

Sermon for February 14, 2018 – Ash Wednesday

Hebrews 13:10-16 (EHV)

Theme: Jesus Our Great High Priest Serves at a Great Altar

- 1) Upon which He offered himself as our great sin offering.
- 2) Because of which we willingly bear our own cross after him.
- 3) Through which we offer our thanks to God

¹⁰ We have an altar from which those who minister at the tent have no right to eat. ¹¹ For the high priest brings the blood of the animals sacrificed for sins into the Most Holy Place, and then their bodies are burned outside the camp. ¹² Jesus suffered outside the gate for this reason: to sanctify people by his own blood. ¹³ So then let us go to him, outside of the camp, bearing his disgrace. ¹⁴ For we do not have a permanent city here, but we are looking for the city that is coming. ¹⁵ Through Jesus, therefore, let us constantly offer to God a sacrifice of praise, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name. ¹⁶ And do not forget to do good and share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.

Ever since the fall into sin, God has wanted his people to focus on the great work of salvation His Son – Jesus – would accomplish for us. This is why, in Old Testament times, the LORD set up worship customs that revolved around the work of a high priest who served as an intermediary between God and his people. Like the coming Christ, this priest would intercede to God on behalf of his people and speak to the people on behalf of God. Most importantly, this priest would present the sacrifices the LORD required to atone for the people's sin. All of this was a living picture of what the coming Christ would do.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, our Lenten series for this year focuses on how Jesus is our Great High Priest: the fulfillment of all of Israel's Old Testament priestly customs. Today we will specifically focus on how Jesus is the perfect fulfillment of the high priest's work at the altar, under the theme: **Jesus Our Great High Priest Serves at a Great Altar: 1) Upon which He offered himself as our great sin offering, 2) Because of which we willingly bear our own cross after him. 3) Through which we offer our thanks to God.**

Part One: Upon which He offered himself as our great sin offering.

Our sermon text is taken from the New Testament book of Hebrews: a letter written to Jewish Christians who were being ostracized and pressured by their own family and friends to revert back to Judaism. "Look," the Jews would say, "we have a far superior religion than your Christianity. We have the Law, the temple, the customs and the priesthood. What do you have?"

The author of Hebrews encourages persecuted Christians with the answer: "We have Christ Jesus, who is not only far superior to the Law, customs, temple and priesthood of Judaism; he is their fulfillment! Want proof? Compare the work the priests do at their altar with the work Christ did at his."

Now, the altar played a prominent role in the worship life of Old Testament Judaism. It would have been the very first thing you would have seen walking into the temple or tabernacle area and would have been your focus throughout your time there - as priests busily offered all sorts of sacrifices on it: thank offerings, fellowship offerings and whole burnt offerings. Once a year, however, the high priest offered a very special sacrifice at that altar: a special sin offering meant to atone for the sins of all the people. And it is to the custom and meaning of that particular sacrifice that the author of Hebrews wants to draw our attention.

He writes: ¹⁰ *We have an altar from which those who minister at the tent have no right to eat.* That is to say: we Christians have a better altar than the one in the tabernacle – an altar in whose sacrifice the unbelieving Jews have no fellowship due to their lack of faith. What is the Christian altar? It's the cross upon which Christ offered the ultimate sacrifice for our sins. And how does the cross compare with the altar in the tabernacle? The author of Hebrews explains:

¹¹ *For the high priest brings the blood of the animals sacrificed for sins into the Most Holy Place, and then their bodies are burned outside the camp.* What the author of Hebrews is describing are the events that happened on “Yom Kippur” - the Great Day of Atonement. Unlike many other sacrifices, only the fat portions of this particular offering were burned on the altar. The blood of this sin offering was sprinkled on the ark of the covenant in the tabernacle to atone for the sins of the people, and the rest of the animal was burned outside the camp like something that was unclean. Why? Because it was considered full of sin!

This annual, ancient sacrifice – instituted some 1400 years before Jesus' birth – was a living picture of the sacrifice that the Christ (our Great High Priest) would offer once and for all on the altar of his cross, as the author to the Hebrews writes:

¹² *Jesus suffered outside the gate for this reason: to sanctify people by his own blood.*

Carrying the sins of all people of all time, Jesus offered himself up on the altar of the cross. All this happened outside Jerusalem's gates (just like the animals on the Great Day of atonement were burned up outside the camp) to show that he bore the curse of sin for us, as it is written: ¹³ *Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree."ⁱ And again: ²¹ *God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.ⁱⁱ**

Yes, Jesus is our perfect high priest who offered the perfect sacrifice for sin on the perfect altar of the cross. His blood covers our unrighteousness. It reconciles us to God, as St. John writes: *the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.ⁱⁱⁱ*

The Jews of Jesus' day may have had a visible altar, of which they were very proud. We Christians, however, have a better altar upon which our High Priest offered a better sin offering. Find your pride in the cross, upon which Jesus became a curse for you in order that you might live forgiven, free and eternally. Let this fact move you to follow him – unafraid of the worldly conflict and shame being a Christian might bring, as the author of Hebrews continues . . .

Part Two: Because of which we willingly bear our own cross after him.

13 So then let us go to him, outside of the camp, bearing his disgrace.

Being a Jewish Christian at the time these words were written was tough. Jews who converted to Christianity were cast “outside the camp” – excommunicated from the Jewish community and considered no better than the rest of the pagan world. They were often ostracized by their family and friends, shunned, mocked, and sometimes even physically persecuted. And is that any different than what many Christians face today – hostility from the world for their faith in Christ?

But the author of Hebrews encourages us to embrace the shame of the cross. Why? Because at the altar of the cross we find our Great High priest who offered the once and for all sacrifice for our sins. And it’s for this very reason that we go out to him in repentance and faith: trusting that, no matter what sins we may have committed in the past, nor what mess we find ourselves in at the present, Jesus forgives us. He offers us a hope beyond anything the world can offer, as the author of Hebrews states: *14 For we do not have a permanent city here, but we are looking for the city that is coming.*

Eternal peace, joy and life in fellowship with God – this is what our great High Priest offers us through faith in Him. There is no greater gift! But in order to receive this gift, we need to let go of all the earthly things we cling to in order to embrace his cross. As Jesus offered himself on the altar of the cross for our sake, he bids us make a similar sacrifice for him – not to earn his salvation, rather to rid ourselves of everything that would prevent us from receiving it. Jesus said: *If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. 24 For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it. 25 What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit his very self? 26 If anyone is ashamed of me and my words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his glory and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels.*^{iv}

Through repentance and faith, let us, therefore, rid ourselves of everything that prevents us from receiving the salvation Jesus won for us in Christ. Let us go out to Jesus – willing to suffer the same shame and reproach from the world that he bore. Why? Because we believe that His once and for all sacrifice for sin on the cross won for us an eternal glory that completely outweighs any suffering or reproach we may have to bear for his sake. Let us go to Christ – presenting our thank offerings to the LORD at the altar of his cross.

Part Three: Through which we offer our thanks to God

Whenever the Jews received blessings from God, they happily offered thank offerings to the LORD before the altar in the tabernacle. Why? To both remember the great things God had done and grow in their faith as they exercised it through these offerings.

Jesus encourages us to bring our thank offerings to his altar in response to the great atonement he won for us. And what are these thank offerings: animals or products of the field? No, the offerings

we offer to God in thanksgiving are far more precious. They are us, ourselves, as St. Paul encouraged: *Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God-- this is your spiritual act of worship.*^v

And how, exactly, do we offer ourselves to the LORD as thank offerings? By using our lips to both confess and praise his name to the world, and our hands to show others the same love he showed us, as the author of Hebrews encourages:

¹⁵ Through Jesus, therefore, let us constantly offer to God a sacrifice of praise, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name. ¹⁶ And do not forget to do good and share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.

Yes, the LORD is certainly pleased when we offer our hands, mouth and heart into his service. Why? Because, through faith in Christ, God has made all us priests, who serve at the altar of the cross under our Great High Priest Jesus, as the apostle Peter once wrote: *⁹ But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.*^{vi}

Brothers and sisters in Christ: Jesus is our Great High Priest who served at a great altar – the altar of the cross. Rejoice in the fact that he offered himself as the once and for all sacrifice for your sins – reconciling you to God. Let the great salvation he won for you move you to let go of everything worldly so that you may embrace his cross – willing to bear all earthly disgrace and hardship for his sake. Let us respond to his great sacrifice for us, by offering our mouth, hands and heart in his service – acting as the royal priests he declared us to be. In this way we will draw others to the altar of his cross, that they too might repent, believe and be filled with the same hope of salvation we have in Christ. Amen

ⁱ Galatians 3:13 NIV84

ⁱⁱ 2 Corinthians 5:21 NIV84

ⁱⁱⁱ 1 John. 1:7 NIV84

^{iv} Luke 9:23-26 NIV84

^v Romans 12:1 NIV84

^{vi} 1 Peter 2:9 NIV84