

***“Who Takes Away The Sin”*** (John 1:29-42a)

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Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Introduction: The shame of stains!

- A. On one occasion I was utterly and completely drenched in sweat after a divine service. After taking off my alb, I saw that my light-colored clerical shirt was a mess! I was left with an embarrassing spectacle and did not have another shirt to put on! And this was just in time for another congregational event after the service! Eventually, someone found an extra t-shirt from an old church fundraiser to cover my embarrassment.
- B. Have you ever been in this sort of situation? Think of how we feel when we get dressed up and then “something happens”...something is spilled or splashed or rubbed against and all of a sudden we are made to feel as though the whole world can see the defect. These little things can make us feel terribly self-conscious.
- C. And culturally speaking, stains really are a big deal. Think of all the cleaning products people invest in to deal with stains. There are stain removers, busters, wipes, sprays...there is an industry that zeros-in on taking stains away. Stains are embarrassing and they don’t look good. We can joke about it and tell ourselves “no big deal,” but in some cases stains are perceived as catastrophes when people have to get in front of others at weddings and other once-in-a-lifetime events. Stains have been known to bring some people to tears when trying to look their best for their “big days” ...the psychology of dealing with stains is serious business.
- D. But these superficial stains are *nothing* in comparison to the deeper stains.
- E. In Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, the other women are condemning towards Hester Prynne. We’re able to listen in on their hard words: “At the very least, they should have put the brand of a hot iron on Hester Prynne’s forehead.” (Barnes and Noble Classics, 2003: 47) But there is no getting past her stain. Another says, “Ah, but...let her cover the mark as she will, the pang of it will be always in her heart.” (ibid, 47). Finally Hester Prynne appears: “When the young woman – the mother of this child – stood fully revealed before the crowd, it seemed to be her first impulse to clasp the infant closely to her bosom; not so much by an impulse of motherly affection, as that she might thereby conceal a certain token, which was wrought or fastened into her dress. In a moment, however, wisely judging that one token of her shame would but poorly serve to hide another, she took the baby on her arm, and, with a burning

blush, and yet a haughty smile, and a glance that would not be abashed, looked around at her townspeople and neighbours. On the breast of her gown, in fine red cloth, surrounded with an elaborate embroidery and fantastic flourishes of gold thread, appeared the letter A." (ibid, 48). "It had the effect of a spell, taking her out of the ordinary relations with humanity, and inclosing her in a sphere by herself." (ibid, 49) The condemning stares of the people reinforced their ways "where iniquity is dragged out into the sunshine!" (ibid, 50) "Here, there was the taint of deepest sin in the most sacred quality of human life, working such effect, that the world was only the darker for this woman's beauty, and the more lost for the infant that she had borne." (ibid, 51-52) She stood there "under the heavy weight of a thousand unrelenting eyes, all fastened upon her, and centred at her bosom. It was almost intolerable to be borne." (ibid, 52)

Part I: And in our sin, we are drastically stained and even more so than what Hawthorne describes.

- A. I like Hawthorne's ability to highlight the stain of sin. "It is almost intolerable to be borne." But the actual truth of the matter is that this statement when it comes to sin is wholly inadequate in that it isn't severe enough. For us, our sin is impossible to bear. It kills us. That's how devastating the stain of sin is.
- B. But this helps us to understand why people react to it as they do. Hawthorne conjectures as to how Hester Prynne will cope. Will she be brazen? Will she enter into an imaginary world so as to escape from reality? Will she scream out loud? Will she go mad?
- C. And these remind us of what people actually do. With the stain of sin comes being convinced that all we can do is "live with it" so that we succumb to further temptation and sin; or we try to repress it and try to forget it, so alcohol and substances are used to dull our senses and our memories; or we let our conscience dwindle to the point of apathy and the loss of hope. Again, stains can be devastating. Stains that say we have failed. Failed towards God; failed towards those we love...just failed. Our scarlet letters take on many and various forms and the stains are overwhelming.
- D. And they are devastating and overwhelming to the point of death, talk about what is "intolerable to be borne." The Lord proclaims, "everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin." (John 8:34) And the Word of God declares, "For the wages of sin is death." (Romans 6:23a)
- E. As part of my sermon preparation, I went to a unique book given to me as a gift when I left Texas. It is remarkable in that it is an extensive book of poetry that was

published in 1876: *A New Library of Poetry and Song*...a huge book. There is a considerable section on "Bereavement and Death"...I wanted to share with you words of how distressing this stain truly is, but alas upon reading poem after poem, by Longfellow, Bryant, Vaughan, Milton, Shakespeare, and many others, the whole section was distressing not because of accurate biblical descriptions of death that I had hoped to find (and did not find), but because – in my opinion – none of the poems grasped the power of the stain. All of them were painfully optimistic – not expressing faith in Christ who is the Resurrection – but trying to spin some kind of emotional coping, negotiation, rationalization, unfounded optimism...trying almost desperately to deny the terrible effects of this stain that rises from sin, wanting to be friendly towards death and generate some kind of imagined bright side to the stain.

- F. And I was reminded that some so-called "stain removers" don't really work. It isn't good enough to deceive oneself that the stain isn't really there or really isn't so bad when it is in fact terrible. And when we face reality, this is about the time when we are tempted to lose all hope.

Part 2: Enter our Gospel this day from John chapter 1.

- A. I am a big fan of Pauline theology. I am constantly excited for our name as a congregation: Saint Paul's Lutheran Church of Irvine. "Saint Paul's" reminds me of the magnificence of Pauline theology; of how the Lord revealed His sacred revelation through this apostle to the Gentiles. Much of Luther's theology is Pauline. One of the reasons I love this theology is on account of Paul's teaching about the cross of Christ. There is this "vicarious" element to the cross. Christ takes upon Himself our sin (2<sup>nd</sup> Cor. 5:21) and Christ takes upon Himself our curse (Galatians 3:13), but as much as I love this facet to the diamond of our Savior's saving work, this is not what we get from John. This is not the approach of our Gospel this morning. It is a different approach and just as powerful as the Pauline emphasis.
- B. St. John takes the approach that is highlighted in our Gospel this morning: The apostle John describes the proclamation of John the Baptist: **"Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29)** For John, this "takes" concept is not a "taking on" idea or a "bearing upon Himself" idea, but it is a stain removal concept, a cleaning away concept. It is a taking away of the stain of sin; it is the Lamb making the stained scarlet lettered sinner -- like you and me -- no longer stained and no longer scarlet lettered. This is why the Lamb of God is so vital to us.
- C. The lamb imagery of course comes from the Old Testament. We have to go back to the Lord directing His people to save them from the plague of death that would enter into

Egypt. He would save them through the Passover. The lamb's blood put upon the lintels and doorposts of the homes of the Israelites would effectively remove the stain of sin and death and cover them and make them one with God (this is what atonement means...atonement occurs when blood covers sin so that what results is an "at-one-ment" with God). The stain of sin simply becomes undetectable in this process.

- D. This seems strange to us, but blood is God's stain remover. It is a powerful stain remover, because where sin brings death to us – such a terrible and shameful stain – blood brings life and unity with God. Life is in the blood (Leviticus 17:11).
- E. Jesus' stain removal ministry to you is directly tied to the Old Testament lamb and Passover! That lamb in the Old Testament was consumed in a Passover meal, but part of its preparation was the requirement that none of its bones were to be broken. Exodus 12:46: "...you shall not break any of its bones." About 1500 years later when the Roman executioners crucified Jesus something remarkable happened: whereas normally they would break the legs of those hanging on the cross so as to ensure their death...they did not do this to Jesus. And John records: ***"For these things took place that the Scripture might be fulfilled: 'Not one of his bones will be broken.'"*** (John 19:36) In addition, the Passover lambs were sacrificed in the Old Testament during specific times of the day (i.e. between noon and sundown). Guess when Jesus the Lamb of God died? Answer: 3:00 pm. And what is really cool even the hyssop branch gets in on the comparison...the hyssop branch was used to apply the blood to the lintel and doorposts (Exodus 12:22) and the hyssop branch was used to lift sour wine up to the Lamb of God on the cross (John 19:29)! These are just three examples of the correspondence of the theme: Jesus is the new lamb, the last lamb, the saving lamb, who once and for all "took" the stain of sin off of us all!
- F. But let me get back to the Passover: when that blood covered those houses (on the lintels and doorposts), the people in the houses were still the same people. That is, they were saved and got their stains "taken" while still being "just people," still flawed, still sinful, still with all their bumps and bruises, still with all their baggage...but God removed the stain anyway; God became one with them anyway.
- G. This is extraordinary: God isn't waiting for you to "feel better" in order for your stain to be removed; God isn't saying you've got to do "x, y, and z" and then we'll talk...and then maybe I'll think about removing your stain. No! While we were yet sinners, God removed the stain! This is Good News! Our stains were dealt with even while we were still sinners! God removed our stains even while we were helpless! Even when we were fully self-conscious of our stain-laden state; God removed the stain...that means you don't have to walk around with this big scarlet letter on your chest...God has removed the stain. He says that you may live confidently as His child...in the Lamb of God, God just doesn't see that condemning stain on you anymore...to Him, it's gone!

So St. John expounds on this wonderful work of our Lamb of God who TAKES away (removes the stain of) the sin of the world:

1<sup>st</sup> John 1:7: ***“But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.”***

1<sup>st</sup> John 2:2: ***“He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the world.”***

1<sup>st</sup> John 4:10: ***“In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.”***

So our Confessions state, “John is saying in this passage [1<sup>st</sup> John 1:7] that in the work or matter of our justification not only the divine nature of Christ but also his blood actually cleanses us from all sins.” (S.D., Art., VIII, Tappert 602)

And this is the significance of this word propitiation: where sin would have once left a horrible stain on you; on account of Christ, the stain is taken by Him!

With no stain, there is no shame; with no shame, your entire life has changed: look up, God loves you; look up, the Lord considers Himself one with the one whose stain of sin and death is removed by Jesus; look up, the Lord considers Himself one with you!