

Sermon for Sunday, January 15, 2017

THE LAMB OF GOD

John the Baptist sees Jesus for the first time, and declares aloud to those nearby, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29)!" And with that declaration John tells us who Jesus is, and what he will accomplish. He is the Messiah, who will take away the sin that separates us from God, secure God's forgiveness for us, and restore us into right relationship with our Maker.

Forgiveness, as we learn about it in the Bible, as we proclaim it from our pulpits, as we enjoy it in the church, and as receive it from God, is rare. It's rare because forgiveness is costly, and not many want to pay the price for it. It's also rare because it's largely misunderstood. Forgiveness is not an end itself, and its purpose is not to make the forgiver feel better. Its purpose is reconciliation of that which is broken, re-uniting of that which is severed, and healing of that which is injured.

In a biblical context, only God gives forgiveness. We are simply recipients of forgiveness; the reprobates who need it, and the prodigals who need to acknowledge it. Though many people chaff at the Confession of Sin we recite each Sunday, wanting to argue that they are not like that, it is nonetheless a critical admission of who we are as people. We are not God. We are not eternal. We are creatures, made not begotten. And we are people that fail to live up to our best selves and to fulfill our most heartfelt aspirations. We are, at every moment in time, Adam and Eve, children separated from God's love and care by our willful desire to be autonomous. And that willful desire to be autonomous is our frequent undoing. It causes others to suffer heartache, pain, and sometimes death by our hands, and when it does, we experience guilt.

Now guilt can be minor or profound. When I fail to get around to writing that thank you note, I feel guilty. That's minor guilt. But it nonetheless marks a failure on my part to acknowledge and nurture the relationship I have with someone, a relationship that is precious to me. We experience this kind of run-of-the-mill guilt all the time. But sometimes we feel profoundly guilty, like when we feel responsible for the death of another human being. This is the guilt that so many of our veterans experience, and is at the root of the syndrome known as PTSD.

Guilt, whether it's minor or profound, is not an easy thing to erase, and forgiveness is not always easily accepted. In fact sometimes, a broad-minded forgiveness, just makes us feel worse. It make us more painfully aware of our guilt. That's because we instinctively know that forgiveness that costs us nothing, is not forgiveness.

God takes our guilt as seriously as we do. If God didn't, we would not find God worthy of our worship. That is why the good news of the gospel, is that God forgives us. God forgives us in order to remain in relationship with us, no matter what.

Forgiveness implies a relationship of commitment, and keeping that commitment in spite of wrongdoing, makes forgiveness costly. In the cross of Christ, we discover just how costly God's forgiveness is, and we receive the assurance that we have been freed by God to live a new life unfettered by guilt.

In the ancient world, a slave could be freed from bondage, but a "ransom" was demanded to do so. The "ransom" was the price that had to be paid to "redeem" the slave, or "buy back" the slave's freedom. When we hear Jesus portrayed as our "Redeemer" and "Deliverer" rescuing us from our enslavement to sin, we need to remember this imagery of a slave being set free. Christ came we are told, "to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). And Paul says, "You are bought with a price" (I Cor. 6:20). We know that with the giving of his life, Christ has set us free. He has "paid the price." He has "redeemed" us from our slavery to sin and from our bondage to guilt.

In the Old Testament system of sacrifice, it was believed that the spirit and power of "life" were centered in the blood. Because God had granted that "spirit of life," it had the power to atone for sins. A lamb was most frequently used for a sin sacrifice because it was a symbol of innocence and purity. Its blood could be an expiation for sin.

The New Testament uses this common understanding of the rite of sacrifice to grasp and proclaim the meaning of the death of Christ. He is the "Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world," the innocent and blameless one who "sacrifices" himself as an "expiation" for our sins. The life in his blood atones for our transgressions and establishes a new covenant with God. By his wounds, we are healed. When we hear about how Christ died for us, how he took on the sins of the world, we need to recall this ancient understanding of the rite of sacrifice. It is the sacrifice of his "life," the sacrifice of the "Lamb of God," that atones for our sin and procures our forgiveness. So Jesus pays the "price" to "redeem" us, and the "price" was his "life," the sacrifice of the innocent Lamb of God.

Forgiveness is always an act of the injured one, and he or she bears its cost. It's a freely given gift of grace. It's never procured or earned. It can only be received. So when you see that ad on TV that says, "Receive Jesus," that's what it means; receive the gift of God's amazing grace.

The grace of God is that God provided the sacrifice that would atone for our sin. The Lamb that was slain was of God, whom God gave up for us all to free us from a debilitating bondage to guilt. "All this is from God," Paul reminds us. Our freedom is a gift of God's amazing grace. God paid the price through the death of Jesus Christ, the Lamb that was slain.

Still though, is there not some cost to be borne by the recipient of such unmerited grace? Are we really let off the hook scot-free? Of course not. But our price is paid in response to the grace of forgiveness.

We need to remember, and always be mindful, that the purpose of forgiveness is to restore us into covenant communion with one another, be it in our relationship with God or with someone else. We are set free from sin, not to sin again, but to enjoy a new life of joyful obedience to the law of love. Or as Paul put it, we are set free from our bondage to sin, to become slaves of righteousness, God's righteousness, which is the preservation of covenant communion. Put yet another way, we are set free from that which keeps us apart—like anger, regret, guilt, hurtful actions—so we can be bound to that which keeps us together, namely faith, hope and love.

The cost to the recipient of forgiveness, is faith, faith that invites us into humility and trust, faith that invites us to turn away from an old life and old problems, and faith that invites us to serve others and share the good news of redemption. The Psalmist understood when he said, "Sacrifice and burnt offering you do not desire or require." The price is paid. But then he said, "Here I am, Lord. I delight to do your will and I have spoken of your faithfulness and your salvation." The Psalmist knew that the cost to him of forgiveness was to delight in following the statutes of God. He promised to serve the Lord, and to proclaim God's wondrous love.

Cried out John the Baptist to his own disciples when he saw Jesus walking by, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" Two of them knew what he meant by that cryptic phrase, and they turned and followed him. That is the cost of forgiveness to us, if we are truly to be redeemed into communion with God. We turn and follow him, not because we must, but because we want to.

"Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!" And, "To him who sits upon the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might for ever and ever." Amen!

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John 1:29-42