

Twenty-fifth Sunday after Pentecost, Lect. 32
November 11, 2018
Hebrews 9:24-28

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A Giving that Overflows

Grace to you and peace from our loving God, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

In these final weeks of the Sundays after Pentecost, the readings begin to sound as if we have already begun a new year. When the writer of Hebrews says that Christ will appear “to save those who are eagerly waiting for him” we might imagine that the reference is to Christmas and that we have been plunged in an untimely fashion into Advent—those four weeks leading up to Christmas. Not so.

Look more closely: “...Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear *a second time*, not to deal with sin, but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.” This concerns not the first coming of Jesus to us as the baby in Bethlehem. It is about the second coming. Christ, who came at Christmas at the beginning of this current liturgical year—way back in December, 2017—is to return at the end of time for the sole purpose of saving us. We mark that return with Christ the King Sunday, which is only two weeks away.

In anticipation of that time, we remember with the writer of this esoteric book the great gift that Jesus gave us—the gift that we have been discussing ever since last Christmas—himself—his birth, life, ministry, words, witness, suffering, death, resurrection, and ascension. Hebrews and many parts of scripture tend to conflate all of these into simple phrases focusing on what some see as the more important event—the crucifixion or the resurrection. But the gift of salvation embraces the entire year, and the entire story of the acts of our Lord Jesus here on Earth.

I have been amazed to hear even some of the smallest asking difficult questions. In my parish in Indianapolis, I remember a little 3-year-old named Erika. As I think about her and her inquisitive mind, I think of Arno too and his incisive questions about faith. What came to mind about Erika is that she was wondering one day about why Jesus had to die, and what it is about his dying that could be helpful to us and to our faith. Her question is one that we all ask. And her comment is delightful, “That’s not fair!”

Of course, Erika was absolutely right. It’s not fair that Jesus died. But death is a part of the experience of being human, and Jesus came to show us how to be as fully human as possible. Hear again what this passage from Hebrews tells us:

And just as it is appointed for mortals to die once, and after that the judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin, but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.

Jesus was God who became human to show us what God wants us to be, in birth, in life, and in death. And also, of course, in his resurrection, ascension, and heavenly rule over all.

What would have been even more unfair is if Jesus had to die more than once. The writer of Hebrews is addressing Erika's question here too. Listen:

Nor was it to offer himself again and again, as the high priest enters the Holy Place year after year with blood that is not his own; for then he would have had to suffer again and again since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the age to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself.

Jesus did not die many times; he died only once, just as we do. And when we celebrate the Lord's Supper, which he gave to us on the night before he died, Jesus is not offering a sacrifice at the table. He is offering his resurrected life to us. The writer of Hebrews understands that there is too much focus on death and not enough on life. And I say, with enthusiasm, "Amen."

When we look only at Jesus' death, as we look at any death, it seems unfair. When my parents died several years ago, even at a good old age, it felt unfair to me. I still want to call my father and talk with him. I still want to know that my mother is there when I need her advice. I still want to be able to visit with them, have them there to offer wisdom and to see what happens in my life and the lives of their grandchildren and now, great grandchildren, whom they were never privileged to meet. It seems such a waste that they could not remain with us. It's not fair.

Jesus' death is different. My parents' lives continue in the eternal embrace of God's life. Jesus' life continues beyond death in a far more powerful way. With the sending of the Holy Spirit, Jesus does indeed remain with us. We know him and talk with him and seek his wisdom, because he is right there in our hearts, our minds, our conscience, and our souls. Jesus' death is tragic and unfair, but it is not the last word. Through the resurrection and return to the Godhead, he is always there for us. That's part of what we learn as we move towards Christ the King Sunday. Jesus reigns forever in our world and in our hearts.

The writer of Hebrews tells us this: "For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made by human hands, a mere copy of the true one, but he entered into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf."

On the way back to the Father, Jesus gives us his all. It begins even before his birth, as you know. Already at the beginning of time, John's gospel tells us, the Word was giving himself to the task of creating us. We learn from Philippians that when the time had been fulfilled for the Incarnation to begin, Jesus gave up even equality with God, and Paul speaks of that gift as an example for us:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in human likeness. (2:5-7)

Everything that Jesus did was an example for us. Paul tells us that from the beginning of the gift to the end, this self-giving of our Lord was always active, encompassing all that Jesus was and did:

And being found in human form, he humbled himself, and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. (2:8)

Jesus continues to give and give and give.

- He supplies wine to sustain a wedding celebration.
- He gives of his essence as power flows from him when he is touched.
- He gives up his coveted time for prayer to feed and heal.
- He calls disciples and takes time with them to teach carefully.
- He struggles to find the stories and images and parables that will touch his hearers with the power of the good news that he so desperately wants to bring.
- He gives his best when he speaks the beatitudes and teaches us to pray.
- He gives of himself when we are afraid and storms rage around us. He stills them and calls us to peace and stillness.
- He gives up his pride and learns a lesson of grace from a Syrophenician woman.
- He rejects the prejudices of his upbringing and speaks to a Samaritan woman.
- He overcomes disgust with those who collect taxes for the occupying forces of his day and calls one of them to follow him.
- He gives his sorrow and his tears at the death of a friend, and then raises him again to life.
- In this morning's gospel, he gives judgment against hypocrisy and the oppression of the poor.
- He gives his utmost on the cross, saving us and showing us that there are no limits to love, and that death, when it comes, is not to be feared because it is not the end.
- He gives again as he appears to his disciples and sends his Spirit to those who believe.

The bounty of Jesus' giving inspires our own. God's bounty gives us the grace to hold nothing back in serving God—just as Jesus held nothing back in serving God and us.

Yes, even to the free offering of our lives. Not necessarily to end them. But to use them, devote them, dedicate them as offerings to this Lord who has so loved us that he held absolutely nothing back.

Erika was absolutely right to question our over-emphasis on the suffering and death of Jesus. And to recognize that death is not fair. And yet, it teaches us something about how to live the life that God gave us. Because when we love as Jesus loved, we hold nothing back. And I think Erika knew that too. That shy child of China, nurtured in a bounty of love by a single woman, blossomed into a loving young girl who never met a stranger. Her love spilled out of her like a fountain—freely and unreservedly. She learned and continues to learn what Jesus wants us all to learn.

Jesus' birth, life, teaching, death, and resurrection teach us that God's love makes us free to hold nothing back. Free for being the loving and giving human beings that God designed us to be, yes. But also free from. Free from the shackles of everything that might keep us from a full life.

Faith sets us free because when God loves us, we already have the most precious gift of all. We already have what money can't buy and what death can't take away. We have the only gift that makes any real difference. The rest is all icing. The rest we are freed to use or to give away as we choose.

We love because God first loved us.

We give because Jesus gave. We have been set free to let the grace of God spill out of us like a child—like a fountain, for the sake of those God loves. There is no longer anything to hold us back. Not death or life, or principalities or powers, or resentment or fear. Not anything in all of God's good creation can stand in the way of the outpouring of love unleashed by God's own unbounded giving.

May we, like Jesus, love lavishly, serve faithfully, and become for the world fountains of grace. Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord, unto abundant and eternal life. Amen.