

An Expensive Lesson Ignored ~ Part 2

Genesis 3: 8-12, 17-19 NRS They heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. ⁹ But the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?" ¹⁰ He said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself." ¹¹ He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" ¹² The man said, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate."

¹⁷ And to the man he said, "Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree about which I commanded you, 'You shall not eat of it,' cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; ¹⁸ thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. ¹⁹ By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

John 18:33-37 NRS ³³ Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" ³⁴ Jesus answered, "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?" ³⁵ Pilate replied, "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?" ³⁶ Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here." ³⁷ Pilate asked him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice."

Luke 23:32-34 NRS Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. ³³ When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. ³⁴ Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." And they cast lots to divide his clothing.

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It might be helpful to recall some of the major points from the sermon last week. First of all, when we back off and look at the grand sweep of the Bible, one of the over-arching themes is that it is a love story about God's love for us. From the very start, God was very pleased with the results of all the creative efforts that culminated in making us in the divine image. And as we follow the story of the relationship between God and humankind, we see that people can be unreliable, that they can forget God and treat each other horribly, but God keeps coming after us, caring about us deeply, and repeatedly reestablishing the relationship.

God reached out to Abraham, much to Abraham's surprise. God rescued a bunch of slaves from the abuse of a major world power – Egypt. When the Hebrews whined and griped about food and water being scarce out in the wilderness, God didn't punish them for their lack of trust – God provided manna, quail, and water. The Old Testament is a long story about people forgetting God and God continuing to love people. It's no wonder that God's self-description to Moses is **NRS Exodus 34:6-7** The LORD passed before him, and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin."

The supreme example of this unshakable love is Jesus. One of the names for Jesus is Emanuel, which means "God with us." And Jesus didn't swoop in from the sky on a chariot of dazzling diamonds. He didn't wipe out legions of Roman soldiers by zapping them with lightning flying out of his index finger. No, God became Emmanuel, because he wanted a relationship based on love, not on coercion, or power, or dazzling fame.

Then, Jesus was killed, buried, and then resurrected. What was that all about? What does it mean? We often hear phrases about Jesus saving us and Jesus dying for our sins. And sometimes we hear the theological churchy word, *atonement*. The word came into use in the 1300s. It is the marrying of *at*, *one*, and *ment* and the result was a word that meant being unified, being in accord or agreement, being reconciled. Only in more recent times has it come to be used as if it meant to be saved or to be forgiven. Consequently, for the sake of accuracy and clarity, some more recent Bible translations have used the word “reconciliation” or the phrase “restored relationship” rather than the word atonement. When we use the word atonement, or when we see it in scripture, it’s important to remember that atonement is how, despite fault on one side, reconciliation is achievable between the two or more parties involved.

Last week we also noticed that the writers of the New Testament letters, the epistles, used various terms when they wrote about Christ’s death and resurrection, words like ransom, substitution, victory, example, and reconciliation.

During my sabbatical, I studied the writings of many of the early church leaders during the first three or four centuries to see if they had some sort of consensus about how to understand the death and resurrection and some common way of describing its meaning. Their writings are just as varied as the New Testament authors. But in later centuries, some ideas began to have more prominence. As we look at a few of these concepts, it’s important to ask if they fit with the overarching emphasis in scripture that God loves us and repeatedly rescues us, even when we don’t deserve it. It’s also important to realize that ideas sometimes take on a life of their own and grow into something that bears little resemblance to their beginning. Here’s an analogy that may help to illustrate that phenomena. If you bought a new boat, it would perform the way it was designed. A few barnacles that attached to the hull wouldn’t make much difference. But as more and more barnacles spread and grew, the boat would change more and more until it didn’t perform at all like it did when it was new.

Our first scripture passage today was from the third chapter of Genesis in which God confronts Adam about eating forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Oddly, God doesn’t curse them, but curses the ground and lets Adam suffer the consequences. Nowhere does it say that Adam and Eve are now inherently sinful. But, some church leaders began to talk about “the fall.” Perhaps the phrase originally referred to falling from approval, falling from naiveté, falling from the idyllic life in the garden, but the fall came to mean falling out of innocence into the clutches of sinfulness and falling under the rule and property of the devil. As humans, our very nature was sinful and we bore guilt at our very core. The term for this was “original sin.” We became the devil’s possessions. It was reasoned that this sinful nature was passed on from generation to generation. Until recent centuries, the common understanding was that men planted a seed in women, who contributed nothing but a fertile ground in which the seed could grow and sprout forth in birth. If a woman never became pregnant or if she miscarried, it was because she wasn’t fertile soil for the seed that had been planted. And so, we were born sinful and died sinful and the act of physical intimacy as an expression of love became tainted with passing evil on to each generation.

There are several problems with this concept of original sin. First, just as it would be unfair to judge people for being short or tall, or for their ability to learn higher mathematics, so it is that if our basic nature is evil, it would be cruel to pass moral judgment on us. We cannot be condemned for that over which we have no control. But God is not cruel. God is merciful, gracious, and shows steadfast love.

Second, some have reasoned that from Adam to the death of Jesus all of mankind was under the devil's power. Yet in Hebrews chapter eleven there is a long list of Old Testament people who are held up as examples of righteousness.

Third, while the doctrine of original sin holds us responsible for the sins of our ancestors, Ezekiel emphatically declares that we each are only responsible for our own sins, saying, "Yet you ask, 'Why does the son not share the guilt of his father?' . . . The child will not share the guilt of the parent, nor will the parent share the guilt of the child. The righteousness of the righteous will be credited to them, and the wickedness of the wicked will be charged against them" (Ezekiel 18:19-20, NIV).

However, most commonly, the way people understand the meaning of the crucifixion is rooted in conscious or unconscious acceptance of the doctrine of original sin.

In ancient Israel, if someone became so deep in debt that the only way to pay the debt was to become a slave to the creditor, then another family member could come and redeem the slave by paying off the debt. The doctrine of original sin told us that we were enslaved to the devil. Since scripture spoke of us being redeemed by Christ, how did that happen? The devil, seeing Jesus, took note that Jesus was sinless and perfect and Satan was determined to have control over him like all other humans. So Jesus was offered in trade; he was the price of redemption. The devil could have the one perfectly sinless human if he released all of the rest of humanity from their bondage to sin. The devil took the deal and Jesus was killed. But then God trumped the deal by resurrecting Jesus. One ancient church leader explained it as being like fishing. All the devil could see was the human Jesus. Not knowing that within Jesus was the hook of his divinity, Satan took the bait. But the devil found the prize to be uncontrollable. So the devil lost control over humankind and lost control over Jesus, as well.

There are problems with this. Who is more powerful, God or Satan? Who makes the ultimate rules? Why would God ever need to play by the rules of evil? The concept of God having to offer a ransom to Satan is outrageous! And what sort of god must bargain with evil and has to use deceit and trickery to win? The idea that God used deception and underhanded bargaining sounds more like an unscrupulous used car dealer and it's a smear on God's character! Talk about making God in our image.

In the second half of the eleventh century, Anselm, the Bishop of Canterbury in England put forth another explanation about how we become reconciled with God. It, too, is rooted in the concept of original sin and is known as substitutionary atonement. Anselm felt that the tools of logic and reason were the key to understanding the meaning of the cross. Anselm wrote that by "Putting aside all authority of Holy Scripture," he explored and discovered "what God is," "by reason alone." The result was a book titled *Cur Deus Homo*, which means, *Why God Became Man*. Anselm, like almost everybody, was a product of his times. He lived in a feudal world and the framework and norms of the feudal system seemed normal, orderly, and right to him. It was simply the way things were. In medieval society one owed certain obligations to one's lord and in return he provided protection. Violate those obligations, and some recompense was required to the lord's offended honor either from oneself or from one's family before normal relations could be restored. "Satisfaction" was the usual term used for this process.

There are twenty-one steps in Anselm's logic but I'll try to give the "Cliff notes" version. All people sin and that offends God's honor because we owe God our very lives and all honor and praise. God can't just forgive us because that wouldn't restore his honor. But since we owe everything to God, there's nothing we can offer that isn't already owed. If there is no compensation (satisfaction) then we are doomed to eternal punishment. Only a human can offer satisfaction for humanity's sin, but only God has the ability to offer compensation. Therefore,

compensation/satisfaction/ atonement will be made by the innocent death of one who is both God and man, that is, Jesus.

The difficulties with this understanding of the meaning of the cross are several. First of all, God is not a feudal lord and isn't bound by feudal conventions. Second, like the ransom explanation of atonement, it is founded on the concept of original sin. Third, it reduces sin and salvation to an accounting system. Your sin must be canceled out by a compensating act of satisfaction. Fourth, and perhaps most important, it confines God's power to fit within this accounting system and strips God of mercy and the gift of grace by assuming that God cannot choose to forgive. God is just a bookkeeper, tallying up accounts.

I had hoped to reach the conclusion of this study today, but the topic is so big and so important that just skimming over it could do more harm than good. I feel confident that we can conclude this next Sunday, making use of the New Testament texts we've read, and making sense of the title of this sermon series.

Do not despair – you didn't come into this world already guilty.

Do not despair – God isn't bound by our sense of justice.

Rejoice! God isn't fair – God is full of mercy and grace and love.