

God Loves a Good Barbecue

**A Sermon Preached by
Jeffrey W. Gibelius, Pastor
Second Presbyterian Church,
Carlisle, Pennsylvania**

June 19, 2011

You shall make the altar of acacia wood, five cubits long and five cubits wide; the altar shall be square, and it shall be three cubits high. You shall make horns for it on its four corners; its horns shall be of one piece with it, and you shall overlay it with bronze. You shall make pots for it to receive its ashes, and shovels and basins and forks and fire pans; you shall make all its utensils of bronze. You shall also make for it a grating, a network of bronze; and on the net you shall make four bronze rings at its four corners. You shall set it under the ledge of the altar so that the net shall extend halfway down the altar. You shall make poles for the altar, poles of acacia wood, and overlay them with bronze; the poles shall be put through the rings, so that the poles shall be on the two sides of the altar when it is carried. You shall make it hollow, with boards. They shall be made just as you were shown on the mountain.

Exodus 27:1-8 NRSV

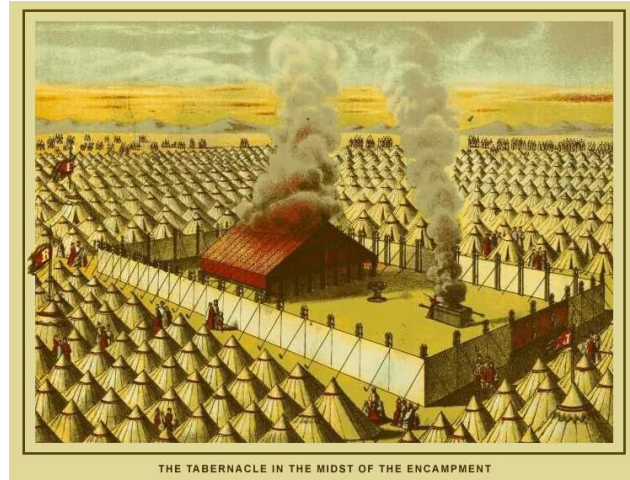
I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God-- what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Romans 12:1-2 NRSV

In just a few hours hundreds of thousands, even millions, of Dads all across America will fire up their grills in honor of..... themselves, for Father's Day. In the process some of them will manage to keep their eyebrows intact and produce the largest presentation of burnt offerings since the demise of the Temple in Jerusalem almost two thousand years ago.

They say that the way to a man's heart is through his stomach. God is not a man, of course, but it turns out that the way to *God's* heart is through God's stomach, too (at least metaphorically). God loves a good barbecue.

We know this because when God was giving Moses the design for the Tabernacle – the moveable worship tent that would eventually become the permanent Temple in Jerusalem – God included in the front yard, a grill.



You heard the description of the altar from the Tabernacle in our first reading. In the days of the Tabernacle the grill was portable. Instead of wheels it had poles so that it could be carried.



Later it was much larger and a permanent fixture in the Temple, made of stone.

It was known by an exotic name, the “Brazen Altar,” but at its heart it was nothing more than a big barbecue grill. Really big. If you didn't bring

your cubit to feet converter with you to worship this morning (which, by the way, makes a wonderful Father's Day gift), let me help you: the Brazen Altar in the Temple stood about 15 feet high and the grilling surface was about 900 square feet. [2 Chronicles 4:1] This is the equivalent of 260 medium sized backyard grills side by side.



The altar *had* to be big. God wasn't just showing off for the neighbors. It had to be big enough to handle all the daily sacrifices as well as all the special offerings on holidays when every Jewish family in Israel was expected to present a sacrifice at the Temple. During the Passover, for example, almost a quarter of a million people would be in Jerusalem to make their offering. Tens of thousands of animals would need to be processed in a short amount of time. That's a lot of barbecue sauce. Teams of priests would work together like NASCAR pit crews to make it all work.



I asked a friend of mine from the Biblical Resource Center in Georgia how the priests managed to cook all this meat, even on such a big grill. He explained that pilgrims would come to Jerusalem in large extended families

– sometimes 20 people or more -- and together they would make one offering on behalf of the entire family. The head of the household would present the offering – such as, a lamb -- to a specially trained priest who inspect it and butcher it. The butchering was done under strict conditions, according to Kosher law, so that the animal would suffer the least and the meat would be cleanest and healthiest to eat. The only parts of the animal that got sent to the grill were the fat, entrails, and blood. This meant not a lot of cooking space was needed, even for a full-sized ox. My friend explained that God required just the fat and guts because that’s the part of the animal that makes the best aroma when cooked. And this “meat” would be left on the grill to burn up entirely – no turning every 10 minutes.

The family – and, on certain occasions, the priests – would take the remaining meat from the animal – the best parts -- to wherever they were staying and roast it there to be shared. No one ate alone. Isn’t it like God to say, “Oh no, I *like* the grizzle and small intestine, you keep the *filet mignon* for yourself”? God was considerate in another way, too. While God did say, “Bring me your *best*,” God insisted on a male sheep, a male goat, and so on. Males were not as valuable as females. God didn’t want a poor family to kill the golden goose. Females could always produce more, so God let the people keep them.

Life in Bible times can seem mysterious and foreign and off-putting until we recognize that there was a good purpose – a Godly purpose – behind God’s instructions. Sacrifices on the altar had a purpose, too – they brought people closer to God and to each other. There was no waste. No one broke the bank. There was much celebrating and togetherness. It didn’t feel like what we think of sacrifice at all.

Imagine it this way. It’s just a few weeks into summer and already your neighborhood is busy with moving vans. New War College students are arriving; young families are buying first homes; some retirees are down-sizing to something smaller up the street. You see all these new faces and you want to get to know everyone better and, hopefully, build friendships with them. So what do you do? You invite them over for a barbecue. They say, “Yes, we’d love to come, and what can we bring?” You say, “How ‘bout we take care of the chicken and burgers, and you bring your favorite dessert or salad.” Before you know it, everyone is bringing something to the party, their signature salad or the best looking pie from Nell’s. You fire up the grill, put on the meat, and soon the aroma in the air isn’t just roasting

chicken, the aroma is friendship and laughter, relaxation and peace. Everyone is glad to be there. Everyone has brought their best, and it doesn't feel like sacrifice at all.

When we look at Temple offerings in Jesus' day we often picture people trudging up to Jerusalem, weeping, as the youngest child brings their prize-winning 4-H goat to the altar to be ripped from their hands and sacrificed by the big bad priests. That doesn't sound like any fun at all. That's because we've mistranslated the Hebrew word for offering, which is, transliterated, "Korban." *Korban* means to draw near, not to give up. The animal sacrifices at the Temple were designed by God to help the Hebrew people connect with God in a way that they could understand and relate to—*over food*. God, of course, was not hungry; God did not *need* their goats and lambs and grain. And God was not punishing or humbling the people, either, by insisting on these sacrifices. Instead, God was saying, "Here's how we can build our relationship. Here's how you will know that we are still friends and that all is right between us. A couple times a year, I want you to bring your best burgers – and maybe even a steak if you've got one – to my house. We'll have a barbecue together."

Another word that sounds pretty grim to us is "atonement." God gave the Hebrews the system of sacrifices so that through them they could "atone" for their sin. Atonement is an English word, of course, that means simply, "at-one-ment." When the Hebrews made offerings at the temple it wasn't some gory act of primitive barbarity. It was the ancient equivalent of neighbors getting together over burgers to meet each other and maybe even mend a relational fence or two. The reason people happily brought their best animals to the Temple is the same reason people bring their best food to modern barbecues: not to impress people (or at least it shouldn't be) but to say, "You are so special to me. I want you to have my best."

The ancient Hebrews believed that there was no smell more pleasing to God than the smell of the people's offerings roasting on the altar. They believed that when the smoke reached God's "nostrils" God knew how much the people wanted to draw close to him. Can you see why God loved a good barbecue in ancient times? It's because God loves *us*.

At the best barbecues, everyone brings something. In ancient times the Hebrews brought lambs, pigeons, wheat, all kinds of things to God's

house. But what did God bring to the table? What was God's offering of his very best?

Jesus, of course. That may sound odd, because it's easy for us to think of Jesus as distinct from God the Father in the same way that we are distinct and separate from our own parents. It would be cruel for a father today to offer his son as a sacrificial lamb. But in Jesus' day the relationship between fathers and first-born sons was quite different than it is for us. In those days fathers and sons were practically understood to be one and the same person. The eldest son was essentially an extension of the father – the father's representative and agent. To praise one was to praise the other; to insult one was to insult the other. So when God the Father offered Jesus, his only Son, on the cross, God was offered himself to us in a form we could recognize. And do you remember *where* the cross was on which that offering made? Just outside the Temple walls, in a spot that you could practically see from the Brazen Altar itself. And *when* did that offering happen? At the same time the Passover offerings were being made a few hundred yards away.

About 35 years after Jesus' sacrifice, the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans. The Holy of Holies was desecrated. The Ark of the Covenant was lost. The Brazen Altar was dismantled. It has never been re-built. This tragedy created a huge dilemma for Jews and first-Christians, alike. "With the Temple gone," they asked, "how are we to connect with God? How will we be at-one with God?"

Jews, most of whom were now living far from Jerusalem, decided that their prayers would become their offering, their way of seeking atonement. Animal sacrifices just didn't make sense anymore; with the Temple gone they could not offer them anyway. So today, instead of regular barbecues with God, Jews have regular prayer times with God.

Christians responded differently when the Temple was destroyed. They concluded that the Temple's purpose must have been fulfilled with the death of Jesus; he was the last and completely perfect offering, every sacrifice after that would only pale in comparison. So today, instead of blow-out barbecues with God, Christians have supper with him. It's a simple meal of bread and juice, prepared not at an altar, but at a table. This table, The Lord's Table, is where we become "at-one" with God and God's people. It's at this table that God gives us God's best. In James 4:8 we read:

“Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.” Another way to say this is, “Offer yourself to God, and he will offer himself to you.” In fact, God already has.

So we know what God offers us, but what can we bring to the table? God says, “Bring yourself. Bring your gifts, your worries, your quirks. Bring your strength and your humble and broken heart. You are the best offering I could have. Make yourself a living sacrifice. That’s what would make me really happy for Father’s Day.” [see, e.g., Isaiah 51:16-17 and Romans 12:1-2]

Next time you smell some meat roasting on the grill – your own or someone else’s – think of God. The only thing God loves more than a good barbecue is you. Amen.

Dear Friend,

I hope you have been blessed by this message. You can request a free audio-tape or CD recording of this sermon by contacting the church office. We also have a complete sermon archive (including audio-files and PDFs) on-line at www.GrowWithSecond.org/sermons

Second Presbyterian Church is a thriving congregation celebrating over 175 years of service to God and God’s people. It would be our joy to help you grow in faith, hope, and love. Please consider being our guest for Sunday worship at 8 or 10:30am. Children’s Church and infant and toddler care are always provided.

Jeff Gibelius, Pastor

Second Presbyterian Church

528 Garland Dr.

Carlisle, PA 17013

www.GrowWithSecond.org

717-243-4571

© 2011 Jeffrey Gibelius

This sermon is intended for personal use and distribution. If you want to use it for anything else, I’d be honored. Just call for permission. No claims of absolute originality are made for this material. As one man said, "I churn my own butter, but I use milk from other men’s cows."