

CHRIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH, SPARTA, NC  
FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT, MARCH 1, 2009  
The Rev. J. Barry Kramer  
Lenten Sermon Series - Part I: Justification  
"The Great Stain Remover"

*"Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God."* [Romans 5:9 (NRSV)]

Over the centuries the church has created a season of prayer and called it Lent. It consists of the period of time between Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. Subtract the Sundays in Lent, because *every Sunday* is a "little Easter" and therefore a feast day, and you come up with 40 days. Frederick Buechner, in his booklet From Death To Life, points out that "In many cultures there is an ancient custom of giving a tenth of each year's income to some holy use. For Christians, to observe the forty days of Lent is to do the same thing with roughly a tenth of each year's days. After being baptized by John in the River Jordan, Jesus went off alone into the wilderness where he spent 40 days asking himself what it meant to be Jesus. During Lent, Christians are supposed to ask one way or another what it means to be themselves." (p.3)

During Lent, we also often study some aspect of our Christian Faith, and how it applies to our daily life. Therefore today we begin a sermon series on the Great Biblical Themes, starting with the one mentioned in our text from Romans. It comes from one of Paul's favorite questions: what does it mean to be justified?

So the reason for Lent is simple enough. We are forgetful people and easily distracted. We are always drifting away from the clean sidewalk to play in the dirt. Perhaps there are some here today for whom discipleship is a straight, clean, one-way path. But for most of us, our faith journey is filled with meanderings and wrong turns where we pick up the stains of life. Again and again, we need a parent to call us in for a thorough cleaning up. In Christian theological terminology, we call this cleaning process "Justification." It is "The Great Stain Remover."

I don't know about yours, but my mother suffered through *all* the grime and stains that are possible for a boy to accumulate! Now I'm talking major dirt! Often my clothes were simply muddy. That was easily washed out. But other stains got tougher. Chocolate was a frequent culprit (remember, I grew up next door to Hershey, PA). As I got older, the stains got tougher! Oil from bicycle repair was a good example. When I started my lawn care business, grass stain was a certainty. All these my mother took in stride. But one stain always brought moans and groans: blood! Blood was the stain my mother could *never* seem to wash out! A blood-stained shirt was either demoted to the status of "play clothes" or else consigned to "the rag pile."

Blood stains continued to plague me even as I grew older. My first time as a Thurifer (the acolyte who swings the incense pot), I managed to cut my finger on the chain, spurting blood all over my clean, white cotta! This time it was our "acolyte mother" with whom I had to deal! No less terrifying, I can assure you! Through my years of ministry, only one thing has surpassed blood as the most difficult stain to remove: lipstick! Just ask Jeanne; lipstick on the chalice purificators after communion is just awful to remove!

But back to the staining properties of blood, which are well known. Has it ever struck you as odd that in the Old Testament tradition blood is ascribed as having great cleansing powers? Levitical law required the priest to cleanse and hallow the altar by *sprinkling* it with blood. The great covenant between God and God's people at the giving of the Ten Commandments was sealed when Moses sprinkled *everyone* with blood! All healing had to be ceremonially cleansed by sacrificial blood. Even houses contaminated by mold or mildew had to be sprinkled with blood. Clearly the Old Testament people believed in the cleansing power of blood. Is it any wonder they also used a lot of incense?

The New Testament writers borrowed this kind of thinking and applied it to the sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross. The Letter to the Hebrews asserts that the Old Covenant sprinkling with blood merely cleanses the flesh, but the blood of Christ cleanses the conscience. In I John 1:7 we are told that the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin. In Revelation we see a multitude whose spotless white robes have been washed in the blood of the Lamb! This old acolyte positively *blanches* at that one!

In our text for today, Paul makes use of the same imagery when he tells the Roman Christians that they (and we) have been justified by the blood of Christ. To be justified is to be made clean in God's eyes. Christ's innocent blood poured out as a sacrifice for transgressors has

washed us clean of sin. We are now unblemished and spotless as far as God is concerned. All the stains have come out in this metaphorical wash!

It should come as no surprise that the old idea of blood as a cleanser finds support from the modern medical community. Blood is actually the scrub brush of the body. Most chemical waste in the body is quickly and efficiently carried away by the blood stream. Certain types of blood cells even attack and destroy viruses that invade the body. Any failure of this cleaning system can cause immediate pain and sometimes death.

The realization of that fact in recent years has made the grass stains and grease smears of my childhood seem far away and harmless now. Also the years have taught me that there are stains far uglier and far more stubborn. There are stains that defile our very lives. There are stains that smear our hearts and dirty our innocence. None of us is altogether clean of such stains. Paul was addressing strangers when he wrote to the Roman Church, but he can speak boldly of sin because he knows that sin has stained every human life. Jesus Christ, we believe, is the single unblemished exception.

*\_\_\_\_\_ There is something else very important to note about this process of Justification. Christ died in order to offer his blood as the stain remover for sinners, but he did not insist that we clean ourselves up first! He did not make us wash off the worst of the grime in order to prove our worthiness. While we were yet filthy and hopelessly stained by sin, Christ died for us. The "Spotless One" was sacrificed so that the unclean might be justified before God.*

Once I thought that blood was the worst stain of all. I was wrong. Blood is the great stain remover. In fact, if I were ever to have a bone marrow transplant, it would have the effect of cleansing my body to the extent of allowing it to create new, clean blood!

The point is, as old-timey and fundamental as it may sound, it is the blood of Jesus Christ that washes us clean. No matter what lies in your past, there is forgiveness and justification for those who genuinely repent. No stain is too vile, too deep, or too set for the grace of God. There is no stain which cannot be removed by Jesus Christ! Remember that the next time you slip and fall, and get dirty.

Justification, through Jesus, is the great stain remover!