will remind them to stay pure in their hearts and their deeds.

It is worth noting that at the start of this community forming journey, households are the key building blocks, sharing with neighbours the key lubricant, and at the heart of it an open fire roasted lamb, a barbecue, or more precisely 100,000 barbecues spread across the town. Imaging the aroma, the sweet smell of roasted lamb permeating the homes, drifting up hazily into the sky, a pleasing fragrance to the Lord.

Do keep in mind these were not sacrificial alters built to worship the Lord, for that practice was already well established by their ancestors of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Rather, these barbecues were there to form a coherent community, a united congregation, a faithful people of God.

I don't want to overplay the positive aspects of fire. Fire, after all, is a dangerous element. Witness the destructive power of wildfires across Canada, in Maui and other parts of the world. Smoke from those fire is anything but fragrant. We got a taste of it this summer, it reeks of death and destruction, and it may be a warning of what will be more to come.

However, fire in the hand of a skilled cook is a delight to watch and to smell. I love watching the two Argentinian Taiwanese Canadian brothers plying their skills at my dad's backyard barbecue, while chatting with them about life, universe and everything.

They happened to share my last name... 'Wu'. Pure coincidence, no blood relationship at all. Actually the older brother has the same English first name as mine... 'Paul'. It is funny, I still get emails that are intended for him, and vice versa. But that is another story altogether.

I am amazed by their 'inattentive attentiveness' of the cooking process. While chatting away with beers in hand, they seem to know the precise moment when to lift the cover, to let out some smoke, turn over the meat, and reapply the cover. You can't rush a barbecue, just like you can't force a community. It takes patience, attention and some degree of risk. Creating something fragrant and beautiful, be it barbecue or fellowship, requires giving to the fire something precious—food ingredient or part of

ourselves. Risk of destruction is part of the process. Sometimes, it comes out all burnt and dry. But other times, it comes out tender and just right.

Jesus Christ, at the start of his public ministry, was introduced by John the baptizer, in John 1:29: "*Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!*" It is an ominous title that would eventually play itself out with Jesus on the cross.

In our theological understanding, which is often called the substitutionary atonement, Jesus becomes the sacrificial lamb. The blood he shed on the cross is akin to the blood painted across doorposts during the first Passover. Through faith in Christ, God or rather the wrath of God passes over us, just as the angel of the Lord passed over the people of Israel in the land of Egypt. It is a bloody and gruesome theology, that I always feel somewhat uneasy about it. I want to stress that theories of atonement vary—there are different ways to understand what Jesus did on the cross. Those theories do not necessary contradict but rather crisscross, they reinforce and strengthen our overall understanding. But in so far as the substitutionary atonement is concerned, that smoke, at least to my nose, reeks of fear, reeks of death!

However, the communities that gather in the name of Jesus, gather not in fear, but in love. Those communities smell heavenly, just like a summertime barbecue in the hands of skilled cooks. I think the Apostle Paul understood this perfectly. So I will leave with you this instruction he gave in Ephesians 5:1-2, "*Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.*"

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**