

Bloody Mercy

Trinity 11

Luke 18:9-14; Genesis 4:1-15; Ephesians 2:1-10

#1110

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Just ask Cain; he'll tell you. The problem with God is that He is too darned picky about worship. Just like each of us, Cain thinks that God should be happy with any old worship that we throw His way, as long as we offer it sincerely. And yet God had the nerve, even the audacity, to have "*regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard.*" He accepts one kind of worship, but rejects the other. What's up with that?! How intolerant! Why can't He just be happy that Cain, or we, offer Him anything at all?!

And then, practically pouring salt in the wound, God seeks to correct Cain. "*Why are you angry? Why has your face fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, but you must rule over it!*" Cain, though, did not rule over sin; sin ruled over him. His anger toward God turned into bitter hatred toward his brother. He got jealous. He betrayed him. And, finally, he killed him. He killed the one who had offered to God an acceptable sacrifice. Let's save that thought for later.

Then there's Jesus telling the story about the Pharisee and the tax collector. The Pharisee wants his worship to be accepted. Just look at all of the things he has done for God – all those things that put him miles ahead of people who, well, aren't quite as religious or devout, folks like the tax collector. The Pharisee stands apart, by himself. He prays...well, sort of. He doesn't mention any good things that God has done. He doesn't really ask anything out of his need. Instead, he reminds God just how fortunate He is to have such a devoted follower. "Hey, God, look how good I've been for you!" he says.

But notice how different the tax collector is. He stands far off. He knows that he is completely unworthy to approach all-holy God. He beats his breast. He cries out: "*God, be merciful to me, a sinner!*"

Now, if we heard and spoke Greek, the word for "*be merciful*" would jolt us to attention. It's not the word we sing when we sing, "Lord, have mercy" – *Kyrie eleison*. Not *eleison* at all! No, it's a rather bloody word, a word oozing and dripping with blood, a word that brings to mind a lifeless lamb placed on an altar of sacrifice, its blood spilling down the sides of the altar. The tax collector, then, says, "God, be gracious to me on account of the sacrifice."

He does not appeal to God's attributes. He does not say, "God, You are so loving and merciful, compassionate and slow to anger, therefore be merciful to me." No, he appeals for mercy based on a death, a bloody death, a bloody substitute for his own life lost in the maze of self-seeking, self-promoting, and self-pleasing. He knows he does not deserve such mercy, but he begs for it anyway. We might even paraphrase it this way: "God, 'look upon the victim whose death has reconciled us to yourself'" (Roman Canon).

Jesus tells us that this man, not the Pharisee, went down to his home "justified," or "made right." Once again, God is being picky about the worship He accepts. He rejects the man who stands before Him and presumes to offer up his own deeds of devoutness and feats of faithfulness. Instead, He accepts the man who stands before Him and pleads for bloody mercy, mercy based on a bloody sacrifice.

And what was that sacrifice? Think of Him who tells the tale. Think of Jesus, the only Person of the whole human race who could stand before the Father and offer up deeds and faithfulness fully acceptable to God. And what makes His deeds and faithfulness acceptable? They are completely and totally love. There is not an ounce or milligram of self-interest in any of His thoughts, words, or deeds. He is the one Man who lives completely for others. He came into the flesh, born of the Blessed Virgin, to live completely for others. His perfect life of total love is a fragrant and pleasing sacrifice to

the Father. This complete, perfect love led Him to consent to become the bloody sacrifice.

So, Cain killed Abel because God accepted Abel's sacrifice but rejected Cain's. And the brothers of Jesus, His own fellow human beings – that includes us! – we consign Him to the wood of the cross. And why?

The Wisdom of Solomon describes the “why” in shocking detail: “Let us lie in wait for the righteous man, because he is inconvenient to us and opposes our actions; he reproaches us for sins against the law, and accuses us of sins against our training. He professes to have knowledge of God, and calls himself a child of the Lord. He became to us a reproof of our thoughts; the very sight of him is a burden to us, because his manner of life is unlike that of others, and his ways are strange. We are considered by him as something base, and he avoids our ways as unclean; he calls the last end of the righteous happy, and boasts that God is his father. Let us see if his words are true, and let us test what will happen at the end of his life; for if the righteous man is God's son, he will help him, and will deliver him from the hand of his adversaries. Let us test him with insult and torture, that we may find out how gentle he is, and make trial of his forbearance. Let us condemn him to a shameful death, for, according to what he says, he will be protected” (Wisdom 2:12-20).

Shocking, isn't it? It all comes down to this: we hated Him because the light of love that shone from His life – a life offered to God the Father in perfect and endless worship – exposed the sham of our lives. His perfect life made us realize that our lives are counterfeits, that none of us can dare come before His Father and plead for justice. We can only ask for bloody mercy.

Then we see that HE is the bloody mercy for which we plead. Our hands are stained with the blood of the Son of God. In 2 Samuel, chapter 1, an Amalekite man from the camp of King Saul comes to David to tell him that King Saul has died. As it turns out, this Amalekite man killed Saul and brought Saul's crown and arm band to David, who would be the next

king. David's words in response sound hauntingly familiar: *“Your blood be on your head, for your own mouth has testified against you, saying, ‘I have killed the LORD's anointed”* (2 Sam. 1:16). We can hear David's words in the words of the people before Pontius Pilate as they demand the death of Jesus: *“His blood be on us and on our children!”* (Matt. 27:25). Ah, the blood of the Son of God staining humanity!

But thank God for that! You see, life, not death, comes through that bloody sacrifice. The death of the Son of God, God's anointed, does not give the punishment we deserve, but rather it brings the death of death. By His bloodshed, our sins are blotted out. For our hatred, He gives love. For our murder, He gives life. And this is the gloriously, life-giving news: He rises again, not to say, “Now you're really in for it,” but rather to say, *“Peace be with you!”* So He tells you again today: “Believe and trust that My blood has secured your peace with My Father. I AM the answer to your every plea for mercy. I AM the propitiation, the means of forgiveness, for you. I AM the taking away of the world's sin – of your sin.”

So we rejoice in the sweet words of St. Paul in our Epistle. It is by sheer, pure, boundless grace that we are saved through faith. Both the saving and the believing are gifts from God, not our own doing. So, let's not boast in ourselves. Instead, let's offer to God what He first offers us through His works, even His works in us. Yes, we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works – works of love, works of being our brother's keeper, works in which He originally created us to walk.

Yes, God is quite picky in worship. He wants the direction of worship to be quite clear: not our doings toward Him, but His doings toward us, His doings to give us the life that's in His blood. So, come, and join in the worship where the Lamb of God is upon the Altar, where bloody mercy flows from God's hand, where the sacrifice is completely His enlivening gift. Come, and *“by the mercies of God, ...present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship”* (Rom. 12:1). Amen.