

The Lifeblood of the Church

In the name of him who for us poor sinners shed his precious blood on the cross, dear friends in Christ: The life of every creature is in its blood. That's what the Lord commanded Moses to tell the Children of Israel. And it was for that reason that the Lord prohibited his people from consuming any creature's blood. "You are not to have it", the Lord said, "because every life belongs to me. So, go ahead: eat the meat. Do what you want with the hide and other useful components of the livestock you sacrifice for worship or slaughter for consumption; *but leave the blood alone*. Don't mess with it in any way, because the lifeblood belongs to me."

As a result, even from ancient times, God's people have had a healthy respect for blood. They knew that without it no creature could live. As a matter of fact, bleeding an animal to death was the only biblically authorized way to kill livestock. It is, after all, a fairly humane way to do the job. A sharp knife across the throat severs the major arteries supplying the brain with blood, thus causing the pressure to drop to near zero almost instantly, which in turn causes loss of consciousness. The animal doesn't feel a thing. What life it has left flows out with the blood that remains – the animal quite unaware.

But as much as God's ancient people respected blood, today we know that it's really some amazing and complicated stuff. It contains, for starters, the red blood cells that carry oxygen to all the other cells in the body without which they cannot live. These red cells also help the plasma take away the carbon dioxide cells produce during respiration, that is, the process of turning simple sugars into energy. So not only do the red cells bring the oxygen needed for life, they help take away the exhaust that would otherwise build up and kill the body. Then you've got a half dozen or so different kinds of white blood cells, some of which hunt down and destroy intruders like bacteria and fungi. Others produce antibodies that latch themselves to germs so that they can be identified, neutralized, and destroyed by other white cells. And in addition to red and white blood cells there are platelets that serve to clot the blood so that when there's an injury you don't bleed to death. But this is only the beginning of what's in blood. You've got complicated chemical cocktails called hormones that direct a vast array of body functions. There are fats and sugars, which the cells need for fuel. There are proteins that are used to make new cells. And there are salts of chlorine, potassium, and magnesium, and trace amounts of phosphorous, copper, lithium, zinc, and a dozen or so other elements that your body needs to keep working like it should. No wonder the Lord said the life is in the blood.

Anyway, because blood does so much, when it's not right – that is, when there's something wrong with it – it adversely affects the whole body. And because blood is so complicated, there's a lot that can go wrong with it. For example, if it's low in iron the red blood cells can't properly do their job of carrying oxygen, resulting in anemia and weakness. Then there's leukemia, which is cancer of the white blood cells. When this happens, the white cells multiply out of control and essentially crowd everything else out – also resulting in anemia and weakness. If the kidneys, whose job it is to filter wastes from the blood aren't working right, then you get a buildup of toxins that can poison the whole system. Too much of the wrong kind of fat in the blood causes nasty plaque to deposit on the walls of the arteries, thus constricting flow. If left unchecked, it can block arteries completely causing a heart attack or a stroke. The viral infection we know as AIDS interferes with the ability of the white blood cells to identify and attack germs, thus making a person unable to fight off diseases. Problems with the platelets may cause the blood to clot when it shouldn't, or not clot when it should. Both conditions are

potentially disastrous; just as are literally hundreds of other conditions that occur when the levels of what's supposed to be in blood are out of balance. No, for the body to operate properly the blood has to contain the right proportions of everything it should. If things are off, it will cause sickness in the whole body; and if things get too far out of whack, it can cause death.

All right, maybe by now you're wondering why today's message sounds more like a physiology lesson than a sermon. The answer is simple: just as your body contains its amazing and wonderfully complex lifeblood, so also the Body of Christ, that is the Church, has its own lifeblood—that which it needs constantly flowing through it in order to survive and thrive. This lifeblood is what carries to us the equivalent of nourishment and oxygen by which we live and carries away from us the wastes that would otherwise poison our souls. What is it? We heard Jesus answer that question. He said, "The words I have spoken to you are Spirit and life." So please understand that what your blood does for your body the teaching of Jesus does for the Church which is his body. And it's not just the words that Jesus spoke during his public ministry; but his teaching that we hear in the entire Scripture. The whole Bible is his teaching because those who wrote it did so under the inspiration of Christ's Holy Spirit. And although Jesus called it *his* teaching, to be more precise, it comes from a higher authority still: that of his heavenly Father. Jesus said, "My teaching is not my own, but his who sent me." So Jesus wasn't freelancing. He didn't make anything up or change what was given to him. And that's interesting: just as God's people were to leave blood alone because the life in it belonged to God, so also even Jesus was not allowed to disturb or alter the Words his Father sent him to proclaim – the Words that are Spirit and life to us. Think about that: if even Jesus was not allowed to, how much more is it incumbent upon fallen sinners like us not to do anything that might upset, contaminate, or in any way alter the perfect balance and proper proportions of the teaching of Jesus that is the lifeblood of the Church?

This question is especially pertinent today because we are marking and celebrating the Sixteenth Century Reformation of the Christian Church. And what we're celebrating more than anything is the restoration of the Church's lifeblood to good health and proper balance – to what it was supposed to be; because, believe me, at that time, if the Church had been a patient here at the Clarinda hospital, she would have been immediately life-flighted to Omaha for the experts and specialists to work on. Her lifeblood was that sick.

There were many problems, but foremost among them was this: the central truth by which the Church lives, the pure Gospel we heard the Apostle Paul express so clearly in today's Epistle, that no one is justified in God's sight by the works of the Law; but rather we are justified by God's grace as a gift through faith in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood – that is, a sacrificial offering for our sin—that most important of all truths was simply not being delivered to the members of the body. Or if it was, it was so low in oxygen that few if any could receive the benefit of it. What people were being told instead was that Jesus died to pay the *eternal* consequences of their sin; but that each sin they committed also carried a *temporal* penalty that had to be either expunged here on earth in any of a number of ways the Church prescribed or paid for by suffering in Purgatory, which you might think of as temporary hell. So instead of hearing about what Jesus did to save them, people went to church to hear about what they had to do to save themselves from tens of thousands of years in a fiery torment from which they'd eventually be released. And here the teachers of the Church were very creative in coming up with all kinds of supposed good works that earned credit in God's sight toward reducing a person's sentence to Purgatory. Why you could enter a monastery or convent and devote your life to chastity, poverty, and prayer; you could go on pilgrimages to sacred sites – earning extra credit if you went on your knees; you could starve yourself, beat yourself, wear rough clothing, and go about begging; you could mindlessly recite ritual prayers,

pray to certain saints, collect and venerate their relics; or you could buy an indulgence – which was a certificate that credited you with the merits that other people had earned but didn't need to get themselves out of Purgatory because they had gone above and beyond what was required to pay for their sins.

None of this, of course, is biblical or has anything to do with the teaching of Jesus; but people were enslaved by this doctrine. They truly believed it. And unfortunately the Church's leaders were so wrapped up in it that they had lost the ability to distinguish between the truth and error, with the result that more of this disease kept infecting the Church's lifeblood. The body just kept getting sicker. And perhaps worst of all was that the leadership of the Church had set itself up as an unquestionable authority higher than the Word of God. They claimed that it really didn't matter what Jesus taught or didn't teach. As long as they, the Magisterium of the Church consisting primarily of the Bishop of Rome together with his Cardinals and advisors – if they said something was true, or if something had passed into practice and been tolerated in the Church for some time, well then it must be right. They argued that, after all, the Lord would never allow the leaders of his Church to go astray. The very idea was inconceivable to them.

But this only proves that they didn't know their Bibles very well; because that is precisely what Jesus is dealing with in today's Gospel lesson: leaders of the Church who'd gone astray and who were teaching false doctrines. In Jesus' day the religious authorities were comprised of two main groups: the liberal and freethinking Sadducees who tended to remove truths from God's Word, and the legalistic Pharisees who added their works-righteous traditions and elevated them above God's Word. These were the people running the Church in that age. They were the ones teaching the people and telling them what to believe. And they were enslaving people with their false, ungodly, man-made ideas. They were poisoning the lifeblood of the Church. Jesus came to proclaim the truth that sets people free. Jesus came to be the truth that sets people free and to cleanse the lifeblood of the Church. And as you recall, the religious leaders and teachers condemned him to death for it. In so doing they unwittingly fulfilled God's plan to redeem his people from their bondage to sin by spilling the precious blood of Jesus by which those who believe in him are forgiven, cleansed, made holy, and given eternal life.

It was to restore this most crucial truth to its rightful place of prominence and to cleanse again the lifeblood of the Church from all that ailed it that the Reformation happened some five hundred years ago. At that time the Lord used a previously unknown German monk named Martin Luther to proclaim his saving truth. He taught it to people who were set free by it, and he confessed it to religious leaders who condemned him for it. We, by God's grace, are the happy heirs of his legacy. It has fallen to us to teach and confess this truth in this church that bears Luther's name. But the thing to see is that it isn't Luther's teaching that we hold to nor is this Luther's church. He would be horrified that we use his name. It's one that our enemies applied to us as an insult and the name stuck. But no, Luther only taught what Jesus and the Apostles did. His teaching was not his own. He received it from Jesus through the Word just as Jesus received it from the Father who sent him. Luther understood that he wasn't authorized – indeed that no one is authorized – to change, contaminate, or alter the lifeblood of the Church in any way. His job was to preserve and proclaim the saving truth of Jesus that sets people free exactly as he received it.

And now, my friends, that task belongs to us. We who are receiving the benefit of the Church's healthy and unadulterated lifeblood have a sacred duty to preserve and confess the pure teaching of Jesus exactly as we have received it. It's an ongoing task. Just as your body is constantly breathing in oxygen and expelling carbon dioxide, and your kidneys are filtering out

wastes and toxins, and nutrients are being fed into the blood stream through your digestive system, and your white blood cells are identifying and destroying bugs that don't belong – all that stuff that goes on in your blood to keep you alive and well; so also we need to be continuously hearing the Word of God, receiving his Holy Spirit, confessing our sins, hearing Christ's forgiveness, remembering our Baptisms, receiving the Lord's Supper, proclaiming his truth, identifying and rejecting false doctrine, going to the Lord in prayer, and living lives that reflect the love of our Savior and the faith in Christ that we hold in our hearts.

"Wow! All that?" you say? "Sounds complicated." Well, in a way it is – and in another it isn't. What do I mean? Well, like I said before, blood is complicated stuff and there's a lot that can go wrong with it. The same is true of the Church's lifeblood. There are hundreds of ways to twist, change, add to and subtract from it that can result in spiritual harm – maybe even death. Obviously we want to avoid them. How do we do that? Well for most purposes, you do it the same way that you keep your own blood healthy: through diet and exercise. That is you watch what you eat spiritually, making sure that you're getting all the nutrients and fiber that you need and you participate in the life of the Church – all that stuff I just mentioned. If you don't – if all you ingest is the spiritual equivalent of cotton candy and battered, deep fried Twinkies – and your approach to participating in spiritual disciplines and the life of the Church is that of a couch potato, then guess what? You're a heart attack waiting to happen. Likewise if you keep turning from the Lord to pursue the pleasures of sin, you'll likely eventually get an infection that your weakened blood is ill equipped to fight off. But just as not everyone has to be a doctor for sick people to get well, not everyone needs to be a master theologian for the Church's lifeblood to remain healthy. This is why God assigns only some to be the pastors and teachers of his Church. It's their job to do the complicated testing, diagnostics, and prescriptions.

You do, however, need to question your pastors and teachers. You need to evaluate what they're telling you and compare it to what you have been taught and know to be true. And you need to ask, are they teaching on their own authority or are they teaching what God's Word actually says? Are they seeking their own glory, or that of Christ and the Father who sent him? Are they preaching the whole truth that's often painful to hear or are they only saying what they think people want to hear? There are ways of telling whether a pastor is true or full of falsehood, and it's your job to make sure that those who teach you are not fiddling around with the Church's lifeblood. The Lord once used a previously unknown monk to reform his whole Church in the west; he can certainly use you to reform this one if and when it needs it.

And so we have to be on guard, remembering always that just as the life is the blood, and that the life belongs to God who gave it; so also the lifeblood of the Church is the teaching of Jesus, and it belongs to God who gave it to him and him to us. May he who gave us his only-begotten Son as the atoning sacrifice for our sin and the gift of his Spirit that we might have saving trust in him, preserve us always steadfast in this faith and confession that we may live with him forever. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!