

Third Last Lord's Day

November 8, 2009

Sermon Text: Hebrews 9:24-28

Sermon Title: "Once and For All"

Grace, mercy and peace be unto you from God, our heavenly Father, and from our Lord and coming King, Jesus Christ, Amen. Our text for the Third Last Lord's Day in the Christian Year is taken from the Epistle lesson, where the writer to the Hebrews says:

"But as it is, (Christ) has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself."

This is our text.

Enough is enough! Or as my mother used to put it, "genug ist genug!" How many times have we heard our parents say something like that? Bill Cosby used to tell the story of the ritual that ordinarily took place at his household when it was time for their baths and bedtime. I'm not going to go through the whole routine, but I remember that his wife would look up at the ceiling and shout "I have had enough of this!" And then the "beatings" would commence.

And as we examine our text from the Epistle to the Hebrews this morning, we need to ask ourselves "when is enough 'enough'?" Last week Saturday we celebrated the 492<sup>nd</sup> anniversary of the day when Martin Luther nailed his Ninety Five theses for debate on the sale of indulgences on the Wittenberg Castle Church. Indulgences were sold by the Catholic in order to shorten the time that a soul had to suffer in Purgatory before he or she was released into heaven. People ended up in Purgatory in the first place because they hadn't "done enough" good works on earth in order to pay off the punishment necessary for their sins. People were encouraged to "do that which is in you" while going on pilgrimages, visiting sacred relics, and doing countless other things in order to cut short that time which was spent in Purgatory.

This was the world into which Martin Luther was born, and in which he had been raised. It was partly because of this that he felt compelled to join the Augustinian monastery in order to "work off" his time in Purgatory and get to heaven right away when he died.

But when is enough... enough? For someone like Luther, it never was enough, really. Although he was faithful to his vows and prayed fervently, he never felt like he could satisfy a righteous and holy judge like God. He could never "do enough". Later in his life Luther revealed that—as a monk—he would go to confession and try to think of and list every sin of thought, word and deed that he had committed since his previous confession in order to receive his penance. But five minutes after he left the confessional, there would always be one more sin that he forgot to confess, and he would turn around and go back to confess not only that sin, but the sin of neglecting to confess that sin the previous time.

To be sure, if you could be saved by doing the best you can and trying to atone for your sins on your own merits, Martin Luther would have been at the head of the line. However, that just couldn't be. There is not enough for us to do, there is not enough for us to think or say that will get us even one tenth of one inch closer to heaven. And because of that, Martin Luther the monk feared and, at times, hated this righteous God as judge, jury and executioner.

And, at first glance, if you were to look at the Old Testament and the various sacrifices that were offered, some might get the impression that that was how the Israelites were to get to heaven as well. There were sin offerings and sacrifices, sacrifices of atonement, and countless other sacrifices and offerings that the people of Israel brought to the tabernacle and the temple to offer to the Lord. But the hymn writer said it best when he penned the words to the Lenten hymn:

"Not all the blood of beasts,  
On Jewish altars slain  
Could give the guilty conscience peace  
Or wash away the stain."

If we back up a few verses in chapter nine of Hebrews, we can see and hear the same thing when the epistle writer says in verse eleven:

"But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing

an eternal redemption.”

Jesus’ blood shed on the cross—once and for all—was enough for us all. His holy precious blood and innocent suffering and death fulfilled all that we need in order to pay the ultimate price for our sins. All the bloody sacrifices from all the animals meant nothing without the blood of the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

Beginning one verse before our text, the author to the Hebrews explains it this way:

“Thus it was necessary for the *copies* of the heavenly things to be purified with these rites, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these. For Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are the *copies* of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf.”

In the Old Testament, the Israelites used to celebrate Yom Kippur, or the Day of Atonement. On that day, the High Priest entered the Holy of Holies and approached the ark of the covenant, where God dwelt among His people—first in the Tabernacle, and later in the Temple—in love. The priest had to purify himself or else he would face certain death upon entering. He applied some of the sacrificial animal’s blood to the mercy seat. He would then take the remaining blood out and apply it to the horns of the altar as an atoning sacrifice for the peoples’ rebellion and sin.

Each year for centuries the High Priest would have to do this. Generation after generation, the Israelites might have truly wondered when it would ever be enough. But not one drop of blood from any or even all the sacrifices on the altar in their entirety could ever pay the price for even one of our sins. But then that wasn’t the point of all of these sacrifices anyway. They were pointing to the promise yet to come.

You see, all of the Old Testament sacrifices were copies of the one true sacrifice. As true God and true man, Jesus could and did shed His blood and die. There are any number of Christians even today who find this a difficult idea to swallow. From the time of the early Christian Church, there were heresies that arose which said that Jesus only “appeared” to be flesh and blood and only “seemed” to die on the cross. After all, God can’t possibly die, can He? Today books like “The DaVinci Code” are based on such a premise that Jesus didn’t truly die and shed His blood upon the cross. But He did in fact truly and completely die on the cross. As true man, He not only got hungry and thirsty, He not only slept and had to rest, but He also voluntarily gave up His life and died upon the cross as the ultimate and complete sacrifice—“once and for all—in order to take away your sins and mine. As true God, He fulfilled the Law and did “enough” by doing what you and I cannot and could not ever possibly do: keep every single commandment of God to the letter. He dotted every “I” and crossed every “t”. And as true God, Jesus could also bear all of our sin upon Himself, as Paul once wrote: “He who knew no sin became sin on our behalf”.

People loved by God, when our heavenly Father looked down upon His Son on the cross, He said “enough in enough!” Only one sacrifice was necessary, that of the spotless and holy Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the whole world, as the writer to the Hebrews stated in our text:

“Nor was it to offer Himself (that is, Christ) repeatedly, as the high priest enters the holy places every year with blood not his own, for then he would have had to suffer repeatedly since the foundation of the world.”

Now in Holy Baptism, Jesus sprinkles us with His most holy blood, blood that has been taken into the presence of the Father. We have been sprinkled and made clean by the washing of regeneration and the renewal of the Holy Spirit. He sprinkles us on the outside to cleanse us and pardon our sin, and to set us apart as His holy people and to have us serve God as a royal priesthood of all believers. It doesn’t matter if you are a parent, child, student, citizen, teacher, brother or sister. We are called to serve Him in whatever vocation that He has placed us. And as we gather at the Lord’s Table to eat His very body and drink His true blood, Christ our Lord sprinkles us on the inside to set us apart to serve in the heavenly sanctuary with angels and archangels and with all the company of heaven. Enough is enough, not because of what we have done, but because of what Christ our Lord has done for us. Thank God that He has done this, for Jesus’ sake, Amen.

And now the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord, our Savior, and our coming King, Amen.