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Christ the King & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Cody & Powell, WY

Fourteenth Sunday after Trinity

September 10, 2023

Text: Luke 17:11–19

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Sick people having to keep a good distance from healthy people is really nothing new. According to Leviticus 13:45, anyone infected with leprosy had to yell out “Unclean, unclean” so that the clean, healthy people would not become infected. This was God’s Law revealed through Moses in the 15th century B.C. Not only were lepers – those poor souls infected with a tragic, disfiguring skin disease – separated from their family and friends; they were separated from God in the public worship of God’s people. They could not go to the Tabernacle, the Temple, or even the synagogue prayer services. Leviticus 13:46 says, “(The leper) shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease. He is unclean. He shall live alone. His dwelling shall be outside the camp.” Alone, outside the camp. Being a leper meant separation from God and man. It was a living death.

If, however, the leper thought he had recovered from his leprosy, he could call for a priest to examine him (outside the camp). If the priest declared him clean, then, according to Leviticus 14, certain sacrifices were commanded. Two birds were to be used in the initial rites of cleansing. One bird was killed; its blood was poured into a basin with water. The second bird, still alive, was dipped into the bloody water. That water was sprinkled on the leper seven times. The living bird was released, and the leper was declared to be clean. But even then, the leper had to remain isolated and go through more rituals of purification for another week. On the eighth day, the cleansed leper had to provide further blood sacrifices of two lambs. If he can’t afford that, then two birds could be offered as sacrifices of atonement for the leper, one a burnt offering, the other a sin offering along with a grain offering (Lev. 14:31).

Atonement, that's the language used throughout the Bible to describe sacrifices offered because of sin. According to Leviticus 14, the blood shed to atone for the leper was then sprinkled on the leper's right ear lobe, the thumb of his right hand, and the big toe of his right foot. Leviticus 14:21 summarizes the matter like this, "And the priest shall make atonement before the Lord for him who is being cleansed." Only after atonement had been made for his sins, was the leper restored.

All this seems bewildering to us 21st century moderns with all our CAT scans, MRI's, and diagnostic tools. Isolating the sick is one thing. We experienced that with Covid-19. But bloody water, animals sacrifices made in atonement for sin, blood sprinkled on specific parts of the leper's body? Why do all that when this is a physical affliction? A skin disease.

These Biblical texts, Leviticus 13 and 14, the cleansing of the 10 lepers in Luke 17, remind us we cannot ignore the fact that we human beings are a composite of material physicality (i.e., body) and immaterial spirituality (i.e., soul). When one part suffers, so does the other. Both must be considered and cared for. The lepers in Leviticus and Luke needed atonement for body and soul. These Biblical texts remind us that without the shedding of blood, someone else's blood, not your own, there can be no forgiveness of sins, no lasting healing, and no fellowship with God. Atonement comes from blood shed on your behalf.

The Lord Jesus Christ is our atonement, from beginning to end. The Lord Jesus Christ did what birds, lambs, bulls, and goats could not do: make a perfect, complete sacrifice that atones for our sins of body and soul while, at the same time, heals soul and body. The Bible describes beautifully what Jesus did when He suffered, bled, died and rose from the dead. Listen to these:

I Peter 1:18–19: ¹⁸...you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold,
¹⁹but with the precious blood of Christ..."

I John 1:7: "... the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin."

I Peter 2:24: "²⁴He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed."

And finally, Hebrews 9:14, "...the blood of Christ ... (purifies) our conscience from dead works to serve the living God."

Without the shed blood of Jesus, there is no ransom from the futility of unbelief and death, no cleansing from sin, and no final, complete healing for our bodies. Without the blood of Jesus purifying our guilty consciences, we cannot serve the living God. Everything Jesus did in His perfect, holy life – every thought, word, deed, and emotion – was for our good. To give Himself as the atonement which brings healing and reconciliation. The bloody agony of the stripes tearing across our Lord's back and those nails which pierced His divine hands and feet all brought about the shedding of blood the world needed in order to be saved from futility, isolation from God and man, and eternal judgment. Our healing in body and soul comes from Jesus.

I want to give this quick word of reminder and exhortation. I am sure many of you know the cases of Covid-19 are rising in various parts of our country. There is even some talk of the restrictions of 2020/21 being reinstated, at least, partially. One of the lessons we need to learn from the past few years, is that we cannot ignore the need to care for our bodies and souls with the saving Gospel and Sacraments. We dare not emphasize the body to the neglect of the soul, or vice versa. The Word of God read, preached, prayed, sung, and received sacramentally in the public gathering of the church and then reinforced in your family worship at home forms the vitality of life in this world and the world to come. As Christians, our determination must be we will not give up God's Word for anything. Jesus shed His blood to save us in body and soul.

The need for the Gospel must be factored into every area of our lives; medical, financial, education, jobs and vocation, everything. Remember Hebrews 9:14, the blood of Christ purifies our conscience so that we can serve the living God. Without the blood of Jesus coming to us in the Gospel we cannot serve God. The Holy Spirit brings the purifying blood of Jesus to us in the Gospel and the Sacraments. Baptism makes us participants in the death and resurrection of Jesus. The body and blood of Jesus come to us in the Lord's Supper giving us the forgiveness of sins and the refreshment of our bodies and souls. Preaching God's Word feeds us in the wholesome life of Jesus. We can't live without God's Word; it's as simple as that.

All the bloody, animal sacrifices of the Old Testament were provisional, temporary. They prepared us for the one, final sacrifice of God's Son who takes away the sin of the world. Saints of God, it is no exaggeration or sermonic hyperbole when I say, "The blood Jesus shed to save us is the blood of God." Jesus is the divine, Son of God in human flesh. An even deeper question we ought to consider in light of Jesus shedding His divine blood is, "Why? Why did He do this?" The answer is staggeringly beautiful and life changing. God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son so that whoever believes in Him shall be saved. God's love revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus calls broken sinners to repentance and saving faith. When one of the lepers returned to Jesus to give Him thanks for healing him, our Lord said to the leper, "Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well" (Lk. 17:19). This is the gospel the Church brings to a world that is so afraid. God loves in Christ. His blood makes perfect atonement for your body and soul. Jesus saves you, makes you well, and gives you all the blessings of His eternal life.

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.