



THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

THE LIFE-GIVING BLOODBATH

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He's a high-tech entrepreneur, one of the brilliant young trailblazers of Silicon Valley who has done several successful startups and then went on (having pocketed all the money he could ever spend) to being an advisor and speaker. As he tells his story at conferences and corporate retreats, he begins with a true autobiographical confession. His high IQ and academic superiority allowed him to graduate from high school at 16 and gain early admission to Stanford. He enrolled as pre-med, intent on pursuing a career in medicine. And then it happened: in an introductory course in anatomy, he was taken into the lab for a dissection. And the moment the incision was made on the specimen, he fainted at the sight of blood. When he was revived, he knew instantly that if he couldn't handle blood, he shouldn't be a doctor. That's what prompted him to switch his major to engineering and information sciences. Computers, after all, don't bleed.

For many people, the sight of blood is a difficult experience. Something visceral in us tells us that the red liquid pulsing through the arteries and veins of humans and animals is somehow precious and sacred and emotion-packed. It's not ketchup or tomato sauce. It has the power of life in it—and when it's shed, it has the power of death.

One of the vocal critics of the Christian faith snobbishly dismissed what we believe as a “bloody religion.” He meant it as a put-down: that, rather than dealing on a pure abstract philosophical level suitable for intellectuals like him, faith in Jesus drags us down into the bloody reality of life with all its messiness and frailties. Actually the critic was right: Christianity is a “bloody religion.” At the core, it's about life and death. Christ is not some pure, dispassionate marble statue to look up to and

admire from a distance; His earthly name was Jesus, and He lived among us in the dust and dirt and pain of real life. And His own blood really poured out from His wounds, and His heart really stopped, and His body was really lifeless. Any tender person suddenly coming upon the crucifixion would have understandably passed out at the sight of all that blood. It was a very bloody day indeed.

A man by the name of Paul had unique insight into the real meaning and significance of that bloody event. In a letter known to us as Romans he wrote about it.

When we were utterly helpless, Christ came at just the right time and died for us sinners. ⁷Now, most people would not be willing to die for an upright person, though someone might perhaps be willing to die for a person who is especially good. ⁸But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners. ⁹And since we have been made right in God's sight by the blood of Christ, he will certainly save us from God's condemnation. ¹⁰For since our friendship with God was restored by the death of his Son while we were still his enemies, we will certainly be saved through the life of his Son. ¹¹So now we can rejoice in our wonderful new relationship with God because our Lord Jesus Christ has made us friends of God.

Romans 5:6-11 (NLT)

How can the shed blood of one Man result in other men and women being reconciled to God? Every one of us has repeated the blunders of Adam and Eve by personally choosing, over and over, more times than we can ever count, to be selfish and sinful, disobeying God's law within our conscience and treating other humans wrongly. The flippant defense that we're "basically good people" won't stand up in God's courtroom. There are far too many offenses on all of our records to give us any hope of acquittal.

And yet the prophecies of the Old Testament sages were united in this conviction: that somehow an Innocent giving up his life in the place of the guilty could work this magical transaction. Paul put it this way in verse 9: "We have been made right in God's sight by the blood of Christ."

I accidentally discovered a fascinating clue to how this works as I was reading the experiences of a man a century ago who had spent time

with working shepherds tending flocks in the Middle East. The spring-time of the year was “lambing season,” when the pregnant ewes gave birth. In larger flocks it was not uncommon for two births to happen the same day ... and occasionally there were problems. The author reported this incident. A mother gave birth to a baby that died in the birth process. At nearly the same time nearby a baby lamb was brought into the world but the mother died of hemorrhaging. The natural solution would have been to put the baby with no mother together with the mother whose baby died so that the mother could feed and raise the orphan. But it doesn’t work, because the mother can smell that the baby is not hers. So the experienced Middle Eastern shepherd would drain blood from the dead lamb and pour that blood over the orphaned lamb; then that blood-covered lamb would be placed with the mother. And the mother would smell her own blood, and receive the orphan as her own. That bloodbath made the lamb acceptable.

This was apparently a well-known practice in ancient cultures that were dependent on shepherding. Perhaps Paul was even familiar with it. This image could well have been in his mind as he wrote about our “being made right in God’s sight by the blood of Christ.” Other Christian poetry and hymns have spoken about our being “washed in the blood of the Lamb”—meaning that Christ’s blood (the “Lamb of God”) poured over us makes us acceptable to God.

This holy bloodbath occurs not by any outward ritual, but by an inner decision of the mind and will that we call “faith” or “believing.” It doesn’t require that we journey to a special place. That was the temporary requirement during centuries of the Old Testament. Jews were expected to travel to the literal Temple, constructed in the heart of their capital city, Jerusalem. And there they would pay the price to purchase a lamb, and that lamb would be bound and laid on the altar by a priest. The person who desired forgiveness for their sins would then have to place their hand on the forehead of the animal as it was slain, thereby transferring their guilt to it—and through its innocent blood being shed, that innocence or acquittal was transferred backwards to the guilty sinner. But this is no longer necessary. We don’t travel to a physical place or perform a physical act. It is all done within. We make the choice to “believe” in Jesus as our Savior and Substitute, and to “receive” His death as applying to us.

Some people have wrongly concluded that believing in Christ is something insignificant or incidental or casual. But it is actually profound and life-changing. A columnist for a major city newspaper (back when newspapers actually paid well for columnists) once wrote about his discovery of how a casually-used word can take on new and powerful meaning. In his late 20's, after a few of the typical youthful romances and breakups, he was ready for a real commitment—and he found the right woman to whom he wished to make that commitment. The night of their wedding rehearsal the clergyman recited the vows that he was to say to his bride the next day, and one of his lines was “I love you.” The rest of that evening he was troubled, because he knew that he had used that word “love” carelessly, and repeatedly, with girls he had dated. But what he felt for, and wanted to communicate to, his bride was vastly greater and more significant. It was love taken to another level, an immeasurably higher magnitude. The phrase “I love you” was no longer a flippant phrase to be tossed out carelessly. And at the moment he said “I love you” to his bride at the altar, it meant far more than those words had ever meant before coming out of his mouth. In saying it now, he knew that his life was changing. A lasting commitment was being made.

The same is true for a Christian who says, “I believe in Jesus.” We can believe things that are relatively insignificant and passing. I may believe that the solution I have worked out to a math problem on my algebra exam is the right answer. I may visit several car dealers and decide that I believe a particular car is the best deal. I may study the issues and believe that a certain candidate is the one I will vote for. But to “believe” in Jesus is of a vastly higher magnitude. When you say it correctly, it changes your life. You are now committed to God, and He to you. Things are never the same again.

In the Sacrament of Holy Communion, we have the privilege of remembering this amazing truth: that Christ, by His sacrificed body and blood, has brought us into God's embrace. The traditional symbols are the bread (representing the broken body) and the cup (representing the shed blood). May all who believe—who have made that decision in their minds and hearts to trust Jesus as their life-giving bloodbath—experience renewed hope and confidence in Him as they “do this in remembrance of Him.”

