

On Atonement  
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15:34

"On Atonement" Pilgrim Church UCC, March 22, 2015—Fifth Sunday in Lent (John 12:20-33)

As we continue on our Lenten journey, today we hear Jesus alluding to his crucifixion in the Gospel of John. Jesus tells his followers that he will be lifted up from the earth, drawing all people to himself to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

Explaining the crucifixion is hard. I remember going to Good Friday services in elementary school because my parents believed that we should worship together as a family and that Maureen and I needed to learn all aspects of our Christian faith early. This is what happens when a Teacher and a Principal raise children in the Church—knowledge is always power. We left worship on Good Friday in silence, got into the car, and I recall that question after question came from my elementary school self: "Why did Jesus have to die like that?" "Why isn't today called Bad Friday?" "Why would God let this happen to Jesus?" My parents patiently explained the cross to their children—I've never forgotten it.

It's hard to explain the crucifixion to adults, let alone children. Catholic children perhaps always get an early education by having crucifixes displayed in churches and in most parochial classrooms. How can you not talk about the death Jesus died when it's often staring you in the face? It may even scar some children for life because it's not easy to look at Jesus hanging on the cross. Since Protestants have empty crosses to recall not just the crucifixion but the resurrection, it may take longer for Protestant children to face the complexities of Good Friday. It may take longer for Protestant children to contemplate "the kind of death he was to die."<sup>[1]</sup>

This morning, I want to give you something that my parents didn't recall having when I bombarded them with all those questions about the cross and the meaning of Jesus' death as a child. I want to give you some explanations of atonement—the theological understanding of the cross and how people are reconciled to God. Atonement technically falls under Soteriology (a segment of Christology) that finds religious meaning in Jesus' death. It's an attempt to understand Christ as savior. All of these terms show how annoying Christian theology can sometimes be and why people get overwhelmed!

Believers have struggled with Jesus' death from the beginning. And when the time comes that you have questions or your children have questions, my hope is that there will be something here for you to hold onto. There's four traditional ways to understand Atonement. You hear them voiced in hymns and liturgies and scripture and church teachings. In this sermon, I'm drawing on John Chapter 12 and *Saved from Sacrifice: A Theology of the Cross* by Mark Heim (who teaches at Andover Newton.) I'll end by speaking to Heim's nuanced understanding of the cross and the modern implications for all of us.

So the first traditional way is the one we may be most familiar with, though the name might be new—Substitutionary Atonement. In this view, humans are guilty, fallen sinners and God needs an offering to redeem us. Innocent, loving Jesus is crucified (sacrificed) in order to redeem humanity and fulfill God's plan of redemption. God is all about justice and practices mercy by saving sinners whose debt is paid by God's own Suffering Servant dying on our behalf. Jesus is sacrificed to bring our at-one-ment with God. This view was popularized by Anselm who said that we needed to be rescued from God's wrath and punishment. Unfortunately this plan for salvation sets God and Jesus against each other. But such is the price Jesus paid for us to

not be punished by God. This one idea about Atonement that emphasized sacrifice and guilt and God's wrath became really popular. Today we may hear—accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior otherwise you can't be redeemed since Jesus died as payment for your sins.

The second traditional way to understand Atonement is the Moral Influence or Exemplarist Theory. For what it's worth, this is what I recall my parents using to explain Jesus dying on the cross to me. This idea is that Jesus' death saves us because it's a moving example of God's love. We are inwardly stirred to gratitude and service in return. We hear a little bit of this in John's Gospel: "Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also."<sup>[2]</sup> In the cross, we see this example of such deep love that is so compelling it can redirect our lives. Redemption happens in the present when we enact Christ's example of holy service. The Moral Influence approach also shows the extent to which God is willing to identify with our lot as human beings. God is willing to suffer and die to understand what being human actually entails.

The third traditional way to understand Atonement is the Christus Victor Theory. This idea is that in the cross, God has a victory over sin, death, and demonic powers that hold humanity in bondage. Some of this is also echoed today in John's Gospel: "Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out."<sup>[3]</sup> The implication is that in his death on the cross, Jesus will perform an exorcism of sorts—driving out those forces that hold humanity in bondage. Gregory of Nyssa explained Christus Victor by saying that sin made us subject to the Devil and then God sets up a trick to deliver us. Jesus is almost like a baited fish hook—Jesus' humanity as the bait and his divinity as the hook. Ultimately, the Devil is tricked and defeated by God because God's divinity was hidden the whole time inside the flesh of Jesus!

And now that that's all cleared up, let's move on to the fourth and final traditional way to understand Atonement. This would be the theological idea of the Incarnation. That we can understand what Jesus' death means by realizing that God being among us so intimately in the person of Jesus points to how God saves the world. Bethlehem changes us just as much as Calvary. It's God's presence in the human condition that saves us, not the bloody sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. Mark Heim explains the Incarnation by writing: "In the incarnation God acts savingly by exchanging the divine power and status for our human lot, so that we may exchange our fallen state for participation in the divine nature. That is the great exchange, and it is a genuine model for the mutuality of the Christian life in general."<sup>[4]</sup> So we can use the theological concept of the Incarnation—God with us and among us—to understand what the cross is really all about. God loving us so much that God comes to us in the person of Jesus, letting all of us participate in God's divine nature.

Modern people have questioned all of these traditional ideas about Atonement. Asking questions like: do these views glorify violence and glorify servanthood in unhealthy ways? Does a religion that glorifies suffering always find someone who must suffer? Have we turned a message of God's love into a veneration of redemptive violence? Are we asking people to continue the sacrifice of Jesus? Feminist Theologians in particular have reminded us that women have long confronted oppression and the endorsement of violence by our culture. Women were once encouraged to stay in abusive relationships because they needed to act like Jesus did.

How we understand Jesus' death and how we explain the cross for ourselves and to our children really, truly, deeply matters. If that is the only thing you get out of this complicated sermon, that's enough for me.

Sometimes we may look at the world and think that everything's worse than it once was. But modern people are more sensitive to human diversity, to movements for freedom and change, and to human suffering. As our world has expanded, our world has gotten smaller. These

good sensitivities changes the way that we may see the cross. All the traditional views of Atonement aren't harmful. But if I got taught Substitutionary Atonement (that God demands Jesus' sacrifice to redeem sinful humanity from God's own wrath) I wouldn't be able to hold onto God. Not trying to tell you how to teach your kids or exactly how you need to understand Atonement for yourself. But there are ways that you may understand the cross that ultimately point to a mean God who you may have trouble believing in and turning to when the going gets rough in your life and you need a God of love.

The modern theory that Mark Heim emphasizes in *Saved from Sacrifice* is that Jesus' death on the cross should be viewed as the sacrifice to end all sacrifices. We ought to stop sacrificing each other. Let what happened to Jesus on that cross never happen again. Taking the cross out of Christianity guts the very purpose of the cross because the cross can be the vindication of anyone who is victimized by scapegoating sacrifice or our thoughtless ways of maintaining peace and unity through violence. Heim writes: "Christ died for us, to save us from what killed him. And what killed him was not God's justice but our redemptive violence. He stepped in between our violence and our victims, and has been a haunting presence there ever since . . . to change things irreversibly, God stepped into the place of the victim, and remained God." [5]

As we ready ourselves for Holy Week, beginning with Palm Sunday next Sunday, let's think about how we understand the cross. Whether we see the cross as this compelling example of Jesus' love that can redirect our lives. Or as God victorious over sin and death. Or as Bethlehem changing us just as much as Calvary. Or as the sacrifice to end all sacrifices, showing us what our redemptive violence does. Or a combination of many of these theological ideas. We need only understand that Jesus' death and how we explain the cross for ourselves and to our children really, truly, deeply matters.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

[1] John 12:33.

[2] John 12:26.

[3] John 12:31.

[4] S. Mark Heim, *Saved from Sacrifice: A Theology of the Cross*, 305.

[5] Heim, *Saved from Sacrifice*, 306 and 314.