

March 20, 2016
John 3:16-19
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“Wondrous Love”

Good morning! I have been pondering this week, as I do nearly every week, what message we most need to hear from the gospel in our life together. This is usually some combination of what I think you need to hear and what I need to say and what I think the Holy Spirit is trying to say. This week is no exception, but the stakes seem higher. This is, after all, Palm Sunday/Passion Sunday, the beginning of Holy Week which sets the stage for Easter. Not only is there far too much biblical material to address in a single sermon, we in the church have also inherited some messes which need to be cleaned up.

Let me say a little more about the messy part: whether you are consciously aware of it or not, there is a whole field of theology which has developed around the crucifixion of Christ, and what that means and how it accomplished our salvation. The broad term for this is atonement theology. Atonement may seem like a fancy word, but it literally comes from “at-one-ment” How do we, sinners that we are, become at one with God? How did Jesus’ death accomplish this? You won’t find specific atonement theology in the gospels -- particularly in Matthew, Mark and Luke. They all tell the story of the crucifixion, but they generally tell it without much interpretation. We’re told *how* it happened more than *why* it happened. The gospel of John has a bit more interpretive material -- John was the last of the four gospels, after most of the eye witnesses to the crucifixion had passed away, and believers were beginning to wrestle with the questions of “We know that this happened, what does it mean for us?”

We find more theology in the teaching of the church which we read in the letters of Paul, but atonement theology really gets revved up with the early church Fathers and into the Middle Ages. There are four

major theories which have come into Western thought. I'm going to outline them briefly: notice that almost all of them use some kind of metaphor to explain our relationship to God and our atonement in Christ. This is very complicated stuff, and it's helpful to have some kind of image from our own culture and experience to help make sense of it. Bear with me: here's the condensed version of centuries of theological reflection:

Moral influence is the earliest atonement theory. The earliest theologians of the church, led by Peter Abelard believed that Jesus came to show us the example of how to live. That by the influence of Jesus' teaching, ministry, and even martyrdom, we would know the way to God.

Christus Victor is a theory which was first proposed by Irenaeus. It takes two slightly different forms. One is that we are slaves to sin and under the power of Satan. Jesus is the ransom which is paid for our freedom: one perfect life for all our sinful lives. A variation on this is that rather than a ransom, Jesus defeats Satan in a spiritual battle, and his victory wins our freedom from being slaves to sin.

Satisfaction This theory was developed in the 11th century by a monk named Anselm. It uses a medieval legal metaphor: we owe a debt to God. We are servants, and our sin has insulted God's honor as our lord; God's honor must be satisfied. We can't pay that debt on our own -- only the perfect sacrifice of Jesus can pay the price for our sin.

Substitution This is another legal theory which became popular in the Reformation. It says that we have broken God's moral law and God is angry. Someone needs to be punished for that sin. It ought to be us, but Jesus is substituted in our place, and bears the punishment for our sin.

Like any metaphor which is pushed further than it ought to be, some of these theories of the atonement have been misused. I find some of the implications of the wrath of God and Jesus being punished in our place to be particularly troubling. These are some of the messes which contemporary theologians are trying to clean up. Maybe it's time for some different metaphors. This isn't just an academic discussion; these are views which are at the heart of our faith.

Atonement shapes our understanding of God and our relationship to Jesus Christ. This is the story of how we are and who we are Christians.

Some of my kids were home for Spring Break this week. I came home from a meeting one evening and found Joel and Becca and her husband, Stephen, at the beginning of a board game called Pandemic. Have any of you heard of it? I brought it with me: there's a great image of a woman in a white lab coat looking heroic on the front. The set-up is that there are four different diseases that are spreading across the globe. The board is world map with cities highlighted in each continent. Each player has a role -- medic, researcher, quarantine specialist, contingency planner -- and you play cooperatively to try to stop the outbreak of disease by building research centers and trying to strategically contain deadly contagions. The tagline of the game is "Can you save humanity?" It turns out we couldn't. Maybe the cards were stacked against us, but four reasonably bright, motivated and cooperative folks couldn't win. And the worst part was that we knew we were losing. About 90 minutes into the game we looked at each other and said, "The outbreaks are spreading. We can't stop them. We're all going to die." And even though there was no actual human suffering involved (other than our own), we felt terrible. We had lost the fight. We had failed humanity. So we did what any group of reasonably bright, motivated and cooperative folks would do: we changed the rules. We stopped drawing cards which made things worse and gave ourselves special powers, and by golly, we saved humanity after all.

The amazing thing about that experience is that I am someone who is intentional about thinking theologically, and I was in the midst of wrestling with metaphors for atonement, and it still took me two days to realize that my children had handed me that metaphor. Sin is the pandemic which infected our world. Despite the best efforts of reasonably bright, motivated, and occasionally cooperative folks to keep it under control, sin continues to spread. And it is deadly. But this is not *our* world; it is God's world and God wrote the rules of the game. And God actually does have the means to save humanity. That means is Jesus Christ. It is worth noting that in Greek, the language of the New Testament, *save* and *heal* are the same word; the concepts of salvation and healing are interchangeable. So the words

of John 3:17 could just as well read, “God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be healed through him.”

Brothers and sisters, if we have received the cure for the illness which is killing the world which God loves, we have no business keeping that medicine to ourselves. We especially have no business saying that not our business. It is wonderful that we have people in our congregation who have a passion for sharing Jesus Christ, but that is not work for a small group of people, or a special event, or one ministry team. People are dying, and we have the cure. We don't have to be obnoxious or rude, we don't have to force anything on anybody, it might be uncomfortable or even a little risky, but other people need to know -- through our example, our friendship, and even our sharing--that God loved the world so much that he gave us Jesus Christ so that we don't have to perish, we can be healed.

I can preach about the atonement, but listening to me is not the same as internalizing it for yourself. I know it's a busy week: setting up for Love Feast, preparing food for Easter, decorating the chancel, hosting an Easter Egg hunt -- these things all take time and effort, and we're grateful for the people who do them. But if we get to Easter without making space to consider what Jesus' death means for us, we've have planned the party and forgotten about the guest of honor. Even if the food and the decorations are great, if we haven't invited Jesus, we've missed the point.

I challenge you to open your Bibles this week. Every week, but especially this week. Read the story of Jesus and his love. The passion narratives are there at the end of each gospel. Team Spirit has provided resources in the Lenten study materials, and in the handout for Holy Week, if that helps give you direction. Consider your own understanding of how Jesus' death makes us one with God. We will enact some of the story in our Love Feast service on Thursday, and give you the opportunity to walk through the events of Good Friday. You don't have to have all the answers -- none of us have all the answers -- but it's a cop out to never even ask the questions. I believe the Holy Spirit is in our questions as well as in the answers. May God's Spirit walk with us through this week and

into the dawn of Easter. May God bless our questions and our answers. Amen.