

Power in the Blood

Proper 27, Year B – Hebrews 9:24-28

preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, November 8, 2015

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

As I was thinking about this week's reading from the Letter to the Hebrews, I was reminded of one of a young friend of mine when I was Dean of the Cathedral in Hastings, Nebraska. Joe Prickett is not a little boy anymore, of course. He's now studying history and sociology at Hastings College, and the last time I communicated with him, other than reading his Facebook posts, was when he was a member of the design team for the Episcopal Youth Event last summer. But this week I was remembering Joe from like fifteen or sixteen years ago, when he would have been three or four years old.

Joe's family and ours were friends on a lot of different levels, and I have a lot of wonderful and fun stories I could tell about Joe, but the one that kept coming to mind *this* week involved his participation in a mid-week service at St. Mark's. Joe's parents Dan and Lisa were both teachers, so they didn't make too many mid-day mid-week services, but they were part of the "crowd" that day, roughly equivalent to the "crowd" of six or seven regulars at our own mid-week services here. But this day, there he was, waving to me from the front row of the choir pews.

Like here, our mid-week celebrations at St. Mark's were never overly lengthy, having only two readings, a short homily and no music. Nevertheless, I remember being impressed with how well my young friend behaved during the service. When there were responses to be made, and especially during the Lord's Prayer, Joe participated lustily, even though back then he only rarely attended the entirety of the Eucharist, particularly in the Rite I setting we were using that day.

When the Eucharistic Prayer had reached its peak, we got to the so-called Prayer of Humble Access. You know, the one that starts, "We do not presume to come to this thy Table, O merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in thy manifold and great mercies." That prayer happens to be one of my personal favorites, as much for the beauty and elegance of its language as for the fact that it fits my theology of our absolute need for God's grace and mercy. But apparently *my* love for the Prayer of Humble Access was not shared by at least *one* congregant that particular noonday. All was well when we got to the last sentence, "Grant us therefore, gracious Lord." All was well. "...so to eat the flesh of thy dear Son Jesus Christ..." All was well. "...and to drink his blood..."

"Drink his blood!?! That's *gross!*!" All was less than well. This exclamatory question (or is that an interrogatory exclamation) was uttered with the same gusto with which my friend had made *all* his responses. But in the context of our prayer, and sitting there in the wonderfully designed Gothic Choir of St. Mark's Pro-Cathedral, it resonated with the force of approximately a stick and a half of dynamite, *perhaps* one and three quarters. I didn't look up to see his parents' reaction, but judging from my own days with boys that age, I'm sure they engaged in some sort of shushing behavior while trying to get their own faces back to some reasonable color. Me, I just smiled and finished the prayer, "...that we may evermore dwell in him, and he in us."

We're not a whole lot different than Joe, though, are we? We don't much like to *think* about, much less *talk* about blood and sacrifices and such, do we? We know better than to visibly cringe when the Old Testament talks about sprinkling the blood of a lamb on the door-posts of their homes. We manage to contain our revulsion when the Passion stories dwell just a little too long on whips and thorns and nails. We sit quietly when Paul or the author to the Hebrews goes on about the cleansing of our hearts by Christ's sacrifice on the cross. But in our tidy, modern minds, we *do* find it a little off-putting, a little off-color, a little *scandalous* that *our* salvation depends on something as *un*-tidy and... *gross* as blood.

And yet, there it is, all over the pages of Scripture. There it is, all over the story of the people of God. There was no denying that they had offended. There was no doubt that they had sinned against God and their neighbor. There is no question that we have separated ourselves, that we separate ourselves over and over and over again, from the love that made us for God's *own* self. And yet still, they knew as we know, that the blood of bulls and goats and turtle doves could not, *did* not bridge the tremendous gulf between the righteousness of God and the miserable failure of human kind to live into our reason for existence, to love God and to love each other.

And so, as the author to the Hebrews says, in a portion that we never read because we focus on all the Saints instead, and so, Christ "entered once for all into the Holy Place, *not* with the blood of goats and calves, but with his *own* blood, *thus* obtaining eternal redemption." And *so* he has done what no other *could*. God from God, light from light, offered *himself*. For *you*. For *me*.

"Drink his blood!?! That's *gross!!*" "This is my blood given for you." Jesus's statement is just as scandalous today as it ever was.

My mind went even farther back this week as well, to Sunday evening services when I wasn't much older than Joe, when we would have hymn sings so that members of the congregation could call out their favorites. While others searched around in the book, mine was usually one of the first hands to shoot up. Though it is not in our Hymnal, as a boy sitting in the grey metal folding chairs of Calvary United Missionary Church, my favorite was always the same – number 111. Now, I suspect that it was my favorite less because of its theology of sacrificial atonement, than because of its catchy refrain or its easy to remember number. But this week what really came back to my mind was the promise of one of the verses:

Would you be free from your passion and pride? There's pow'r in the blood, pow'r in the blood;
Come for a cleansing to Calvary's tide; There's wonderful pow'r in the blood.

"This is my blood given for *you*." That's just gross! But it is that very scandal that we celebrate every time bread and wine becomes the Body and Blood of Christ. It is the scandal of a love *so* vast and *so* powerful that God himself would give the essence of who he *is* to repair the tear we made in creation. It's a scandal. It's gross. And, thanks be to God, it's *ours!*