

“Extravagant Generosity”
Hebrews 9:11-14
All Saint’s Sunday—November 4, 2012
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Before Scripture reading

Our scripture text for today is another section from the book of Hebrews that lifts up a spiritual practice. Last week and the week before we looked at the practice of prayer. This week, appropriately enough as we kick off stewardship, we will look at the practice of giving, of generosity. I’m just going to forewarn you that like our other texts from Hebrews, this pericopy will take a little bit of work to get to the word of life for us today. This text also has blood splattering everywhere—lots of animal sacrificing going on, so steel your stomachs if blood makes you queasy.

Introduction: Blood of the Lamb

Among African Americans in the black church, a greeting often begins with the words of Psalm 107, “Let the redeemed of the Lord say so.” The congregation then replies, “I am redeemed by the blood of the Lamb.”¹ Songs in the black gospel tradition often run red with the blood of Jesus. “What can wash away my sins, nothing but the blood Jesus.”² The black church also sings words like “there is pow’r, pow’r, wonder working pow’r in the precious blood of the Lamb.”³ These songs sing about the redemption that comes through the blood of Christ, the Lamb of God.

Blood of Lambs in Israel

This notion that redemption somehow comes through blood stems from the sacrifices of animals made in the religious practices of Israel. This ancient system comes

¹ Angela D. Lewis, “Hebrews 9: 11-21” African-American Lectionary.com

² Robert, Lowry, “Nothing But the Blood of Jesus.” *Gospel Music* Doane William and Robert Lowry

³ Lewis Jones, “There is Power in the Blood.” (1899)

from a time in which seeing the blood of animals was a regular occurrence in everyone's life; no clean and sanitary butcher's cases in pristine grocery stores existed. People's very lives and livelihoods depended upon animals; to sacrifice one upon an altar for their sins really meant a sacrifice for their family and tribe.

The God of Israel in that ancient culture understood the reverence and the dependence God's people had upon animals. Within Israel, God then encouraged the priests of Levi to develop a system of animal sacrifice---whereby this rural and agricultural culture would offer up their most sacred possession (their animals) as a way of purifying themselves from sin. People brought their unblemished, healthy animals to the tabernacle or temple, and the animals were sacrificed on the altar. Their blood was then smeared on the sides of the altar, which made the sacrifice valid.⁴ These actions cleansed the bodies, buildings, furniture—even cooking utensils—from the stain of sin.

One day a year, on the Day of Atonement (known as Yom Kippur), priests would don special garments. The blood of goats and heifers would be taken into the holy of holies, the inner sanctum of the temple. After this ritual, the priest would place his hands on a living goat, which would then be sent out into the wilderness—bearing the sins of the people of Israel. This is where we get the notion of a “scapegoat.” This practice, which is described in depth in the book of Leviticus 16, is the practice referred to in our Hebrews text today.

Blood of Jesus

The significant difference though, is that the author of Hebrews substitutes the blood of goats and heifers with the blood of Jesus. Jesus is our high priest, who enters the Holy of Holies and places himself upon the altar. In contrast to the daily and yearly

⁴ “Worship”, *Harper Collins Bible Dictionary* ed. Paul Achtemier, p. 1224-5.

offerings of animals that the levitical priests had to make, Jesus entered the sanctuary and offering himself once and for all. Jesus offered his own life and his own blood on our behalf. The scripture today says, “Jesus 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. Jesus’ blood frees us from the prison of death and sin. The sacrifice of Jesus—seen in his death on the cross, ascension, and entrance into God’s presence—cleanses not just our bodies, but also our minds and hearts. Jesus’ blood brings not only atonement—making us one with God, but also redemption—making us one with ourselves.

Jesus’ Extravagant Generosity

Jesus’ blood, in effect, represents the most extravagant generosity to us. Jesus offers the sacrifice of himself that we may worship the living God. Jesus as the Lamb of God, the scapegoat for our sins, frees us to live for God. Regardless of who we are or what we have done, whether this week or twenty years ago, the blood of Jesus takes away the stain of our sin. The author of the book of Hebrews, by referring back to the Israeli practice of animal sacrifice, is trying to beckon his audience onward to a life of redemption in the blood of the Christ lamb. The author is saying “Let the redeemed of the Lord say so” so that the people can say, “we are redeemed by the blood of the Lamb.” (sing if possible) “What can take away our sins? Nothing but the blood of Jesus.”

This extravagant generosity we experience most clearly in the sacrament of Holy Communion, which we will celebrate in just a moment. On this altar (point) we live into what Christ’s sacrifice does for us. After all we break Christ’s body and we drink the blood—a little gruesome in some ways to think about—but it connects us back to our ancestors in the faith, all the way back to Israel’s practice of sacrifice. In this sacrament, Christ continues to feed us with redemption, with grace, with freedom from sin. In this

sacrament, Christ continues to offer extravagant generosity—to give of his very self, so that we may have the gift of eternal life.

Our Extravagant Generosity

When we rise from this table, we go forth as ones generously given the love of God. We have been recipients of God's great love to us. We have been offered freedom from sin, from our past way of life that entangles us. We have been given a new future and a new hope. We have been given our very lives.

As ones who have so richly received, we are then called to offer generosity to others. In the grace-filled economy of God, though, even as we go forth to share, we receive back—often doubly, as did our children in worship today. As Karen described earlier, last weekend a small group from our church went forth into our community on a Pilgrimage of Pain and Hope. We offered listening ears to teenagers at Bridges, to Latina women, to recovering addicts at the Jaywalker Lodge. We gave to them the chance to tell their stories, to be heard, to have their voice respected and acknowledged. In turn, we received back incredible stories of triumph over suffering. We heard from a teenager who used to run with a violent crowd being changed by his education at Bridges; he is now the student body president. We heard of women dedicating themselves for two hours every school day to be a mentor, offering hope to the next generation. We heard of addicts who lived through the deepest darkness of enslavement to drugs and alcohol who are now giving back to help other addicts become free.

Their stories inspired us, gave to us, blessed us. When we give as Christ gives to us, we receive back unexpected blessings into our own lives. Living into the extravagant generosity of God means that we live a life filled with overflowing goodness. As you think about your offering, your pledge to the church for 2013, my prayer is that first you would

open yourself up to the extravagant generosity of God. Open up to the redemption, the freedom, the new life brought to you by the “pow’r, pow’r wonder working power in the blood of the Lamb.” Then as you feel led, give generously back to the church. May your life be filled with unexpected blessings. May your life be filled with overflowing goodness. Let the redeemed of the Lord say: **we are redeemed by the blood of the Lamb. Amen**

Silence for reflection