

2014_03_12 Midweek Passion 2
Ascension Lutheran Church, Batavia IL
Pastor David Pfeiffer

The Blood of Christ in the Book of Hebrews:

2 – THE BLOOD THAT CLEANSSES

Hebrews 9:6-14

INI

Grace to you from Him who is our Great High Priest, who mediates a New Covenant in His own blood, and peace to you in His blood, a blood which cleanses us from all sin (Hebrews 1:1–2) Amen.

The second in our series of texts dealing with the blood of Christ in the book of Hebrews comes from

Hebrews 9:6–14

⁶ Now when these things had been thus prepared, the priests always went into the first part of the tabernacle, performing the services. ⁷ But into the second part the high priest went alone once a year, not without blood, which he offered for himself and for the people's sins committed in ignorance; ⁸ the Holy Spirit indicating this, that the way into the Holiest of All was not yet made manifest while the first tabernacle was still standing. ⁹ It was symbolic for the present time in which both gifts and sacrifices are offered which cannot make him who performed the service perfect in regard to the conscience—¹⁰ concerned only with foods and drinks, various washings, and fleshly ordinances imposed until the time of reformation.

¹¹ But Christ came as High Priest of the good things to come, with the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands, that is, not of this creation. ¹² Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption. ¹³ For if the blood of bulls and goats and the ashes of a heifer, sprinkling the unclean, sanctifies for the purifying of the flesh, ¹⁴ how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?

In the name of our faithful High Priest who is both the Pioneer and Completion of our salvation, dear brothers and sisters in Him,

1) Cleansing human blood

Blood cleanses us. And I'm not just talking theologically or spiritually – we'll get to that. Firstly I'm just talking about the function of human blood. We have little

experience with blood and unless you are a nurse or doctor, you might have little sense of what it means to say that “blood cleanses.” Blood is powerful and tonight we will explore the cleansing power which God has given in the blood of Christ.

Paul Brand was a surgeon who served as a missionary doctor in India. In an article for *Christianity Today* he describes the body as a janitor. It is always in the process of cleaning up the messes within us. Individual red blood cells are responsible not only to release cargoes of fresh oxygen, but also to absorbing waste products. Red cells are picking up and carrying potentially hazardous chemicals every second. They carry unwanted waste to organs that can dispose of it outside the body. To the lungs, to the kidneys, red cells are busy carry toxins away to be filtered and rid of. The heart resounds and a filtered, fresh blood rushes back through the body to do it all over again. Each second, your blood is busy carrying on this cycle of cleansing, carrying off unwanted waste and distributing much needed, keeping your body clean and alive. To a doctor who orders a pint of blood, or a nurse who hooks you up to a transfusion, blood is life. It cleanses the body.

2) Cleansing blood in OT sacrifice

This idea of cleansing blood was foremost in God’s first covenant and His prescriptions for worship. Within that setting of worship, God would use it for cleansing in a much higher and more significant way. God would accomplish a greater cleansing, and He would do it with blood.

Worship is about access to God’s presence. God gave instructions and rituals to Israel in order to impress upon them what it means for God to be holy. He would also assure them that He desires to share this holiness, and how this would be done among sinful human beings. Blood would be the ritual agent by which the priest and people were sanctified; that is to say, blood was the means of atonement – it cleanses the sinner and makes him holy so that he can access God’s presence and offer service to God.

What is described in our text is an event known as “The Day of Atonement.” Leviticus 16 describes this annual event. Once a year this ritual of atonement would take place. Imagine with me, this experience. What would it be like to participate as a priest in the Old Covenant worship ceremonies? Imagine yourself as a member of the tribe of Levi, a priest who approaches the tabernacle for worship.

As a priest you are allowed to enter the gate and into the outer courtyard. As you enter, you pass by the altar of burnt offering. That is the place where the goat will be offered as a sacrifice of atonement. And beyond the altar, is where something special will

happen today. Beyond the altar is the entrance to the tabernacle. It is basically just a large tent. The first part is the Holy Place, when on duty you have served there before. But beyond is the place where only the high priest can go – the Most Holy Place. And only today. Normally, priests are allowed into the first part before – the Holy Place. But today is special; it is the Day of Atonement. Once a year the high priest goes behind the veil, into the most holy place, into the place where the ark of the covenant sits, the place where God's glory dwells. Today, he will stand there, beneath the angelic statues of the cherubim and offer the blood for the sins of the people. It is nothing more than a tent, yet this is where God has promised to meet and cleanse the people from their sins.

You help with the slaughter of the goat and the blood is given to the high priest. There must be blood. God has sanctified blood as the means by which He will atone for the sins of the people. The high priest walks purposefully into the tent. There, in the tent, the High Priest goes through the curtain to offer the blood on behalf of himself and on behalf of the people. The High Priest will sprinkle the blood on the place of mercy which is simply the cover of the ark; and then he will sprinkle blood on the floor. Seven times he will sprinkle the floor; seven times the place of atonement upon the ark. This will both sanctify this space for God's presence and will sanctify the blood for use in the rest of the ceremony. From there, the High Priest can return to the people and offer atonement from God to the people. Now you have that assurance; now you and all the people have been cleansed from their sins; now you have confidence to share in God's holiness and serve the LORD.

But all along, it is simply incomplete. All the animals, all the sacrifices, all the atonements. It is incomplete. It cleanses the priest bodily, yes. It sanctifies him ceremonially, true. But it really did nothing for the conscience. Year after year, more was always needed. It granted access to God's presence and grace, but only in a limited way. And the key word here is "limited." So the believer looks with hope toward a day when these rituals will come to an end. He longs for a new day in which the Messiah will come and fulfill what is lacking. He trust in the LORD's promise, to provide an eternal redemption, one which will atone for sin once and for all, a time when the believer, together with the angels and cherubim, will have full access to God's holiness. The first tabernacle was incomplete – a shadow of something greater to come.

⁶ Now when these things had been thus prepared, the priests always went into the first part of the tabernacle, performing the services. ⁷ But into the second part the high priest went alone once a year, not without blood, which he offered for himself and for the people's sins committed in ignorance; ⁸ the Holy Spirit indicating this, that the way into the Holiest of All was not yet made manifest while the first tabernacle was still standing. ⁹ It was symbolic for the present time in which both gifts and sacrifices are offered which cannot make him who performed the

service perfect in regard to the conscience—¹⁰ concerned only with foods and drinks, various washings, and fleshly ordinances imposed until the time of reformation.

The central meaning of blood in the Old Covenant rituals was for cleansing. On the day of atonement, the high priest would meet with God on behalf of the people, but as it says, “never without blood.” However, the blood of the first covenant, was always limited and incomplete. It only qualified a person for access to God’s presence in a bodily, physical way. It did nothing for the conscience.

3) The cleansing blood of Christ

True worship of God is in spirit and truth. It is a spiritual matter. So, if bodily impurity would disqualify a person from the earthly tabernacle, what do you suppose disqualifies a person from entering God’s heavenly presence; from entering the heavenly tabernacle? Not an unclean body, not a ritual uncleanness – but an unclean conscience. An unclean conscience disqualifies a person for access to God’s heavenly presence.

After all, the uncleanness that really plagues us is not bodily at all. It does not have to do with deformity or illness. The sin that plagues us is spiritual in nature. It affects our conscience. And sin disqualifies us in more ways than most people are used to thinking. Most people will admit: “nobody’s perfect” – but they miss out on the fact that sin is more than outward defect. It is about keeping a private list of things that irk God in order to work on them and improve. Nor is it about having a private list of things that please God in order to simply check them off. On the surface we hear words like: “you shall not murder” – yet, underneath it all is the toxin which clogs our veins – hatred.

And so often it not just the sins we commit, but rather the which are committed against us. After all, what is our first reaction when sinned against? How do we respond when abused or hurt by someone else’s words or actions? Get even? Disown that person? Maybe we don’t to hold a grudge, but what do we do instead? We bury the bitterness within us; or we harden ourselves in self-righteousness judgment. And really the grudge hasn’t gone away. We can’t seem to get rid of it. All along we are being accused.

The Accuser gets into your head: he rehearses the idea: “I deserve to be angry – I was right, and she was wrong; he said this, she did this, that’s their problem, I’m just going to look out for myself ... and then Satan turns the tables – “wait a minute, how can you be a Christian if you’re feeling this way. Christians are supposed to forgive, yet look at

you..." We're trapped. We're hurt. And how can we approach God's holy presence with such a divided conscience. How can we call ourselves a royal priesthood with such unresolved guilt or animosity within us?

The blood of animals could never atone for the spiritual toxins within. No sacrifice or work we offer could ever do this. It will take a blood much holier than yours or mine. It will take the birth of something better, someone greater, a blood which can cleanse us eternally.

¹¹ But Christ came as High Priest of the good things to come, with the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands, that is, not of this creation. ¹² Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption. ¹³ For if the blood of bulls and goats and the ashes of a heifer, sprinkling the unclean, sanctifies for the purifying of the flesh, ¹⁴ how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?

The idea here is lesser to greater. Shadow to substance. Symbol to fulfillment. And so the picture of the first tabernacle helps us more readily understand the holiness of God and the great gift of cleansing that is ours in Christ.

Jesus came as High Priest of good things to come. He accomplishes something heavenly, a way into the Most Holy Place with Most Holy Blood. Here in His Son, the holy God enters our common, sinful world. He not only enters it, but becomes human, takes on human blood and human weakness and human death. He not only takes on this weakness, but as Paul puts it, "He becomes sin for us." Because He is the Son of God, is able to act as High Priest on a whole higher level. He is the High Priest of a better way, a higher, heavenly way. As true God and true Man, Jesus was able to offer something eternal; he was able to appear in the true tabernacle and offer Most Holy Blood. He appears in heaven itself before God and obtains an eternal redemption. The event of His death and resurrection is once and for all, the eternal Day of Atonement.

And He did so without spot – the unblemished Lamb of God. This means God's forgiveness is perfect and complete. For the sins we've committed and for the sins that have been committed against us – He appears as High Priest; He presents His own holy blood as atonement for all sin. It is an eternal offering, meaning it will not be left to you to correct what has gone wrong. It will not be left to you to purify your thoughts or sanctify your actions. His blood cleanses your conscience from those dead works that you might have peace with God and with your neighbor.

Only the High Priest is granted such access. Only He can mediate atonement. Only the High Priest can enter the Most Holy Place for you and return with God's blessings of forgiveness and life to you. And how does the High Priest now bring God's holiness to you? Where does He offer His priestly service, to sprinkle your heart with the blood which cleanses us from all sin.

Well, does Christ say each communion service? "This is My blood of the New Covenant shed for you for the remission of sins." In the weeks ahead we'll get to delve deeper into this. But just let it sink in for now... The Church is the Temple of the Living God; which means where the Church gathers, there the High Priest is mediating a New Covenant; where the sacraments are administered, there holiness is being shared. Gathered around the Word, gathered around the washing of baptism, gathered around the body and blood given and shed for us – we come into the presence of God's Most Holy Place to receive Christ's eternal redemption.

This is what cleanses us from dead works and qualifies us for living works. We are now alive and rejoice with a clean conscience. In this blood we can approach the living God to worship in peace and joy. In this blood we receive the holiness of God as we hear His word. The blood of Christ cleanses us – both from the sin within us and the sins that are committed against us. We return as mediators between God and the world. In this blood we are cleansed and sanctified as priests. We go back to our daily routines in priestly service to the world. In our callings, in our relationships, in the congregation, Christ is in us and with us. We are qualified for living works of service and faith, works that overcome bitterness, that deal with unresolved conflicts, that issue forgiveness as God also forgives us. We leave as priests, filled with works which are created by Christ Jesus and a service which is performed as He lives in us and His blood flows through us.

Blood is life. When I used to work as a medical transport driver for a nursing home, I got a sense of the importance of blood transfusions. I remember one elderly lady in particular. She would go once, even twice a week. It was all they could do to keep her alive. As I picked her up, it was almost like transporting a ghost. Her face, rather pale; she wouldn't talk much. I'd take her to the hospital, up to the short stay unit. There in the hospital the magic would happen. They would give transfuse bad blood out and pump the fresh blood in. In three to five hours I'd come back to find a new person. Cheeks red, there she was, talking and feeling much better.

Here, as we gathering in Christ's Priestly presence, we receive that life-giving blood which cleanses us; which carries away the toxins; and consecrates us for service in the Most Holy Place. Here we are ghosts made whole, receiving the blessings of life from

the living God that we might depart – a living, talking, serving priesthood together with Christ.

Hopefully this gives you a little more appreciation for the words of our opening hymn:

*There is a fountain filled with blood
Drawn from Immanuel's veins,
And sinners plunged beneath that flood
Lose all all their guilty stains.*

Amen.