

Sermon

Sunday, March 10, 2019

Charleston, SC

8:00 am & 10:30 am Sermon ~ Leviticus 16:20-28 and John 15:6-15

At-One-Ment

The Rev. Al Zadig, Jr.

This coming May, my wife and I will have been married for 24 years. It's hard for me to comprehend. In this Lenten season as I reflect on life, if I could define marriage in one word, it would be at-one-ment. Two people going through life as one, joined together – at-one-ment. I think it's the thing we all long for, to be at one with another, unconditionally. Loved by one who knows your flaws, and still loves you! When we have this with a spouse, it results in profound contentment. Yet because we are human and flawed, this is only the second highest contentment we could ever have. Second, because the very highest contentment comes when you and I are at-one with God. Regardless of the joy or pain of our earthly relationships, being at one with God is our highest contentment.

After Adam and Eve act out in the Garden of Eden, sin is introduced and has been our thorn and source of broken-ness ever since! Sin is why our at-one-ment with God is so illusive. Sin defined is that barrier between us and God, anywhere, literally anywhere, where God is not. A thorn that affects us all today in the form of rebellion and unforgiveness. These produce shame, embarrassment, guilt, and condemnation, which then produces brokenness in our relationship with Jesus and others, pain, and even depression. This barrier is such a difficult problem that God in His wisdom gave us an entire book of the Bible called Leviticus to be the manual for maintaining at-one-ness with God, despite our sin. Leviticus, by the way, is the official book of the Bible that people die in when they say, "I'm going to read the Bible cover to cover." Rarely do you make it out of Leviticus. It's a technical manual. Nevertheless, it is the way for dealing with sin, to pave the way for at-one-ment.

To understand Leviticus, you have to understand the two chief principles the Jews

lived by. First, blood was sacred. Blood meant life. Second, "an eye for an eye, tooth for tooth." So, if you took the blood of another, you would pay with your own blood. This is why we are told in our Leviticus reading from today that there is life in the blood. The only way to pay for your sins was through your blood. Blood taken for blood, life for life, wound for wound, bruise for bruise.

Now, make the jump with me. This blood for blood justice was not just between people, it was also blood for blood with God. The only way to be at-one with God was through blood, for God demands justice. But, thankfully, not your blood; this is where animals came in. The Jews would use the blood of animals to satisfy this tooth for tooth understanding with God.

As Leviticus 16 reads, "Aaron shall lay both his hands on the head of the goat and confess over it all the sins of the people of Israel. The goat shall bear all their sins." That goat became known as the scapegoat for our sins. But then, in Jeremiah hundreds of years later, God says, "There is a day coming where I will make with you a new deal." It won't involve the blood of animals. Six hundred years pass, until one evening in an upper room in Jerusalem, a Galilean peasant dares to say, in effect, "The new deal prophesied by Jeremiah is about to be established. This at-one-ment is about to become available to all, not through bloody animal messes on an altar, but through the mess of the blood of Jesus on the cross." Once for all. Staggering! Explosive! Jesus takes the place of that scapegoat. He sheds his blood to atone for our sins, to pay for our sins, and to be at one with us. He is the atonement, his blood, like the blood at the Passover, literally saves our lives. The blood of Jesus on the cross is the way we become at-one with God. Peter Moore texted me a line that says it all, "Jesus came to pay a debt he didn't owe, because we owe a debt we can't pay."

Only through the blood. And I have proof. Paul says in Hebrews 9, in the New Testament, "Jesus bypassed the blood sacrifices of animals, and instead, used his own blood as the price to set us free and bring us into at-one-ment with Him." Paul goes on, "If animal blood was effective in any way, think how much more the blood of Christ cleans up our whole lives, inside and out, and brings us at-one-ment with Him!" Yes, Hebrews 9 is the Christian parallel for Leviticus 16. How does this work? Do you remember when Jesus was on the cross, what did they do? In our Gospel reading from John 19, one of the soldiers jabs a spear into the side of Jesus. At the tip of the spear is a large barbed iron head that, when thrust into his side, makes a large gaping wound on the way out. As it tears the flesh of Jesus, what comes out of him is amazing – a sudden flow of not just blood, but water. Why the water? The water is a divine symbol of cleansing and power and stands for the living water of baptism and salvation, while blood stands for forgiveness. So two elements pour from Jesus, forgiveness and power. Blood is forgiveness, water is the cleansing power. When we receive the blood of Jesus in communion, we have total at-one-ment with Jesus. Total forgiveness. We also receive the washing with water of all our brokenness, our suffering, and our grief. That is why in every Eucharist you always see the priest pour both wine and water into the chalice.

As I wrote this sermon in my office, tears rolled down my cheeks when I read what Chrysostom wrote about blood and the spear. It forever changed the way I will look at the Eucharist. Chrysostom, that 4th century Bishop, writes, "As you drink from that chalice in communion, do it as if you were drinking from the very side of Jesus, drinking in his forgiveness and cleansing strength."

Yet, there are many who would still say, Father Al, I take communion every Sunday and I still don't have that at-one-ness with Jesus that I really desire. If you are there this morning, I say thank you for your honesty. IN return, let me be honest with you, and say there are two main reasons why in taking the blood of Christ, we still may not feel at one with Him. First, Paul in Corinthians writes, "Come to communion and drink that blood in a worthy manner." What does that mean? It means coming to communion forgiven, and forgiving of other people. It is why we have the confessional right before communion. Billy Graham always said, "Psychiatrists and therapists realize there are curative powers in confession." Asking Jesus to forgive you, and to give you the power to forgive another. Again, this is why communion is after confession. It is why we call it the great thanksgiving! It's why we have a celebrant, a celebrator. Praise God we are forgiven, let us now be at one with Jesus through his body and blood. This is God's way of keeping us at-one, not only with him, but with each other. Until we confess, until we forgive, being at-one with Christ will be hard. Every Sunday, therefore, we re-boot our system. It's why Charles Spurgeon, that great English theologian, said, "Sin and hell are married, unless repentance proclaims the divorce."

We all long to be forgiven. Some years ago, a father and a son in Madrid, Spain had become estranged. The son runs away and the father sets off to find him. He searches for months and months to no avail. Finally, in a last desperate effort to find him, the father puts an ad in the Madrid newspaper. The ad reads, "Dear Juan, all is forgiven. Please meet me in front of this newspaper office at noon on Saturday. I love you. Love, your Father." On Saturday, two hundred men named Juan show up, longing for forgiveness and love from their fathers.

So, two reasons we don't feel at one with God. First, we've not forgiven, or asked for forgiveness. But second, it is when we say to ourselves, "I know I need to forgive, but what that other person did was too great to be forgiven. I could never go back there in my mind." Or, "What I did was too great I could never be forgiven." Again, thank you for your honesty. The challenge with this response is that you are essentially saying, "Jesus, what you did on that cross was not enough for me. You dying in our place just wasn't enough." If that is where you are today, you are denying

his pain, his torture, and the hell he endured for you, because he loves you. Christ places himself on the cross as one who himself is guilty, as if he had committed Cain's murder, David's adultery, Peter's denial, and your sin of ____ - you fill in the blank. This led one scholar to say some of us confess a sin a thousand times, never feeling forgiven. I tell them, because of the blood of Jesus, confess once. Then thank God a thousand times for forgiving you in his blood.

So again, two obstacles are preventing our at-one-ment with God. Communion without true confession. And our inability to forgive because we think what has been done to us, or what we've done, is simply too great, even for Jesus. IF those are the two obstacles, let me give you two ways to tear them down. The first is what we're going to do in a minute, which is extended prayer through the Great Litany for Lent. The Litany is a series of prayers meant to help us clean house. It is meant to say, Lord help me forgive and be a forgiver. They were written in the 5th century just for this purpose. But second, let me offer you a gift of the church called private confession. When that one sin is just too much to deal with, it is okay to say, Al, I need help! Like carrying out a piano from our attic, I can't lift it myself. This is what private confession is for, to name that big thing and let a priest help you carry it out. It's in the prayer book on page 447. We have a private confessional service where we walk you through that obstacle that's keeping you from being at-one with God. Don't waste this gift!

So, pray through the Great Litany with us, with all your heart. Call a priest and try this private confessional. I go to a retired priest each month for this reason. When Jesus becomes larger than our inability to forgive or be forgiven, we experience at-one-ment with him.

This is what happened to twelve precious St. Michaelites yesterday. Twelve nine-year olds went through training to receive their first communion today. As part of that, they did the work of forgiveness and received Jesus into their hearts. After our confession, I asked the group how they felt. Nine-year-old Wyatt Brown replied with something I'll never forget. He said, "I feel like heaven." So, come put your mouth under his wound for forgiveness. Say, "Lord, it isn't in me to forgive, but through your blood, give me that strength to forgive, and be forgiven."

Experience the deepest possible at-one-ment with him.

Finally, let me draw this to a close by taking you to 14th century blood-stained Scotland. Robert the Bruce is leading the scots in a bloody effort to gain independence from England. During one of his conquests, the English sack his camp and put bloodhounds out to find him. As the bloodhounds catch Bruce's scent and close in, the second-in-command to Bruce says, "We're done for, they are on our trail." Robert the Bruce leads his battalion quickly through the forest toward a river, and yells Plunge! They all swim upstream and come out down the river and disappear into the forest. Within minutes, the dogs come to that water bank, but can go no further. Why? The scent is gone, the trail broken. You see, our sins are like those barking bloodhounds. But a stream flows, red with the blood of Jesus Christ. No sin hound can touch us. The trail is broken by the precious stream bed of the blood of Christ. By his grace through faith we are saved. So kneeling, let us prepare to take in the blood of Christ by cleansing our souls. I invite you to pray with us the Great Litany.