

Priest, Sacrifice and Sanctuary

John 2:13-22; Hebrews 10:12-25

Everybody imagines that spirituality entails being calm, cool, collected and in control. And Jesus almost always was. But there was something about his Father's house that sent him out of the envelope just about every time he got near the place in the gospels. You all remember his first trip there, in Luke's gospel, as a boy after his Bar Mitzvah, he got so caught up in following the priests and Levites around the temple that he missed the caravan home. His mother and stepfather were in something near hysterics but all Jesus could talk about was his Father's house, his Father's house.

Or in John's gospel, our Call to Worship today, Jesus leads his disciples on a tour of his Father's house. Only they don't get far because he loses it on the temple porch and rips apart the market set up there to sell goats and sheep and pigeons, the place where they changed imperial currency into temple shekels. And Jesus overturns it all, snapping a rope at any marketeer foolish enough to try to hold his ground in a place Jesus knew his Father had set aside for foreigners to come and worship there.

Or think about David, the crazy king who danced the Ark of the Covenant into the holy city. David once sang in a psalm, *"Zeal for your house will consume me!"* And it darn near did! Just getting the Ark to Jerusalem cost David a man's life. It cost him a year of his reign, it was actually part of what cost him his first marriage.

But for all his failures, David never lost his zeal for getting near and staying near God in his sanctuary. In Psalm 24, David would sing, *"One thing I have asked from the LORD, that I shall seek, that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD and to meditate in his temple."*

On that score David and Jesus were very much alike. Both of them came alive, both of them had a focus and a zeal for the worship sanctuary that was both wonderful and a little scary. David, dancing like a minstrel, leading the Ark up Mt. Zion in a national parade. Jesus at the head of another parade a thousand years later, the whole countryside happy and singing and waving palms until Jesus sees a market set up at the sanctuary at which point Christ goes on a rampage and the merchandise goes airborne!

But that zeal, that heart for worship is why so much of the focus here in Hebrews is on blood and water, and worship and sanctuary. Because then and now, Christians have been tempted to think that the bulk of what happens between us and God takes place somewhere besides the heart, somewhere out there in how we act and what we do. So we come to church wanting to learn how to raise our kids and how to make and spend our money and how to manage our time and influence our neighbors.

We want to learn the what's and how's and how much and how many when life is really more about who. Who sets your heart aflame so that you become like David, a dancing fool when God finally arrives in your town and you can get near enough to worship him? Who becomes your focus when, like Jesus, the whole city meets you at the gate and wants to make you king and all you care about is whether there's room on the sanctuary porch for a stranger to worship God if that's what he needs to do?

Don't get fooled! Life is about who you love, that's what defines us. And the foundation for love and faithfulness and loyalty is set for us at worship, when we draw near to God to be forgiven, and to receive love from and express love to that one Person whose love is always true, whose ways are always straight and whose word is always good. Get worship right and God will sort out the rest of what we do.

Fail to learn zeal for worship and love for God and all the patterns and disciplines and techniques the spiritual athletes want to teach us will go all tilt. Because what happens between us and God together in worship is what equips our hearts to live out what God commands us to be. To be sure, the Bible does have lots to say about how to build our marriages and raise our kids, how to make and spend and give money, how to love and serve and influence people.

There is a world of things to learn and we need to learn them all, but the worship we hold in common is where we gain from God together all those qualities that breathe life and grace into all those patterns and disciplines we hope to live out... together. And so this morning's word from Hebrews is about how Christ has won for us the forgiveness and reconciliation that all the Old Testament furniture and rituals and sacrifices could only symbolize and hint at.

Christ embodies all the goodness that Old Testament could only foreshadow.

Christ is the sacrifice who once and for all satisfied God's justice and anger against how bent and wrong all of us are. It was Christ who bore the Father's zealous and angry justice so that we could become the children of a zealous and loving Father. The sort of Father, Jesus taught, who when he sees us in trouble and trying to make our way to him, he runs out the house and pulls us into his arms on the highway and clothes us in his robe and welcomes us at his table, all our sins and troubles aside.

As a high school student, starting out with Christ and reading my Bible for the first time, I had trouble believing that the God I was reading about could ever love a guy like me. Until I found one of those prayers by David, who was inspired to know a thousand years before the fact that someone like Christ would pay for his sins.

David prayed, *"The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness. He will not strive with us, nor will he keep his anger forever. He has not requited us according to our sins, nor has he rewarded us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his lovingkindness toward those who fear him. As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us. Just*

as a father has compassion for his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him.”

It was Christ’s sacrifice that allowed his Father to become our Father, to put his justice and anger aside and treat those who “*fear him*”, believers, as his own children. Now David discovered and we will after him that the Father’s love can be severe. No father loves a child and allows him to remain a jerk. But if we belong to Christ, the Father always and only deals with us out of love. And it’s Christ’s sacrifice for our sins that once and for all freed the Almighty to be our Father and not our Judge.

But Christ is more than just an abstract sacrifice standing between us that the justice we deserve. Hebrews tells us that Christ is “*a great priest over the house of God.*” He is that human being standing between us and the Almighty, humanizing both the holiness the Father demands and the forgiveness the Father offers so that we can possess it day by day in the twists and turns and storms of our lives. Jesus held children on his lap, welcomed fallen women at his feet. He spotted Zaccheus, the little traitor, up in a tree and amazed the crowd by inviting him to lunch. His words, his life, his presence when we gather is what makes God’s love personal.

Finally, we learn in Hebrews that Christ, himself, is the sanctuary. Whenever two or more of us gather, Jesus promised in Matthew’s gospel to be there in our midst turning our gathering into sanctuary, the place where we can find God and the forgiveness and wisdom and power we need to live as his children. Now this notion of Christ being organically linked with us to form a human sanctuary is difficult for modern people to think about, and not just moderns! After tearing the temple porch apart, Jesus found himself immediately confronted by priests and Levites, the same sort of people who had fascinated him when he was twelve.

And their question to him was not unreasonable, “Who do you think you are? You better have some sort of sign up your sleeve if you want to run the sanctuary!” And Jesus did have a sign in mind, “*Destroy this temple and I will rebuild it in three days!*” Nobody that day understood what he was getting at. It was only after the resurrection that the apostles connected up the “*three days*” part and understood that the temple Jesus talked about was his own body slain which was slain as a sacrifice and resurrected to become a sanctuary. But how can a single person become a sanctuary?

We see hints of it in our passage this morning. We read in Hebrews that Jesus has “*opened a new and living way for us through the curtain, that is his flesh.*” it says. For more than a thousand years in Israel, a curtain hung between God’s people and the Holy of holies, the place where God lived and his goodness and purity and forgiveness and love could be found. And only one person ever got there and him only once a year as a hint that one day human beings would be welcome in God’s presence again.

Now we learn in Hebrews that the curtain was Christ’s “*flesh*”, his body. And we learn in 1st Corinthians and other places that when we believe in Christ, the Spirit enters our hearts and

weaves us together as *“the body of Christ”*. Paul goes so far as to picture each of us as a particular organ in an argument meant to teach us that we can be whole, we can be well only if we remain loyal to and invested in each other.

In other words, when Jesus rose from the dead in three days, he founded a temple that is organic, spiritually speaking. To believe in Christ is to become a building block in a new temple, an organ in Christ’s body. And it’s in light of that notion that the rest of what’s taught in Hebrews this morning begins to make sense. *“... let us,”* he writes, all of us together, *“draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience, bodies washed with pure water...”* All the rituals Israel strived at on their way to worship, Christ has already accomplished for us. For all time, our sins are covered, our bodies pure from sin. So Hebrews goes on, *“...let us hold fast the confession of our hope...”* In other words, the forgiveness and the promises, the hope we gain in common worship is not an individual possession. We either possess it together or we don’t possess it.

So our passage concludes, *“...let us consider how to stir one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.”* In other words, if Christ is the cornerstone of a new human sanctuary and we are the human building blocks as Paul taught in Ephesians, if Christ is the head of a body in which we are all organs as Paul taught in 1st Corinthians, then we need to share a common life that is something more than make believe. We need to meet, to learn a gospel together, to work through our differences redemptively, like Christ works with us.

We can’t divide out into like-minded cliques and factions where all we ever hear is what we thought in the first place. I challenge you to read the book of Acts and the letters of Paul and take to heart what different places the early Christians came from and how the Apostles constantly exhorted them to keep their hearts and minds open to one another and to build a common life together. Things like love and loyalty and faithfulness and humility grow from what we do in common, and it only begins with what happens in our hearts on Sunday mornings.