

The Sacrifice of Praise

Hebrews 13:15-16

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Let me begin by wishing each of you a blessed Thanksgiving Day. This has been an incredibly difficult year for our State: unemployment, personal indebtedness, corporate bankruptcies, mortgages which exceed the value of the property. Add to this the blood shed by our sons and daughters in far away places like Afghanistan and Iraq. We are a hurting people. As a Christian, I believe that in any and every circumstance we have every reason to give thanks. For a Christian is confident and certain about only two things: 1) God is with us, and 2) God will lead us through the darkest valleys to the brightest future—beyond what we can even imagine. May God grant each of you to be truly grateful for all that you have received and ever mindful of all those around you who are in need.

A colleague of mine was visiting in the hospital when a nurse asked him to call on a woman who was in great pain and had no family. He dutifully went and introduced himself. She was indeed very restless and visibly distressed. It is hard to know what to say to a stranger who is suffering, but he had read in her chart that said she was a Roman Catholic. So he asked her if she would like him to call a priest. “No,” she said, “I have a priest.” At which point she removed her hand from under the covers and thrust a large crucifix into his face. Wow. That is the humbling yet wonderful thing about being a pastor. You always think you are going to minister to someone else, and then they wind up ministering to you!

If there is a single message of the book of Hebrews in the New Testament, it is this: Jesus Christ is our high priest. Our text this evening is like a high priest’s “owner’s manual.” A good owner’s manual says what a given item can do and how to use it. Except in this case, we are not talking about an object we possess, but a person who has given himself to us.

A good high priest does one thing for you: he gives you access. Not access to a vast religious bureaucracy, nor access to political power, secret knowledge or self-help

principles, but access to God. Verse 15 begins, “Through Jesus...[we have access]...to God...” (Hebrews 13:15).

Hebrews tells us that Jesus is the “exact representation of God’s being.” (Hebrews 1:3) There is nothing fuzzy or incomplete or deficient in Jesus. He presents to us a flawless, impeccable and perfect image of God. Hebrews also tells us that Jesus was made in every way like us. He shared our humanity. He tasted suffering and death. He was tempted in every way like us except he was without sin (Hebrews 4:15). In this way God is not some remote bureaucrat in some other dimension who does not understand the blood, sweat and tears of humanity, but in fact he has gotten his hands dirty in this world and salted it with his own tears and spilled his own blood on the earth. Think of it! The ground you stand on tonight has absorbed the blood of God Almighty. That alone should be enough for you to want to take off your shoes and worship, for you are on holy ground!

If you had your choice of seeing a lecture and slideshow about the moon given by Neil Armstrong or Albert Einstein, whom would you choose? Armstrong, of course! He has been there, he is an eyewitness—no one on earth could give you better access to the moon than one who has been there and come back to tell about it. Likewise, Jesus came from God and became fully human so that we would have access to know God.

Not only did Jesus remove the barrier of ignorance, but he also removed the barrier of sin. The Bible says in Isaiah 59:2, “Your iniquities have separated you from God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear.” In the Old Testament, people gave animal sacrifices to atone for their sins. The sense was that sin created a debt we owe to God. The sacrifice was a symbolic way of paying that debt. But it was only symbolic and temporary; therefore people repeated the sacrifices constantly. Everyday in the temple, sacrifices were offered. There never was a time in the temple when there was not a sacrifice burning on the altar, 24/7.

But Jesus is no symbol. He is the thing itself, the real deal. He has come down from heaven and brought with him the whole treasury of heaven to pay up all debts for all time with the one offering of his perfect, sinless life—once for all. Hebrews 7:27 says, “Christ sacrificed for our sins once for all when he offered himself.” Jesus Christ is our High Priest; through him alone we have access to God. He has overcome the barriers of

ignorance and sin. All Christians believe and proclaim this central truth, be they Catholic, Presbyterian, Baptist or Amish. This is our unity!

How to use your High Priest in three easy steps:

Step 1: Confess his name! (Hebrews 13:15) He is not your priest until you do this. The Bible says, “If you confess with your mouth that, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” (Romans 10:9)

Some of you know that I come from the U.P. (Upper Peninsula). It is a common expression up in those parts to refer to the rest of Michigan as living “below the bridge” (Mackinaw). I have met many a “Yooper” who proudly proclaimed that they had never been “below the bridge.” For them there might as well not even be a bridge. Likewise Jesus might as well not exist if you do not confess him. If you do not take the access he provides, he cannot be your high priest.

Step 2: Do not ever come into the presence of God empty handed. That was actually a command God gave to the people in Deuteronomy 16:16. But what could we possibly bring to God that he does not already own? The Bible says the earth is the Lord’s and everything in it. (Psalm 24:1) There is virtually nothing left for us to offer—our every possession, our family members, even our very lives themselves already belong to God. We cannot bring him stuff he already owns. That would be like the kid who took handkerchiefs out of his father’s drawer and wrapped them up for a Christmas present to him. Such a gift would only yield shame and embarrassment. However, there is one thing we do have to give: our praise. Praise given in freedom and love is the gift that truly pleases God.

After the flood, the first thing Noah did when he got out of the boat was build an altar, get on his knees and praise God. After the Exodus from Egypt, the first thing Moses did was lead the people in praise, “I will sing to the Lord, for he is highly exalted. The horse and its rider he has hurled into the sea.” (Exodus 15:1). After hearing the announcement of the coming birth of Christ, the first thing Mary did was praise God, “My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior...” (Luke 1:46-47).

Hebrews 13:15 says our praise must be continual. A Christian life is a continuous life of praise and worship. That is why Hebrews 10:25 is so careful to admonish us, “Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing...” Our praise should be

freely given. It should be continual. It should be both corporate and individual. We should not skip a single day, let alone a Sunday. To try and remove worship and praise from Christianity is necessarily to destroy it. We are a people who praise God. We are a people who have complete joy in Jesus Christ. Praise is who we are and praise is all we have to give.

Our praise comes in one other form: “to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.” (Hebrews 13:16) Can you believe that some people were actually forgetting this? Do you forget to do good to your spouse? Your children? Your elderly parents? The addicted? The poor, the unemployed, the divorced, the depressed, the incarcerated or the grieving?

Praise is an expression of faith. For this reason, a generous life is both a praise and an expression of faith.

We have a credit crisis in this country. “Credit” is a Latin word for faith. When a bank loans money to me or to some business, it is a statement of faith. The bank is saying, “We believe in your ability and integrity to pay us back with interest what you received.” The bank offers “credit”, which is to say, faith in you. The same principle holds true when you invest your money in a bank. You are making a faith statement. You say to the bank or the investment house, “I believe in your ability to pay me back, with interest, all that I have given you.” The flow of money has frozen up in our society because we lack faith in each other. This is what a credit crisis means.

But when I give money or time or love to a stranger who is poor and needy, it is not because I believe in them or their ability to pay me back. When I give to the poor, it is not a statement of faith in my fellow man. It is a statement of faith in God. I am trusting that God will care for me and provide for me in the same way I am providing for others. The hand of the poor becomes the altar of praise—a place where I can freely make a faith statement; a place where I can give credit to God. This is what Jesus meant when he said, “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and thieves break in to steal, but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven...” (Matthew 6:19) Every generous act we do in this life then is a statement of faith in God. It is a sacrifice of praise. It is an investment in heaven with which God is well pleased. On the last day God will settle accounts with each one of us by the words of Jesus: “to everyone

who has, more will be given, but as for the one who has nothing, even what he has will be taken away.” (Luke 19:26) He is talking here about faith. Faith begins with the good confession and faith is lives by the continual sacrifice of praise at the altar of the church and in the hand of the poor.

Let me leave you with the benediction that comes at the end of Hebrews:

May the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of all the sheep by the blood of his eternal covenant equip us with every good thing that we might go from this place to do his will, that which is well-pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory for ever and ever. Amen.
(Hebrews 13:20-21)