

Proclaiming The Lord's Death: He Became Sin For Us
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
March 1, 2020-AM Service
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Romans 3:19-26

We are so used to the cross of Christ and the language surrounding it. It shows up in our songs, it shows up in our sermons, it shows up in our liturgy week after week. We say quickly and easily, “*Jesus died for my sins. Jesus shed his blood for the forgiveness of my sins.*” The words roll off our tongues without even thinking.

In some ways that’s good. It shows that this good news is a deep part of our life. But once in a while we ought to step back and realize how strange this sort of language sounds to others. How did Jesus dying on a cross save you? ‘His blood washes you clean and pays your debt.’ What are we talking about when we say things like that? How does blood pay a debt?

Not only is the language strange, to some people it’s offensive. Verse 25 of our passage says that God presented Christ as a sacrifice of Atonement, and that we are justified-made right with God-through the shedding of Christ’s blood. That’s a reference to Leviticus 16 and the ceremony practiced in the temple on *Yom Kippur*-the day of atonement. On the Day of Atonement, the high priest killed a goat, he took its blood and went into the Holiest place in the temple, and sprinkled the goat’s blood on the ark of the covenant and on the atonement cover. In this way, he made atonement for the sins of the Israelites. The blood of the goat paid for the sins and allowed the people to stay in fellowship with God. Now Paul is saying that on the cross, instead of the high priest presenting a goat, God the Father presents Jesus as a sacrifice, and it is his blood that pays for our sin and guilt and allows us to have fellowship with Him. We’re used to hearing that as good news, but can you understand how to someone from the outside it might sound bizarre? ‘It takes blood to make things right between you and God!?! God the Father presents his son as an offering!?! Are we talking about human sacrifice?! You Christians celebrate a human sacrifice? Write songs about it? Have a special meal to remember it? That’s messed up!’ Can you see how a modern person might react that way?

It’s really important to understand what we believe, both for our own sake, so that we understand our God and our faith, and for the sake of our witness. If someone at work came up to you with these human sacrifice questions, would you know what to say to them?

As we think about the meaning of the cross and answering our imaginary questioner, let’s look more closely and this talk of blood and debt. People talk about the idea of blood paying for sin as primitive and backwards, but is it really so foreign to us? If you go to Washington DC, one of the must-see sites is the Lincoln Memorial. Way down at one end of the national mall, Honest Abe sits in his chair and stares out toward the capitol building. If you go up the stairs and into the memorial itself, you can stand right at the feet of the great president. If you turn to your right, you will see words written on the wall. It’s Lincoln’s famous second inaugural address, widely acknowledged as one of his greatest speeches. In that speech, he suggested that the blood spilled in the Civil war-and there was a lot of it-was a kind of atoning price that needed to be paid for all the blood spilled in the scourge of slavery.

Here’s how Lincoln put it: “Fondly do we hope-ferverently do we pray-that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue, until all the wealth piled by the bond-men’s two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash, shall be paid by another drawn by the sword, as was

said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said “the judgments of the Lord, are true and righteous altogether.”

Now whether or not you agree that the Civil War was the blood price for the sin of slavery doesn't actually matter to my point here. The interesting thing is that the entire nation understood the logic of debt and payment. Slavery was a sin, that sin is owed a debt, and that debt requires some sort of sacrificial payment. Every American then and every American now gets it when we say the sins of slavery are a debt that needs payment and that payment is sacrificial in nature.

Another story. In Argentina from 1976 to 1983, after a military coup, a paranoid military government began the systematic murder of people who were opposed to them. These people weren't murdered in a conventional way-their bodies didn't just turn up in the street-instead they disappeared. Later it came out that many of them were taken up in airplanes over the Atlantic and thrown to their death, never to be seen again. It's a monstrous sin in the history of that country and few people have been brought to justice for it. Although that sin has been acknowledged and everyone knows that it happened and that it was wrong, but that acknowledgement isn't enough. In 1999 a son of one of the victims said this: “The last time I saw my mother was when I was seven, and I will never see her again! Someone must pay for my pain!”

I think we all understand the feeling of that young man: it's not enough that everyone acknowledges that my Mother's disappearance was wrong-a debt needs to be paid! Something is owed to justice. Something is owed to decency! Someone needs to be punished for that price to be paid! Sin creates moral debt. Sin throws off the moral balance sheet of the universe. Sins cause deficits in other people's lives, it steals from the shalom of individual people and it steals from the shalom of society. There's a penalty that needs to be paid, a debt that is owed.

We have that same instinct in our parenting. Good parenting requires consequences. When your child breaks the family rules-lies to you, repeatedly violates curfew-it's not enough to for them to say I'm sorry, I'll never do it again; there should be some kind of consequence. Maybe grounding. Maybe a loss of some other privilege. But some sort of appropriate penalty.

‘Ok fair enough,’ our imaginary questioner might say, ‘I see how sin builds up a debt. I see how we talk about punishment as paying the debt, but that still doesn't explain Jesus. The people who do the crime should do the time. God can see who's guilty and who isn't. Why doesn't he just round up all the bad guys and make them pay the price for their sin?! Just round up all the bad guys and give them what they deserve?! Why take it out on Jesus?’

Paul has an answer for that. If God started rounding up all the bad guys, do you know who would end up part of the round up? I would. And so would you. “For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.” “There is no one righteous, not even one.”

When it comes to the problems of the world, we love to point our finger at *other* people. When someone asks us ‘Who's responsible for this mess?’ we love to point to people out there. Those people. Them. The millionaires and billionaires. The liberal snowflakes. Those east coast elites. Those redneck southerners. The welfare freeloaders. Those greedy corporations. There's a whole mode of ‘them’ discourse right now. There are no shortage of radio hosts and pundits who will tell you all day long about who's responsible for the problems of the world and it's always ‘those people.’ That's the opposite of how Paul talks in Romans. For Paul, ALL have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God

There's a story told about GK Chesterton, the great British Catholic. In the early part of the 20th century, the London Times sent out a question to some of the leading authors and thinkers in the country. The question was, “What's wrong with the world?” The Times hoped they would

receive some insightful social commentary. GK Chesterton's response to the question was very insightful and very short in fact it was two words long. "What's wrong with the world?" asked the Times. The reply: "Dear sir, I am. Yours, GK Chesterton." That's Paul's answer. There is no one righteous, not even one. All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Who's responsible for this mess? Who is responsible for the miseries of this world? I am. You are. There is no 'us' and 'them.' The line of good and evil goes right through the center of every human heart.

This week a story came across my newsfeed about Jean Vanier. Jean Vanier is one of my spiritual heroes. He's written some great books about what it means to be human. He's a champion for the weak and the small. He started the L'Arche communities for developmentally disabled adults. In these communities, people whom the world see as weak and disposable were treated as fully human made in the image of God. He's dead now, but while he was alive if you'd have asked me to name a living saint his name would have been first on my list. This week, after an independent investigation, it was revealed that Jean Vanier had sexually abused some women he worked with. Employees, fellow workers, women who were under him. He used his power to coerce them into unwanted relations. It happened multiple times. When I saw the headline I couldn't read the story. It took me 2 days before I was willing to hear details. I still feel sick to my stomach when I think about it.

It strikes me that Jean Vanier could be the poster boy for Romans 3:10-There is no one righteous. Not even one! Scratch the surface of your greatest spiritual heroes and you'll find the ooze, just under the skin. Scratch the surface of anyone in this room and you will find the same thing. We are beautiful creatures made in the image of God, but we are sinners. We've done things. We've left things undone. Terrible thoughts enter our mind, while kind compassionate thoughts don't show up nearly enough. We can't fix what's wrong with us and we cannot pay the damages. Frankly, the moral accounting of all this is way beyond us. It all adds up to a mountain of guilt and victimhood that towers

The Father and the Son see this mess, they see this mountain, and what do they do? The Son raises his hand and says, 'I'm willing.' And with his heart full of love, the Father presents his son as a sacrifice of atonement through the shedding of his blood. Jesus climbs up onto the mountain of our sin and hurt and he dies for it all. He dies for each of us and all of us. He fixes what we can't fix, pays what we can't pay. That's why we process the cross down our center aisle every Sunday. That's why we write songs about it. It's the center of our hope.

We are about to celebrate the Lord's Supper. When you celebrate in the pew there's one moment in the celebration that I love. The tray with the wine (juice) has passed by you. And you've taken out the cup and it's sitting on your knee, or on your lap. Have you ever noticed that sometimes when you're holding it the surface of the juice ripples in time with the beating of your heart? The surface of the blood of Christ ripples in time with the pulsing of your own blood. When I see that I think, 'How appropriate, because my whole life is in that cup.' All my hopes. All my fears, all my longings. It's all in this cup and it's all in his cross. My fellow sinners, it's the same for you. So take, drink, remember and believe that Jesus Christ gave his blood for the complete forgiveness of all your sins.

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