

BLOOD**Exodus 12:1-14; Matthew 18:15-20****The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 18A)****September 7, 2014****All Saints', Atlanta, Georgia**

The story of the Passover, --the story of the wrath of God passing over or passing by the people of God—is a fundamental story of our faith. And it involves blood—the blood placed on the doorposts and lintel. Blood echoes through our faith as the stuff of life, right up there with bread. And blood is also associated with death and ideas of sacrifice and violence. Blood thirsty, Blood curdling. Bloody awful. Story after story, with the story of Jesus front and center, tell of scapegoats, the killing of some to manage the anxieties of others. A sacrificial system developed that was, at its worst imagined as a kind of mechanical way of dealing with wrongdoing and the consequence of bad actions. Kill the lamb. Kill the dove. Kill Jesus who gets named as the Lamb of God that taketh away the sins of the world. Kill --and the blood will wash away your sins and make you righteous. It is part of our tradition, certainly, this notion that God, for some reason, demands bloodshed. We have just sung “My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus’ blood and righteousness.” But if we learn anything from the story of Jesus and his bloody end, we must learn that violence is never, ever redemptive. Never good.

Always destructive. Sacrifice can only be understood as costly *self*-offering, giving of the stuff of life and so receiving life in measures more than we can imagine for it is in giving ourselves away in love that we find we are most fully who we were created to be.

Sacrifice is that counter-intuitive truth that it is in giving of ourselves and our substance that we receive. I know that it is part of our tradition but the 'washed in the blood of the Lamb' stuff gives me the heeby-jeebies not mainly because it is a fairly disgusting image, but because it seems to get bound up with ideas that somehow violence can be redemptive.

We have to talk about ISIS or ISIL here. Muslims killing other Muslims and anyone else who appears to get in the way of their allegedly God-given purpose of establishing a Sunni caliphate with authority over Muslims throughout the Middle East and the World. I presume that part of their calculus in beheading Americans and posting the videos will cause some kind of response and hope that they are right about that. We have seen this kind of madness and evil before. When will we ever learn that attempts to impose ideology by force always lead to massive human suffering, and usually genocide in one form or another? Christians were at it with our crusades. But so were Hitler, and Pol Pot, and Stalin, ideologues all. Their name is legion in history. There is no

compromising with fundamentalists of any stripe and when they are murderous, surely the rest of humanity must find a way to stop them. Violence, however, is never redemptive and the baying for bloodshed by the talking heads of our world in response to ISIS is revolting in its own way. But the reality is that violence *is* an option for anyone who would put a stop to this ideology and poverty and ignorance driven *jihad*.

Sometimes in this world the best thing is still not something we can declare to be good.

I have shared before my lunch conversation in seminary days as to whether Dietrich Bonhoeffer and others were right to attempt to assassinate Adolf Hitler. To this day I believe they were making the best decision they could and that I hope I would have had the courage of those men and women who could see madness for what it was. At the same time, I cannot declare the resort to violence and killing righteous or good and must name it as something requiring repentance.

Our reading from Matthew starts to get at this challenge on a more personal level when our basic human relationships are broken. He writes of church discipline when members are in conflict with one another and the possibility that reconciliation is sometimes simply not possible. He gives the basis for excommunication, --a discipline

rarely used by Episcopalians, but still an option on the books for bishops. Leaving church aside for the moment, every one of us, sooner or later, knows a relationship that is broken and sometimes we have no reasonable hope or interest in reconciliation. It is reality that things are not perfect in this life and any efforts to make ourselves pure in the sight of God or anyone else are futile, pride-driven and so doomed to failure. But as surely as we renounce violence and coercion while still knowing these to be options for society—surely there will not be prisons in heaven—so we proclaim the importance and possibility of reconciliation and forgiveness and right relationship when we hear the gospel of Jesus and perceive that the reign of God in our midst has already begun.

I remember going on a renewal weekend in the early 80s called *Cursillo*. Some of you might know it as the movement is still around. There were a handful of people on the retreat who proudly called themselves ‘fundamentalists’ and with whom, -- inevitably—I had all kinds of difficulty whenever we were in conversation. At the closing Eucharist, no sooner than we had been absolved of sin and were passing the peace of God in the forgiven and beloved community when one of these people came up to me and said something like “The Peace of the Lord be with you even though I’m a fundamentalist” and I shot back something like “And also with you, you poor thing.”

Sinning *during* the passing of the Peace was a new low for me and actually led me into a kind of crisis for a few weeks. I wondered whether there is any substance to the gospel or whether we are forever consigned to live in a sinful and broken world.

Somehow, by grace, I was reading a book about the Eucharist by an English Methodist who was teaching at Duke, called Geoffrey Wainwright. He pointed out that of course the Eucharist has a past dimension when we remember the story of what really matters. And the present dimension is also obvious as we enact the story in the telling, sharing bread and wine around the table, But, he pointed out, there is also a future dimension too what we do in an acknowledgement that this is but the first fruits of the promise of what happens when God is made fully manifest in the world. I'm not talking about 'pie in the sky when you die' but about a somber recognition that all is not yet well and that some measure of brokenness will have to get sorted out in God's grace and God's time, quite possibly not until we lie in death. And this we hold to be true even as we proclaim the presence and reign of God already in our midst.

It is *here* that life comes together for me in some important way. It is *here and now* that the realities of brokenness and forgiveness, violence and the promise of peace, blood as the stuff of life and sacrifice as costly self-offering all come together in

ways that are beyond words. The *Seder* in Judaism recalls the saving work of God in the Passover and incorporates every Jew into that saving experience. Just so, in our sacred meal, we remember the offering and integrity of Jesus and his self-giving love as the way of real and abundant life for us as we are incorporated also into the beloved community. It is why we can say as we will minutes from now. "Alleluia. Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us." "Therefore let us keep the feast, Alleluia." It's the stuff of life this bread and wine. All of it. The body and the blood.