

## “Once for All”—Hebrews 9:24-28

For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made by human hands, a mere copy of the true one, but he entered into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. Nor was it to offer himself again and again, as the high priest enters the Holy Place year after year with blood that is not his own; for then he would have had to suffer again and again since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the age to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself. And just as it is appointed for mortals to die once, and after that the judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin, but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.

This Letter to the Hebrews is a difficult piece of Scripture to get our heads around. (The Epworth Sunday School Class is saying, “Oh, now you tell us!”) The writer of this letter uses images and ideas that are unfamiliar to us, images and ideas to which it is difficult for us to relate. But here is a most inadequate summary of this letter:

The writer says that the old Jewish system of sacrifices to make atonement—to reconcile people to God by the use of animal sacrifices to pay for people’s sins—was imperfect at best. The sacrifices were offered by an imperfect priest who had first to offer sacrifices for his own sins, then for the man-made Jerusalem Temple itself, and then for the sins of individuals and for the people as a whole. Furthermore, the sacrifices had to be offered again and again, using animals that were not perfect. The sacrificial system was, in the writer’s estimation, wholly inadequate to atone for people’s sins, bringing them forgiveness and reconciling them to God.

But, in the fulness of time, God brought to his and all people a new and perfect way for bringing us rebellious sinners back home to himself. At just the right moment God the Father sent his Son—God himself in the flesh—to make the offering of the perfect, flawless, sinless sacrifice, his body and blood, for the sins, not just of the Jewish people, but of all people. Jesus offered himself as the perfect high priest, the One who did not need to atone for his own sins because he didn’t have any. And even though Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection took place in this world, Jesus the perfect high priest offered the perfect sacrifice—himself—in the perfect heavenly temple. Because this was the perfect sacrifice offered by the perfect high priest in the perfect heavenly temple, it didn’t need to be done over and over and over—Jesus’ offering of himself was and is once for all. And through this perfect sacrifice, God forgives the sins of those who will accept this gift of his

unearned, undeserved love—the gift of his grace—and brings them into a new relationship with him.

I don't know if this little summary clarifies anything or just muddies the waters further, but it helps me, at least, to get a handle on this Letter to the Hebrews, and it sets the stage for what I want to say about how we respond to this sacrifice made on our behalf—a sacrifice made once for all.

The first way we respond is to accept this gift of grace. Jesus has done for us what we cannot do for ourselves—Jesus, the perfect sacrifice, has made us right with God. Through the perfect offering of himself, Jesus has paid the price that has bought the forgiveness of our sin and our reconciliation with God, a reconciliation made necessary because of our sin—our fundamental rebellion against God and God's will and God's way caused by our selfishness and self-centeredness. The brokenness of our relationship caused by our sin is something we can't fix: we don't have it in us to love God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength; we don't have it in us to love our neighbors as ourselves; we don't have it in us to live in obedience to the way and will of God.

But Jesus has laid himself down as the bridge between God and ourselves. Jesus has offered himself as the price to pay for our sin. We can't do it for ourselves—Jesus has done it for us. All we can do is accept it—all we can do is open this gift of grace, this gift we can't earn and don't deserve but which God the Father offers us out of his love. To reject the gift is to remain in a broken relationship with God—to accept it is to step into the new relationship, the new life, that Jesus the perfect sacrifice has made possible for us.

So accepting the gift is the first response to God's love made real in Jesus the perfect sacrifice. The second response is to live into the new life that Jesus has made possible for us. You see, Jesus didn't die for the forgiveness of our sin so that we could just go on living in our sin. Jesus died so that we could be forgiven of our sins—but he rose from the dead by the power of God so that we could enter into a new life, a new way of living. In this new life, we live, not by our own selfishness and self-centeredness, but by a new desire to live in obedience to God by loving him with all that we are and all that we have, by loving our neighbors as ourselves, and by loving with self-sacrificing, self-giving love our new family, the Church of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Now, this transformation doesn't happen all at once, and it's not easy—we can't turn our backs on our old ways by our own power. But God has given us his Holy Spirit, his own power, to make the transformation happen in us. Through the Holy Spirit, we're convicted of the things in our lives that are not part of God's will for us; through the Holy Spirit, we're guided toward and empowered to do what is God's will for us; and through the Holy Spirit, we're constantly assured that God is with us always, constantly moving us more and more toward loving

him, loving our neighbors, and serving others as Jesus would serve. In the power of the Holy Spirit, we become more and more the people God has always intended for us to be.

So the first response to the perfect sacrifice of Jesus is to accept the gift of grace; the second response is to live into the new life that is God's desire and gift to us through the Holy Spirit; and the third response is to share the good news of this gift with others. You see, to say that this perfect offering by the perfect high priest in the perfect heavenly temple is "once for all" is not just saying that Jesus' sacrifice didn't have to be repeated—it is also to say that it is for *everybody*. The old Communion liturgy says that, in his death, Jesus made a "full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice for *the sins of the whole world*." The problem of sin is not just an individual problem: it's the problem of the whole human race; it's the human condition. We are in an entire world of people who are in a broken relationship with God, with no hope of finding the answers and the reconciliation with God we seek unless somebody shares it with us.

That's where you and I who have accepted the gift live into the part God has given us in transforming our community and transforming the world. God has given us the calling of sharing this good news that forgiveness of sins, reconciliation with God, and a new way of living are possible when we accept the gift of grace, the perfect sacrifice Jesus has made on behalf of you and me and the whole world. You see, people are not going to hear it unless we share it. They're not going to have a chance to experience the love of God for them unless we tell them about the love of God we've experienced. They're not going to know about the change Jesus can make until we tell them about the change Jesus has made in us. It's not about telling people that they're going to hell if they don't accept Jesus; it's not about knocking on doors and telling perfect strangers about Jesus; it's not about big and glorious spectacles that attract people but don't really offer them Jesus; it's about sharing the gift of Jesus with people we know and care about, who will share the gift with others they know and care about, who will share the gift with others they know and care about, and on and on and on. That's how God through Jesus and the Holy Spirit is transforming our community; that how God through Jesus and the Holy Spirit is transforming the world.

So Jesus gave himself for you and for me and for the whole world, so that we could be forgiven of our sins and reconciled with God—the perfect sacrifice. Jesus, the perfect high priest, made the offering in the perfect heavenly temple. And he did it once for all—it doesn't have to be done over and over. But he did once for everyone—for you and for me for the whole world. Have we accepted the gift? Are we living into it? Are we sharing it with others? This is the good news, my sisters and brothers—that Jesus, the Son of God, has given himself for us, once for all. Thanks be to God!

