

4.7.2019 Passion Sunday (Hebrews 9:11-15)

A volunteer who worked at a hospital years ago tells of this experience. A little girl was suffering from a rare and serious disease, and her only chance of recovery appeared to be a blood transfusion from her five year old brother, who had miraculously survived the same disease and had developed the antibodies needed to combat the illness. The doctor explained the situation to her little brother, and asked the little boy if he would be willing to give his blood to his sister. The boy hesitated only a moment before taking a deep breath and saying, "Yes, I'll do it if it will save her." As the transfusion progressed, this five year old boy laid in bed next to his sister and smiled, seeing the color returning to her cheeks. Then his face grew pale and his smile faded. He looked up at the doctor and asked with a trembling voice, "Will I start to die right away?" You see, being so young the little boy had misunderstood the doctor; he thought he was going to have to give his sister all of his blood in order to save her. (Chicken Soup for the Soul, 1993)

We were all suffering from a not so rare, even more serious disease than the little girl in the story. A disease capable of not only killing the body, but the soul as well. A disease that would cause certain physical death and eternal separation from God. Like the little girl in the story, we had only one chance of recovery, but due to the seriousness of our condition a blood transfusion would not be enough. This time the Remedy would come only through death, the precious death and sacrifice of our Lord and Savior, and who are we, that He should die for us? Why would Almighty God, who reigns in glory beyond all imagination, who loves, and has always loved His only begotten Son with an infinite love that we cannot even begin to fathom, why would He not only turn His thoughts toward mankind, but give the life of His beloved Son for you and I that we may live in everlasting glory with Him? On this Passion Sunday, as we consider our Lord's freely given sacrifice, ask yourself: Who am I, that God should die for me?

Our journey through this season of Lent is meant to lead us to a greater understanding of who we are. This journey began on Ash Wednesday with the solemn reminder, "*Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return*" (Genesis 3:19). From our first step on the lenten path we are shown what frail, finite creatures we are, and when we reflect on the dust from which we came and the physical death that awaits us all, what we find is that we have no power within ourselves to help ourselves. In a sense, we are like this little girl who was laying in a hospital bed trapped in a body that lacked the ability to cure her illness. Lacking a remedy from within, she had to rely entirely on the remedy that came from outside her own body, a remedy that came through the blood of her little brother. Like her, every attempt we make to save ourselves, that comes from within ourselves, ends only in death, for we have no power within ourselves to help ourselves. Our only hope is found in the Remedy that is outside us, the Remedy that comes through the precious blood of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

His one, full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice for our eternal redemption is the focus of our Epistle this morning. This Epistle is a letter written to the Hebrews, a group of Jewish people who were converts to the Christian faith, and so it's important for us to read this passage of Holy Scripture from a first century Jewish perspective. The author

of this letter is writing to a people who, unlike us, are very familiar with the rites and sacrifices of ancient Israel. The way this passage speaks of *“the blood of bulls and of goats, and the ashes of a heifer”* (Hebrews 9:13) being sprinkled on those who are unclean, that they may be sanctified and purified, is very confusing unless you have some knowledge of the Old Testament. In our culture the thought of using blood and ashes to ceremonially cleanse a person makes little sense, but in the sacrificial system of ancient Israel blood purified the flesh, it cleansed and removed what the Law declared unclean.

In the Tabernacle built by Moses, and later in Solomon’s Temple, there was a room known as the Holy of Holies. Once every year, on the Day of Atonement, Israel’s high priest would enter into this Most Holy Place to burn incense and sprinkle the blood of the sacrifice on the mercy seat of the Ark of the Covenant, the very dwelling place of God. Through this ritual that God commanded, the high priest offered sacrifice to atone for his own sins and the sins of the people. Year after year the people would repent, and the high priest would offer the blood of bulls and of goats to atone for their sins. Through this Old Testament sacrificial system those who worshipped God were sanctified before Him, they were declared ceremonially pure.

With this basic understanding in mind of how Israel’s high priest entered into the Most Holy Place in the Tabernacle and offered the blood of animals to atone for sin and be forgiven, we are now able to make some of the same connections that the Hebrews would’ve made as they read this letter. The author writes, *“Christ being come an high priest of good things to come, by a greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this building; Neither by the blood of goats and calves, but by His own blood He entered in once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption for us”* (Hebrews 9:11-12). As we consider what these verses from our Epistle are meant to communicate, hold on to the mental picture of Israel’s high priest entering into the Holy of Holies and offering sacrifice for the people. Remember that God’s Temple here on earth was a type and shadow of His dwelling place in heaven.

These verses from our Epistle tell us that Christ has become our High Priest. So, picture the Eternal Second Person of the Holy Trinity, the One who declared, *“Before Abraham was, I am”* (John 8:58), picture Him offering sacrifice on our behalf. As our High Priest, Jesus entered into a greater and more perfect tabernacle, one *“not of this world”* (John 18:36). Our Lord entered into the heavenly Holy of Holies to the end that He may offer a blood sacrifice to atone *“for the sins of the whole world”* (1 John 2:2). Through the Holy Spirit, by way of the Cross, the Son of God entered into the very dwelling place of the Father. He approached Almighty God as both Priest and Victim, for He did not come with the blood of goats and calves, but *“by His own blood He entered in once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption for us.”* This is the comfortable, everlasting truth proclaimed by the Word of God, and as unimaginable as it is to think that the Body and Blood of the Son of God was given for our salvation, it is this fact that by His grace breaks our stony, rebellious heart and leads us to love and serve the Lord in holiness and righteousness all our days.

Just imagine for a moment how a girl who was beginning to recover from a deadly illness would respond to hearing the news that her little brother saved her life. Imagine how she would respond toward him when she learned that he actually intended to give her all of his blood in order to save her. Now stop imagining, and consider the truth of what God has done for you. In a very real sense we were laying in a hospital bed just waiting to die, until Jesus came to do for us what we could not do for ourselves, and the Good News is that His perfect sacrifice not only earned our eternal salvation, His sacrifice sets us free today. As we read in the Epistle, the blood of Christ has purged our *“conscience from dead works to serve the living God”* (Hebrews 9:14).

The abundant life that Jesus promises begins today with a conscience free from fear, guilt, regret, and sorrow over past sin. The abundant life that Jesus promises begins today as we use our free will to respond to the love the Father has lavished upon us by living in union and communion with Him, by loving God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength and loving our neighbor as we love ourselves. The abundant life that Jesus promises begins here and now as we gather at the altar, in the very presence of God. Our Lord is here today to do for us what we could not do for ourselves. It is here that He says to the Father, through the Spirit, “Yes, I’ll do it if it will save them,” and offers His Body and His Blood, to the end that our frail and finite, diseased and dying bodies may be made clean by His Body, and our souls washed through His most precious Blood, that we may evermore dwell in Him, and He in us. Amen.