

“WE STILL NEED THE LAMB,” A Sermon delivered by the Reverend Dr. Geoffrey G. Drutchas, St. Paul United Church of Christ, Taylor, July 10, 2022

In our gospel less for this morning we encounter some simple words of precious significance. Very specifically, in the very first verse of John’s Gospel, we are given account of how the fearless New Testament prophet John the Baptist hailed Jesus as the “Lamb of God.” Now, John had every reason to have a certain affection for Jesus. Scripture informs us that he was a cousin of Jesus, whether close or distant. John had also baptized Jesus in the River Jordan. But John the Baptist also enjoyed a huge following all his own—a whole flock of disciples gathered at his side, excited by his loud proclamations that the kingdom of God was at hand. This was a following most leaders would want to cultivate and keep. Yet that doesn’t deter the more selfless John from according to Jesus the accolade of being the “Lamb of God.”

That affirmation is no idle one to the ears of John’s own followers. No sooner does John pronounce it than some of those heretofore surrounding him defect to Jesus, joining their lives to his ministry. Among those who come to Jesus from the side of John the Baptist is none other than Simon, the one soon re-named Peter, becoming the “rock” on which the church, the new gathering of God’s people, will be founded and grounded. (*John 1:42*)

Of course, the idea of Jesus as the “Lamb of God” is metaphor or symbolic language. To us, in this year of our Lord 2022, it may sound rather ordinary, even innocuous. In church life together, we are more than used to hearing it. What then could have this phrase as an identity tag for Jesus so potent? Why should John the Baptist’s followers have abandoned him for Jesus after the prophet pronounced them in his cousin’s favor as he did?

If you know a little Jewish history, the answer to such questions is not complicated. As good Jewish boys, steeped in the traditions of Israel as we are not, John the Baptist’s disciples heard something profound being signaled by the very declaration that Jesus is the “Lamb of God.” With an immediacy we cannot imagine or grasp, John’s disciples realized that the one whom they trusted and respect and had heretofore so avidly following was pointing to Jesus as the divinely anointed messiah destined to usher in God’s long-awaited kingdom. Yes, Jesus as the “Lamb of God” was the one whom John the Baptist had long prophesized would soon appear to liberate Israel’s people from the sin and degradation into which they had so abysmally fallen.

Messiah... Lamb of God... You may still not get the connection. It’s not so obvious in our ears. So let me explain. In Jewish worship leading up to the time Christ, an actual lamb or goat was frequently brought into tabernacle or Temple religious services at special times of confession to help men and women obtain a fresh reconciliation with

God. As historians note, the worshiping Jewish assembly would confess their individual and communal sins aloud. Then a live lamb or goat, usually young, would be carried around into the entire worship space with its coat rubbing the tabernacle or temple sides to absorb the spoken sin. Much as we have been wiping down surfaces to prevent the spread of Covid, the lamb or goat would wipe down the place of worship, spiritually disinfecting it. Immediately afterwards, the lamb or goat would either be slaughtered or driven into the surrounding wilderness to wander, vulnerable to devourment by other predatory animals. This may sound cruel to the lamb or goat. Yet the idea here was that the sacrificial lamb or goat would take with him to death the people's confessed sin and guilt, allowing them to enjoy a clean slate and fresh start with God.

Who's not familiar with the term "scapegoat"? It's used in everyday language all the time. But the original term was "scrape goat"—as in the lamb or goat utilized in worship space to scrape away the confessed sins of the people. Needless to say, the image of the sacrificial lamb or scapegoat was still very familiar and rich communicative in Jesus' day.

Although to our mind John the Baptist cuts a strange figure dressed in his rough camel hair tunic and maintaining a foraged diet of locusts and wild honey, he was no slouch when it came to messaging. (*Mark 1:6*) Just as he used his strange manner of dress and eating habits to show that he was incorruptible and beholden to no one, John deftly invoked the "Lamb of God" imagery to good effect, putting everybody on alert that his cousin was truly the long-awaited one whom God has promised to send in the fullness of time for the redemption of Israel and the entire world. While Jesus' future apostles could at later moments prove dense, they did not miss or mistake the import of John the Baptist's symbolic reference and endorsement. As the Apostle Andrew boldly announces to his brother Simon Peter and anyone else who will listen: "We have found the Messiah!" (*John 1:41*)

Today, even though our Christian churches often display images of Jesus as the good shepherd, often protectively holding a young lamb in his arms, we don't so readily invoke any image of Jesus as the lamb, except on those special occasions like today or at communion times when we sing the "Agnus Dei," which is simply the Latin for Lamb of God. Perhaps this paucity of mention of Jesus as the lamb is due to the fact that we've lost touch with so much antecedent Jewish tradition. Yet it may also reflect a present-day aversion to the idea that we do sin and need Jesus Christ to wipe it away after we've dirtied and befouled our lives with it--just as the coat of a goat or a lamb was used in ancient times to physically cleanse a tabernacle canvas or a temple wall in the aftermath of acknowledged and recited sins.

Congregation, over the last half-century, our society has witnessed the emergence of the so-called human potential movement. At the core of its teachings is the notion that

human beings like us can self-actualize and perfect ourselves. I personally believe in the importance of self-improvement. I try to be a better person every day. Yet, as the great Protestant reformer Martin Luther so boldly and abundantly made clear in his own teaching and preaching, all based on personal struggle and spiritual experience, none of us has the potential necessary to attain true perfection on our own. We are only kidding ourselves and chasing after illusion if we imagine that we do. Human egotism, selfishness, and greed have been inherent to our nature since the days of Garden of Eden where disobedience on the part of Adam and Eve led to their exile into the world.

Yes, egotism, selfishness, and greed are an inescapable part of our human condition, producing much misery. They are the source of human sin. Moreover, they perpetuate it, sometimes to self-destructive ends with hurt for others too. The best that we can hope to do is to tap sin down or keep it in some kind of check so that it doesn't completely overtake our lives and sow the seeds of our ruin. This is where confession, whether individually spoken or communally shared, comes in. This is where Jesus our Savior, as the Lamb of God, comes in too.

Imbedded in our English language word confession is the Latin word *fesio*, meaning declaration. When we confess we declare something openly. In a most valuable way, we can confess our faith. Jesus encouraged such faith confession throughout his ministry. In Matthew's Gospel, he states: "Who confesses me before men, him will I also confess before my Father in heaven." (*Matthew 10:32*) The Apostle Paul similarly encouraged faith confession in his Letter to the Romans. There he remarks: "If you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved." (*Romans 10:9*) In fact, throughout the history of Christianity, our churches have composed formal confessions of faith. Outlining beliefs and convictions of the Christian Reformed churches, the Heidelberg Confession of 1563 is just one famous example. But in common parlance and conversation confession is more usually thought of in terms of acknowledging mistakes, misdeeds, and crimes.

In a secular court, confessions of crimes perpetrated can seal any legal case against the confessor. Not dissimilarly, in a Christian setting confession can function as an admission of moral error and sin that spiritual convicts us.

Who has not heard that old Scottish proverb: "Confession is good for the soul"? There's certainly truth in it. As the Old Testament psalmist testifies: "When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long... Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity." (*Psalms 32:1-5*) A cessation of anguish and a sense of relief was the result. Confession—getting things off our chest, especially when we've done something wrong—can be cathartic. Afterwards, without the weight on our chest and soul, we feel like we can breathe again. This was the value of the confessional boxes

for priest and parishioner that used to be seen in Roman Catholic Churches. This is the value of the more general, congregational prayers we offer up in our own church, honestly acknowledging our frailties and failings. This remains the reason why so-called “talk therapy” offered by counselors and psychologists is a godsend to many who are emotionally troubled.

Yet one challenge or problem persists once we do “fess up,” whether through prayer in church or in some more private and individual counseling setting. What do we do with what is confessed—and what we continue to confess, given how hard it is for us to break from bad habits and our natural penchant for sin and selfishness as human beings?

Congregation, sad to say, we can end up buried and wallowing in confessions piled high, to the point where our inner being begins to look like the shabby household of a hoarder. It can all weigh us down in a fresh way, leaving us debilitated by a sense of profound guilt which hinders our ability to live positively and well as God intends that we should. This is why and where Jesus as the Lamb of God stands so essential to our well-being. When our sin is confessed and our regret and repentance for committed sins are sincere, he hears our confession on God’s behalf, invites us to lay our lingering guilt upon him, and takes our guilt to his own cross where it can die with the mortality of his being.

Some of the most profound words of Jesus’ ministry are embodied in what he so often says to those he heals or helps, like the adulteress who was almost stoned to death by judgmental men. “Go,” Jesus declares, “and sin no more.” (*John 5:14-15; John 8:11*) But the power of these simple, wonderful words is more than matched by what Jesus prays on the cross to God, before breathing his own mortal last, for the sake of all repentant sinners—past, present, and future. “Father, forgive them,” he asks, “for they know not what they do.” (*Luke 23:34*) God’s forgiveness of our sins, which Jesus takes away to die with him on the cross, liberates us to live life more fully again, not burdened by terrible guilt that can otherwise sap and consume our strength and become a disincentive to any future, necessary confession of sin.

Of course, even when we confess our sins to be absorbed and put to death by Christ’s death, we are still responsible for whatever wrong we have committed. Scripture makes this very clear. In the Old Testament Book of Numbers, God actually declares before Moses: “They [who have sinned] must make full restitution for the wrong they have done, add a fifth of value to it and give it all to the person they have wronged.” (*Numbers 5:6-7*) Nothing Jesus preached contradicts or diminishes this material responsibility. Yet the spiritual burden we carry is lessened by Jesus’ take-away of our sin, coupled with God’s forgiveness, making our responsibility for repentance and restitution feel more bearable, sensible, and worthwhile. As the First Letter of John in the New Testament affirms: “If we confess our sins, [God] is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to

cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” (1 John 1:9) As the Lamb of God who takes away our sins as a prelude to God’s forgiveness, Jesus makes possible a fresh start for us unsullied by past mistakes and errant ways, from which, hopefully, we have learned much, so as not to senselessly repeat them all over again.

In this very troubled world in which we now see a spate of the most terrible violence at every turn and where too many leaders lie to us with seeming impunity, we need all the help against sin that can be mustered. As much as ever, we need the Lamb of God who, as we sincerely repent, can take our sin away and, opening us to God’s forgiveness, make possible a righteous fresh start.

One of the great historic prayers of our Christian churches, set to music by many different composers, declares as its repeated refrain, “Jesus Christ, Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world.” This morning I just want to reiterate how truly blessed we are to have Jesus as our messiah and savior in the battle against sin in our own lives. Unlike the goats and lambs who, against their will or choice, were used by the ancient Israelites to wipe clean the tent folds or temples walls after a confession of sin, Jesus, fully aware and voluntarily, offers himself in sacrifice on our behalf so that our personal and communal sins might be removed as an obstacle to our salvation and redemption.

The rest of the world might think they can get by just fine without a messiah or savior. But we know better—or should. Whatever our different circumstances in life, we all still need the Lamb of God—and the salvation that he alone makes possible. Thank you, Jesus, for being the Lamb of God, for us. **Amen.**