

A Pleasing Sacrifice  
John 19:31-42 (Part VII)  
Lent Midweek VI  
April 1, 2020

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

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

This evening we conclude our meditation on the passion of our Lord, according to the gospel of St John, just in time to hear it in full next Friday. And, as we do conclude the reading this evening, we ought recognize that this final portion is no anticlimactic “post-death” wrap-up, but is perhaps the most comforting of them all. For, yes, last week we were comforted that Jesus remembers us, but in this evening’s conclusion of the text, the Holy Spirit proclaims that the Father remembers us and, because the Father remembers us, the “for you” benefits of the Christ’s sacrificial death and atoning blood already begin to pour out for you and for me, even before the Messiah’s lifeless body is removed from the cross.

Now, what do I mean by saying that this text shows that the Father remembers us? The Father isn’t even mentioned; how can this be about the Father’s love for us?

Consider, friends, that even after Jesus has died, the Jewish leaders are still unwittingly threatening the prophecies, still – in their Sabbath legalism – seeking to break the legs of the New Covenant by breaking the legs of the criminals. For, the prophetic Word says that the bones of God’s Lamb are not to be broken; but, already dead,

Jesus is in no position to defend the prophecies, to fulfill them by his own volition and remembrance of them. But, just as it was the Father's will to sacrifice the Messiah on our behalf, it is also the Father's will to defend the prophecies of old and protect his sacrifice from being desecrated and rendered insufficient for fulfilling the words of the prophets. That truth is often lost on us, but the hymn writer says it well:

The Father offers up His Son, desiring our salvation.  
O Love, how strong You are to save!  
*You* lay the One into the grave  
Who built the earth's foundation.

And so, when the Jews ask Pilate to send the soldiers to break the legs of the criminals, the Father steps in and ensures that his already completed sacrifice is not desecrated, the Messiah's bones are protected, and – instead – the soldier pierces the side of God's Lamb, and – a final time – the prophetic word is fulfilled regarding that Christ promised since Genesis 3. And, as that final word is fulfilled, his body cannot hold back the benefits, but they spring forth from his side – blood and water pouring forth, the blood of forgiveness and water of new life – in a manner that John himself sees and recognizes: "He who saw it has borne witness—his testimony is true, and he knows that he is telling the truth—that you also may believe."

Notice that last phrase?: “that you also may believe.” Yes, there’s the “for you” reality of the cruciform Gospel already confessed, already recognizable before the Christ is even removed from his throne of sacrifice and placed into the tomb. There’s the “for you” reality that the Father willed and the Christ achieved and the Father safeguarded, that you may benefit from all - every detail – that was carried out at Calvary.

Yes, *every* detail. We ought ponder this great truth that, though as Luther says, Christ’s blood is so rich, His merit so sufficient, that just one drop of blood could have atoned for the whole world. Nevertheless, it is equally true that Christ did nothing *extra* for your salvation – you needed it all, your sins owed it all and burdened him with it all and required it all. We must admit that *implicitly*, the “for you” proclaims into our ears our responsibility, our portion of the guilt... that our salvation required every last little bit of what Christ endured. Your salvation is no less expensive, your need was no less dire, than the thief on the cross, or the Jewish pharisees, or Adam himself. The “for you” means “for your sake, on your behalf, for the sake of paying for your sins, your guilt, your condemnation.” Christ did nothing *extra*; it *all* had to be accomplished; his payment was not superfluous or an over-reaction: your sin deserved all of it, required all of it.

But the “for you” simultaneously means he also left nothing *undone* for your salvation; he finished it all, accomplished it all,

secured it all, paid for it all. All that your sins required, he endured. All that you owed, he paid. All the burden that was to be laid upon you, He willingly carried. Both Law and Gospel pour forth as Isaiah's words echo through history:

“he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed.”

And the benefits of all that now, from the very moment recorded in our text, pour forth for you from the Lamb's sacrificed body as the Father – pleased with the sacrifice – defends its honor from the Jews' ignorant attempt to break the prophetic word.

And to show how widespread, how universal, is the gift of this sacrifice – to show how the blessed “for you” is for *all* who are far off – the heavenly Father gives care of the body to a rich man and a pharisee, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus. Yes, those two classes of sinners Jesus so often called out for repentance and warned that it would be harder for them than for any to enter into heaven because of the stubbornness of their self-righteousness or the love of their wealth, even they can be beneficiaries of God's grace, even they can be granted faith that the Christ's “for you” work extends to them. And, if even for them, then also even for you. How often we love to decry the pharisee's self-righteousness or the rich man's idolization of his wealth, ignoring our own hypocrisy as our lives at times are absorbed in and defined by both faithless ways: we

love our material treasures almost as much as our self-measured wisdom and knowledge of God.

Thus, if we claim it less than fitting that a rich man and pharisee would have the privilege of handling our Lord's lifeless body, we do well to repent of ourselves and consider that it is equally less than fitting that we sinners would have the privilege of handling our Lord's life-sustaining body and drinking his life-giving blood. We may fume with frustration that we don't get to gather right now to receive the Sacrament in our regular gathering, but do we forget that the Sacrament is not foremost our right as it is our divine privilege... a privilege we have sadly so often taken for granted, sometimes treating it as secondary to life's weekend schedule, so that the Lord now patiently and lovingly chides and disciplines and teaches us anew... so that we for the rest of our earthly days will remember these horrible weeks and will never again take for granted this divine privilege, each and every time we have opportunity to "take, eat" our Lord's life-sustaining body and "take, drink" his life-giving blood... to touch and handle the same body and blood, sinners though we be, that the sinner rich man and pharisee also handled with the greatest reverence. Their benefit is our benefit – and it yields from our hearts the love of Christ, flowing from faith in Christ, on account of the merciful sacrifice of Christ.

And so, these two – Joseph and Nicodemus – are pictures of the love and faith and appreciation of all the penitent. Joseph

despairs of his wealth and gives up his property (his tomb) in faith that Jesus – as the Christ – deserves honor even in death. And Nicodemus, who (having come to Jesus by night) had struggled to comprehend the mysteries of heaven now, in faith, gives up his earthly reputation and status and self-constructed theological wisdom and, instead, sees the crucifixion of the convicted as the mystery of God's work on his own selected altar by his own selected Lamb for the benefit of all who repent and are born anew by the Spirit in faith in this Christ. And, together, these two unlikely beneficiaries of the faith – the rich man and the pharisee – bury their crucified Lord in the tomb in the garden.

A few weeks ago, we had meditated upon the importance of the historical details included in the accounts of our Lord's passion: the hill called Golgotha could've easily been verified by the passersby who knew the place of Roman crucifixion. Tonight, we mentally go to the tomb in the garden and realize that there the declaration of Christ's resurrection unmistakably rang out for a generation after his ascension... as friend and foe alike knew in their heart of hearts that that tomb in the garden had housed Jesus of Nazareth, but could not keep him contained.

But, it's not just the location of the tomb that makes declaration, but also – as John includes them in our text – the linen and the myrrh. The myrrh point us backward to Jesus' birth and the marks of gentile worship when the magi came bearing gifts before

the infant prophet, priest, and king. The mention of the linen hints at what is to come, for in a few short days, the linen will lay empty, the face cloth neatly folded – a certain indication this was no hasty stealing away of the body, but a calm and controlled resurrection and victory over the tomb to be left behind... a relic of history, lost in history.

Such is also how we ought see not only Christ's grave, but therefore our own. Yes, the grave may lie ahead of us, but it's already destined to be a relic of history, lost to history. It will be overcome just as calmly as when Christ stepped from the grave; indeed, just the same, our coffins will be left neatly behind as we who died with Christ again live with him. But each in his own order, we at Christ's coming again in glory, but first Christ himself.

And so, the final words of the reading of the Passion set the stage for that which we anticipate, all of history anticipates... that the resurrection will come to pass, just as Christ had promised, and with it will arise from the dust of the earth our certain hope that this benefit is "for you", that we might with confidence and joy *look for* our own resurrection and boldly cry out, "Kyrie Eleison, Lord have mercy."

In the Name of the Father  
And of the Son  
And of the Holy Spirit.  
+ AMEN +

Rev. Mark C. Bestul  
Calvary Lutheran Church  
April 1, 2020