

CROSS PURPOSES:
Redeeming Blood
John 19:31-34; Romans 5:6-11

Text: . . . *one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once blood and water came out . . .
now that we have been justified by his blood, we will be saved through him . . .*

John 19:34; Romans 5:9

Introduction

Some of you may recall that when I concluded the interim position here over sixteen years ago, I went to serve with the Rev. Dr. F. Morgan Roberts, Pastor/Head of Staff at Shadyside Presbyterian Church. Four months later he retired, and shortly before his retirement, Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary set up its library computer system and named the system *Morgan*. It was an electronic card catalogue, and whenever a student inquired about a book in the library, the library staff would respond, “Go ask Morgan.” Soon after that occurrence, Pittsburgh Theological Seminary followed suit, set up a library computer system and named it *Calvin*. The next time I saw President Sam Calian, I told him that I was grateful to the seminary for naming the new computer system after me, and wasn’t it marvelous that two seminaries had chosen both pastors from Shadyside Church to honor in this fashion! President Calian gave me a long, inquisitive look and then said, “Cal, this has nothing to do with you. We named our computer system after the theologian John Calvin.”

Now, being a Calvinist not only in name but also in theological persuasion, I have often reflected on that incident and each time concluded that of course, I should have thought of that!

Such a reflection also calls to mind a time in a previous pastorate in Syracuse, NY, when a young woman from a prominent family in our church was expecting a child, and she informed many of the people in the congregation that if she were to have a boy, she intended to name him *Calvin*. I was delighted, and the next time I saw her I informed her that I was pleased she planned to name her son after me. Screwing up her face into a portrait of bewilderment, she said, “What are you talking about, Calvin? We are naming him after *Calvin and Hobbes*.”

I’ve learned my lesson. These days, anytime I am confronted with a similar circumstance, I always ask the question, “Are you by any chance referring to me, or it is someone else?”

Washed in the Blood of the Lamb

While I may always ask that question in those circumstances, there is one question I never ask under any circumstances: that is, *Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?* In forty-eight years of ministry, I have never asked: *Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?* By the same token, I would lay a wager that you have never asked, *Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?* And why don’t we? What prevents us from asking such a simple, direct question? We are ecclesiastical descendents of John Calvin—Calvinists, as it were—and there is a strong segment of Calvin followers that ask this question routinely of anyone they meet. Historically, Calvinists have been fond of the old nineteenth century hymn about the blood of the Lamb:

*There is a fountain filled with blood
Drawn from Emmanuel’s veins;
And sinners, plunged beneath that flood,*

Lose all their guilty stains.

*Dear dying Lamb, Thy precious blood
Shall never lose its power,
Till all the ransomed Church of God
Be saved, to sin no more.*

*E'er since, by faith, I saw the stream
Thy flowing wounds supply,
Redeeming love has been my theme,
And shall be till I die.ⁱ*

Here is a hymn about Christ's redeeming blood. We believe that Christ redeemed us through his sacrifice on the cross. Here is a hymn about atonement. We believe that by his death, Christ atoned for our sins. Here is a hymn about salvation. We believe that Christ died on the cross that we might be saved through his death and resurrection. But why don't we sing this hymn and why won't we ask the question: *Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?*

We are Presbyterian Calvinists of the Reformed tradition. Why are we not asking the same questions as the other followers of John Calvin? There are two answers, both rather simple and concise.

Individualistic Piety

The question *Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?* is the test case for individualistic piety. It is the shibboleth of the would-be righteous who are absorbed by the isolating torment of personal misdeeds. The subject of the interrogative: *Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?* is *you* the individual. The inquisitor who asks the question *Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?* is implying that if you think you are not washed in the redeeming blood of the Lamb, then you need to get washed in the redeeming blood of the Lamb, as if your individual choice will bring about your own forgiveness and your own salvation. From **our** Calvinistic perspective, the truth of the matter is quite to the contrary of this assertion. The subject (that is, the actor) of God's salvation is God: Redemption comes by way of God's action rather than human pious response; by way of God's initiative rather than human pious reaction; by way of God's activity rather than human pious self-flagellation.

Jesus at Cross Purposes with Separation

The second reason we don't ask this question is that Christ is not at cross purposes with us or with our sins; Christ is at cross purposes with the state of separation: our separation from God, which Christ addresses in his Incarnation and in his Crucifixion. God comes to us in the Child of Bethlehem—Emmanuel—to gain direct proximity with us and to be in intimate relationship with his creation. Then in Christ God endures the cross to abolish sin, the human state of separation from God, and to close the gap between the divine and the human.

Purpose of Jesus' Cross: Reconciliation

The essential purpose of Christ's death on the cross was not to take away my individual sins only but rather to take away the sin of the world. At last Wednesday's Lenten Vespers, we reminded ourselves that John the Baptist pointed to Jesus and said to those around him: *Behold the Lamb of God, who takes*

away the sin of the world. Sin here is singular and, I believe, refers to the collective state of separation from God; and the purpose of the cross of Christ is the reconciliation of the world to the Father. The accurate answer to the inquisitor, therefore, is *Yes, I am washed in the blood of the Lamb, for everyone is washed in the blood of the Lamb; all of God's creation is washed in the blood of the Lamb; Christ's redeeming blood—by his choice—was shed for everyone; blood and water poured out of his spear-inflicted wound for everyone; and, therefore, we have been justified by the blood of Jesus Christ through whom we are reconciled to God the Father. Ever since his death, we now live in a state of reconciliation rather than a state of separation from God. God is nearer than breath and dearer than life, and we know it!*

Over two thousand years have passed since Calvary, and he who hung there has become to millions upon millions of us the Lord of life . . . Wouldn't it be marvelous for one true moment to catch an authentic glimpse of that cross!

When Abraham Lincoln's body was brought from Washington to Illinois, it passed through Albany, New York, and, as it was carried through the streets, it was reported that an African American woman stood upon the curb and lifted her little son as high as she could reach above the heads of the crowd. She was heard to say to him, "Take a long look, honey. He died for you." True! And Lincoln died not only for him individually but to abolish a state of separation. Lincoln died for the state of an ultimate union of North and South so that the insidious system of human slavery could no longer separate people from God or from one another.

If you and I could take a long look at our Lord hanging upon the cross, we would see the One who has died for us that we might no longer be separated from God our Creator or from one another by inhuman and demeaning practices.ⁱⁱ

In Union with Christ and Engaged in Life

So where are we going with all of this? What can we possibly conclude from all this discussion about Christ's atonement on the cross? It's this: our union with Christ engages us with the world. While prayer and piety are essentials to the Christian life, prayer and piety alone—that is, soaking in the cleansing blood of the Lamb for our own individual salvation—prayer and piety alone remain self-absorbing and insufficient. In a world reconciled by the blood of the cross, we who are in union with Christ are called to be engaged in life:

*I should not stay aloof, wrote Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and refuse to participate in the tasks, joys, and sorrows of earth, while I am waiting patiently for the redemption (realization) of the divine promise.*ⁱⁱⁱ

The desperate needs of the world are ever before us! The cries of despairing humanity are ever a luring cacophony to our sensitive ears. The fractured images of human brokenness offend our cultured sensibilities. The ceaseless outcry for social justice surround us like a suffocating shroud. Do you believe for one moment that God is satisfied with any of us who lounges about mollified by a comfortable Christianity while his Son hangs bleeding on a cross?

God has drawn us in the Spirit's tether. God has inducted us into the Holy Spirit's service. We are under the yoke of Christ. God—who is nearer than breath and dearer than life—has engaged us to engage the world.

Conclusion

Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb? Certainly! Everyone is. Sometimes I wish we weren't. The cost of discipleship is so enormous. On the other hand, what is the cost of discipleship in contrast to death on a cross?

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Notes

ⁱ William Cowper (1731-1800), text to the hymn, *There's a Fountain Filled with Blood*, set to an Early American Melody arranged by Lowell Mason (1792-1872)

ⁱⁱ This illustration and text adapted from Harry Emerson Fosdick, *Crucified by Stupidity*, a Palm Sunday Sermon from his book of sermons titled *The Hope of the World*, published in 1933

ⁱⁱⁱ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Meditations on the Word*