

CHRIST ABOVE ALL
Hebrews 4:1-15
Mark 10:34-45
Preached by Dr. Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
Sunday, October 21, 2012

The letter to the Hebrews was written to Jewish Christians in response to their questions and concerns about embracing Jesus as their Messiah.

All the early Christians, both Jews and Gentiles, had to contend with many outside influences threatening the purity of the gospel. First there were the Gnostics who advocated blending the prevailing pagan mystery religions with Christian teachings. Then there were the Judaizers, Jews who compelled recently minted Jewish Christian believers to still keep the same strict legalisms imposed on them by the Pharisees. Certainly if these Judaizers were successful Christianity would become a religion that taught you must work to earn your salvation instead of accepting the Good News of salvation through Christ.

By citing the Jews own scriptures, the author of Hebrews demonstrated how everything that already happened was intentionally enfolded into God's plan to lay the foundation and pave the way for his Son, who is greater than all the patriarchs, kings, prophets and priests combined, if only because he alone was present at the creation and the chosen one to have authority over all things at the end. (Hebrews 1:2)

In the Book of Psalms the High Priest Melchizedek, who anointed Abraham in the Book of Genesis, is celebrated for being the first in the long line of priests who anointed each new king with holy oil because the king of Israel was not only the head of state ruling in God's name, he also served as priest, the mediator between God and his people. That explains why at every coronation it was always hoped the new king would turn out to be the promised Anointed One or Messiah foretold by the prophets.

Unfortunately that hope always ended in disappointment as each king came and went until, conquered by a succession of enemies, the House of David ruled no more in Jerusalem. Even so, David's fertile descendants continued to produce sons in each succeeding generation until Jesus, the son of Joseph of the house of David, was born in Bethlehem.

So, using the Jewish scriptures, the Jewish author of Hebrews made the case for Christ's supremacy that enabled him to sacrifice himself thereby ending forever the need for any priest to offer up any new sacrifices for absolution of sin.

As John the Baptist said, Jesus is "the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." (John 1:29)

Probably because there's no satisfactory explanation we can come up with the author of Hebrews never tried to answer the question, "Why was Christ's sacrifice on the cross necessary, couldn't God find a less violent way to make our salvation possible?" I'm sure Jesus himself wondered, especially on the night before his crucifixion. We know Jesus begged for his life praying, "Father take this cup of suffering away from me," but there must have also been the unrecorded request for a "Plan B", a satisfactory alternative. Can't you hear Jesus pleading, "Father, isn't there another way to forgive the sins of the world?"

Even if there was another way, it remained God's will for his son to suffer and die, so despite any misgivings, Jesus submitted to his Father's will, embracing the Pascal mystery knowing full well that only he, God's beloved and unblemished son, could make salvation possible.

That same point is driven home in today's gospel passage when James and John secretly approached Jesus with a loaded request. "Rabbi, there's something we want you to do for us."

Jesus just told his twelve disciples for the third time he was going to Jerusalem to be crucified. You'd think James and John would be sensitive enough not to ask for special favors at this point in time, but being obtuse and ambitious they pressed their case. "When you sit on your throne in your glorious kingdom we want you to let us sit at your right and left hand." (Mark 10:37)

James and John just didn't get it. It must have been with deep sadness and frustration that Jesus then asked them a question, "Can you drink the cup of suffering I must drink? Can you be baptized in the same way I must be baptized?" (Mark 10:38)

Full of themselves both solemnly answered "Yes we can," not realizing they had no idea what they were asking for.

Jesus' baptism in the River Jordan, which happened just prior to the beginning of his ministry, was actually his ordination or inauguration to his calling to be the Suffering Messiah, the High Priest who sacrificed himself for the remission of sins.

Knowing this, now you can understand why Jesus was driven by the Spirit into the wilderness immediately after his baptism: to struggle with and finally submit to the consequences of accepting the responsibility to suffer and die for the sins of the world. Tempted by Satan, Jesus could've gone either way, but in the end he faithfully embraced his destiny.

Getting back to James and John, as it turned out years later, James was put to death for his faith and even though John the beloved disciple died of old age in his own bed, both of them ultimately did drink from Jesus' cup and finally got what they asked for, to sit with Christ in glory in his kingdom, not because they engineered a slick

backroom deal, but only because they finally came around, denied themselves, picked up their crosses and followed Jesus.

Now comes the time in the sermon to apply the lessons learned from today's scriptures by answering two questions:

- 1) What does Hebrews tell you about your need to unburden yourself from any preconceived notion keeping you from really knowing God's grace and forgiveness through Christ?
- 2) What does Jesus' answer to James and John's outrageous request tell you about the burdens you need to take on so you can really know God's love and forgiveness through Christ?

First, Question 1: What's the particular burden you yourself carry keeping you from fully knowing God's grace and forgiveness?

The Gospels report that, one day, Jesus looked out at all the people who came to hear him preach, and sensing their frustrations and despair called out to them, "Come to me all you who carry heavy burdens and I will give you rest."

From the time we were children we've been carefully taught we have to work hard to earn our own way if we're ever to be happy and successful. As toddlers we started with potty training, then learning how to tie our own shoes, and dress ourselves. When we went to kindergarten we wanted to see stars for good behavior on our charts and later A's and B's on our report cards. After graduation we worked to earn promotions and higher salaries to earn the esteem and respect of our coworkers, as well as our own, because we were taught from the beginning we had to earn our own way to be happy and successful.

Of course, learning the importance of working hard and earning our own way is what makes the world go 'round. If we're all slackers nothing that mattered would ever get done. But there are unintended consequences to this work ethic. If you resisted being potty trained, if you took longer than others to learn to tie your shoes, if your classmates got more stars and better grades and you never got promoted or a higher salary, you might end up with a case of low self-esteem.

But there's another unintended consequence. Your need to earn and excel inevitably spills over into your spirituality driving you to unconsciously apply the same expectations you were carefully taught to succeed in the world to your relationship with God. You can end up thinking like everything else worth having, "I must earn God's favor and love by being better than who I really am." Facing this conundrum you do either one of two things, you set yourself a standard of right and wrong and take excessive and undue pride in keeping it, while looking down on those who don't, or you live in frustration and despair because you've told yourself, too many times, you don't measure up, you're a failure and God doesn't love you so why should you love yourself.

The Letter to the Hebrews assures us that even when we fail to keep the strict legalistic laws and traditions imposed on us by others claiming to speak for God, (but in reality don't) even so, God still loves you so maybe you should love yourself, and throw off any burdensome standards you've learned to judge yourself by.

You see, the truth is, Christ came to unburden you from the law of high expectations. The Gospel is all about God's grace giving you a pass even though you failed if only because God loves you. If that weren't the case, Jesus wouldn't have said, "Come to me all who carry heavy burdens and I will give you rest."

Now, Question 2: What does Jesus' answer to James and John's outrageous request tell you about the burdens you should take on so you can come to really know grace and forgiveness through Jesus Christ?

Remember the movie "Saving Private Ryan? Immediately after the allies landed on the beaches of Normandy, a squad of American soldiers was given a mission: go out and find a Private Ryan and bring him back alive because the War Department discovered all his brothers were killed in battle and he was his widowed mother's only surviving son. By the end of the story most of the squad was killed or seriously injured. The mortally wounded Captain who led the squad, knowing the cost and sacrifice it took to save Private Ryan, looked at Ryan and said with his dying breath, "Earn this."

Keep in mind, Ryan, already saved because of the sacrifice of others was still told to "Earn this." Earn this because we died so you might live. Don't squander your life away! Make it count!! Never forget and always remember how we willingly laid down our lives because we were told to do so. We followed our orders and completed our mission. Now it's all up to you."

When James and John finally realized Jesus sacrificed his life for them because he was told to do so, followed his orders and completed his mission, now it was up to them to make their lives count. I'm sure they realized nothing they could ever do could equal what Jesus did for them, and yet awed and overwhelmed by Christ's sacrifice and empowered by his grace James and John chose to "earn this" by sacrificing themselves for Christ and his Gospel every day for the rest of their lives.

"Earn this," not because your salvation depends on you, but because Christ died for you. Live your life by living for others. When given the opportunity, sacrifice yourself as Christ sacrificed himself, by making yourself available to the ones you meet every day who carry heavy burdens that need to be lifted from their shoulders by you so they like you can claim God's grace and forgiveness.

Let's pray.