

March 8, 2015

TEXT: John 17:18–24

TITLE: Saving Salvation—Too Much Blood

As rich and expansive as the English language is, sometimes we can't express what we want to say in plain words. When that happens, we turn to metaphors. Two lovers walk hand in hand and one says, "How would you describe our love?" After a pause, the other replies, "Our love is a rose, a garden, a journey, a flame, no, a fire; a game, a battle, a madness, a dream." Metaphors help us express what is hard to put into words. But no metaphor is perfect—and sometimes they get pushed too far and stop communicating accurately and truthfully.

During Lent, the sermon theme is on saving salvation—re-examining and rescuing the Christian idea of salvation from some of the limiting and flawed ways it is preached about today. Two weeks ago, I spoke about how salvation is not so much about things we do or quick prayers we offer up at revival meetings, and much more about what God does for us. Last week Pastor Heather spoke about atonement, and how the cross is less about a substitutionary sacrifice that a vengeful God requires and much more about the length to which Christ, the Son of God, would go out of love to save us. Today I want to go a step further with this same theme and explore whether the church has become too dependent on the metaphor of Jesus' saving blood.

As we heard, love is a word associated with lots of metaphors. In a less romantic way, so is blood. There are blue bloods and bad blood; bloodbaths, blood suckers and sweating blood. You can be cold blooded, hot blooded, out for blood. You can bleed someone dry, but then again you can't get blood out of a stone—for we're only flesh and blood. In the ancient world out of which the Judeo-Christian faith emerged, blood was something more than all of those metaphors. Blood was life. Life is not air, not water, not chocolate or coffee. Blood was life. To shed blood was to lose life itself. What courses through our veins was Life with a capital "L"—a belief and a metaphor rolled into one.

Very soon in the early history of the Old Testament, two meanings for blood became intertwined. Blood was life—that was why it was shed in sacrifices, as a way to honor the God of life with a gift of life from animals of the Lord's creation. But since blood was life, it was also seen to have a power over death. In the Exodus story, after Egypt had been afflicted with a series of plagues, Moses told the people to take a lamb, slaughter it at midnight, and then daub some of its blood on the doorposts of their homes (Exodus 12:7). For that very night, an angel of death would move through Egypt and kill the firstborn of every man and beast. But for those houses with the mark of life-giving blood on the doors, the angel would pass over them and they would be spared. The blood of life, long used for sacrifices, would now come from a lamb and save people from death.

It is no surprise that this double-sided Old Testament metaphor would become one of the main ways Jesus' life and death would be understood in the New Testament. Jesus was the unblemished lamb whose life was taken as a sacrifice; but through his blood came the forgiveness of sins so that the angel of death would pass over us sinners and we would be saved. The blood of life that saves from sins. This idea was most clearly expressed at the communion meal—the new Passover ritual—when Jesus took the cup and said, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Mt 26:28). It is a beautiful, wonderful promise given by our Savior and recorded in the four gospels and the writings of the apostle Paul. But later in the New Testament, later in history, something else was added to this metaphor of Christ's blood. Not surprisingly, it comes from the end of the bible, that troubling book of Revelation.

Revelation was written during a time of intense persecution—when Christians had to worship in secret and both government and synagogue forces persecuted them. That book opens with a blessing: *Grace and peace to you from Jesus Christ, who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood and made us to be a kingdom* (Rev 1:5-6). Then it says, *Look! He is coming with the clouds, every eye will see him and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail* (Rev 1:7). Suddenly the meek sacrificial lamb of Exodus became the triumphant, conquering Lamb in Revelation—the Lamb before whom all enemies fall. More vividly, the Lamb in whose blood the martyrs of the faith washed their robes and made them white and spotless. This has always been a confusing metaphor to me: washing robes in red blood turns them spotless white? That never works with my laundry at home. But the dominant idea here is that Jesus' death washes away our sins—and his blood shed on the cross was the means to this end. In the late 1800s, Robert Lowry joined the chorus of those who celebrate this metaphor and wrote his hymn “Nothing But the Blood of Jesus” we heard earlier.

But sometimes a metaphor can be stretched too far. Blood is not life. Blood is part of the equation, along with oxygen, water, and something meaningful to do. But blood ultimately has more value when it stays in the veins rather than when it's shed on the ground. Lowry wrote “Nothing But the Blood of Jesus” in the late 1800s, but once the 1900s unfolded with World War I and World War II and the Holocaust and Hiroshima, frankly the world had seen far too much blood to write hymns glorifying it anymore.

Yes, Jesus did say at the Last Supper “this is my blood poured out for you for the forgiveness of sins.” But Jesus went on to say more about why his blood was poured out. As part of that meal, Jesus prayed a long prayer described in John 15–17. These are the penultimate words Jesus spoke, because after this meal came the arrest in the garden, a few words at his trial, and his final words from the cross. Jesus prays to God for us—but what does he ask for? If by grace and by Christ's sacrifice our sins have been forgiven, what was the reason for this? The reason was not personal piety—for us to wear white robes before God's throne in heaven—for some to be let in the pearly gates while others are

excluded. That's not the focus of Jesus' prayer. Our sins are forgiven, salvation is given to us in Christ that we might be one. That we might be reconciled with one another. That we might live at peace with God and all people. That's why we're saved.

This is all hard to capture into words. What Jesus is describing involves heaven and earth and God's immeasurable love and the quality of eternal life lived now and in the future. But throughout this prayer, Jesus never talks about sacrificial lambs. His words are not focused on blood spilled to keep away the angel of death, to appease a bloodthirsty deity who demands sacrifice as payment for human sin. No. Jesus' words and metaphors are all focused on life. Listen. John 15: I am the vine, you are my branches—abide in me and you will bear much fruit. John 16: Yes, for a while you will weep, but your pain will turn into joy. A woman has pain in labor, but when her child is born, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy of having brought a human being into the world. John 17: Father, I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world. Protect them. Sanctify them. As you are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me and loved them. St. Augustine long ago, in one of his sermons on the gospel of John, said this: *God did not begin to love us only from the moment we were reconciled by the blood of the Son. Rather God loved us before the creation of the world, so that we too should be sons and daughters together with the Only-begotten before we were at all.*¹

Metaphors matter. There is a spiritual value captured in the way we speak about blood and how we remember the times when blood has been shed—by martyrs and saints, as a result of human violence, on a cross long ago. Yet blood always has most value when it courses through the veins and is protected there by people of faith and love. Human violence and sin led to the cross and the shedding of Christ's blood. God's power and love transformed that sacrificial death into resurrection—new life and forgiveness for all. Why? Not to separate us into the saved and unsaved. Not to pull us apart. No, it was done that we might be one—reconciled, united to God and one another through Christ. Why are you saved? To be each day alive with God—one with Christ—part of a shared witness to the world. This is a gift and a daily demand. And it's much more than a metaphor. It's the gospel good news. Thanks be to God.

¹ Quoted in Stephen Duffy, The Dynamics of Grace, p. 81-82.