

An Expensive Lesson Ignored – Part 1

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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While I was on sabbatical in 2013, I studied the history of Christianity among the Celtic people who lived in what is now Ireland, Scotland, and England. When Cathy and I returned we shared much of the richness and beauty of that heritage with you in a congregational retreat and a sermon series. But the main focus of my studies was on the meaning of the death and resurrection of Jesus. How we understand them, what we believe they signify and mean, and how we see the purposes of God in them are central to our faith and our understanding of God. This is a significant part of the core of our faith because it speaks to who we are, who God is, and what the relationship is between God and us.

The more I learned, the more I felt like I needed to write down what I was finding out and collect it into some sort of organized order. By doing that, I could see more clearly how thinking about the crucifixion and resurrection had changed over time. It also seemed important to share that with others and I began writing a book. Upon returning from sabbatical, it quickly became clear that completing the studies and writing would have to wait until after I retired when there would be more time. But it's also important to talk about this before leaving and the sermons this Sunday and next address this.

The Bible is many things. It's a library of letters and other documents written and collected over the centuries. Parts are poetry, parts are history, parts are law and commandments, parts are letters to churches with troubles, and there's more. There are love songs and collections of sermons by prophets who preach correction and hope. But there's a thread that runs through it all. It's a love story. God brings the universe into existence and is pleased with the results. Stars and planets? Good! Seas and dry land? Good! Fish and birds

and plants and animals? Good! And to top everything off, humans were made to reflect God, to be the image of God. Very good! God loves the results of all those creative efforts.

Think about the exodus from Egypt and the events at Mount Sinai. God took a rag-tag bunch, people from the bottom of the social and economic ladder, a bunch of slaves, and rescued them from the clutches of the ruling world power at the time. Then, on Mount Sinai, God gave Moses the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments have two themes. (1) Have a relationship with God. Know God. Pay attention to God. This is an active relationship. This is a God who wants to be in accord with us, to be at one with us. (2) Treat each other with respect and kindness. Be good to each other rather than hurtful. Unfortunately, the people were often less interested in a close relationship with God than God was. They forgot who rescued them, and they worshiped a golden calf. They moaned and groaned about food and water. Despite their ingratitude and lack of trust, God gave them manna, quail, and water.

And up on Mount Sinai God told Moses who it was that he and the people were dealing with. (Exodus 34:6-7) “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, ⁷ keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin.” These phrases describing God are found dozens of times throughout the Old Testament. This was and is a God who is overflowing with steady, dependable love, a God who keeps on forgiving, who keeps on seeking a close relationship with people. All through the period of the judges, the people neglected their relationship with God, and God came to their rescue again and again. During the times of the prophets and the Babylonian captivity, God reminded the people of his desire for a steady relationship and brought them out of captivity again.

Through the ages, God was steadfast in love, grace, and mercy. People were repeatedly fickle and forgetful. So God again, for the umpteenth time, took the initiative and came to live among us. God, as always, was pursuing us, seeking us, wanting to have a close relationship with us. God became Emmanuel, the name that means “God with us.”

Born as a helpless infant and raised in obscurity, Jesus began his ministry about the age of thirty. His ministry began with temptation in the wilderness. He was tempted by power over nations. He was tempted to use miraculous power to end his own suffering from hunger. He was tempted to call on squadrons of angels to dazzle the crowds with his divinity and glory. But, Jesus resisted all of this, because he wanted a relationship based on love, not on coercion, or power, or dazzling fame.

After three years of teaching and dealing compassionately with those who were suffering, Jesus was arrested, tried, and executed. He didn't protest verbally. He didn't damn his accusers for their false testimony. He didn't physically resist his arrest. Someone from some other faith background and some other culture where Christianity has little presence, might ask, “What is this all about? What does it mean?” The reply that they get might be something along these lines. “Jesus had to die for us. It was part of God's plan. Because Jesus was perfect, totally sinless, he was the only sacrifice that was sufficient to cover our sins. He paid the price that we couldn't pay, in order that God might forgive us. We call this atonement, this act of his being sacrificed so that we will be saved.” That, or something along those lines, is a fairly common understanding of atonement, of how it is that Jesus saves. For someone who lived in ancient times, where animal sacrifice was a common part of worship, whether you worshiped the God of Israel or the gods of Greece, Rome, or Egypt, the concept of animal sacrifice was familiar and it fit into one's concept of what the world was like and how life worked. It is, however, a concept with which many today have little contact or understanding.

What about this word, *atonement*? For years, when I'd hear the word, I'd think of things like paying the penalty, paying the fine, or Jesus dying in my place. I'll admit I wasn't comfortable with this idea of atonement. I'd have those little theological arguments in my head.

If God is all-powerful, then why does God have to do anything? Doesn't God make the rules? Why does there have to be a human sacrifice? Couldn't God find some way to forgive without having the sacrifice of the perfectly good and loving Jesus? Animal sacrifice sounds so barbaric, but human sacrifice is even more revolting. If God is one, then how does God make Jesus submit to brutal execution? But, if there is that much separation between Father and Son, then this all bears an uncomfortable resemblance to divine child abuse. We are revolted by the thought that Herod had all the babies killed in Bethlehem, but it is somehow holy that God has his only son killed? I'll admit, there was much about atonement that I found to be uncomfortable. I suspect that at some conscious – or even unconscious – level, many other people have similar feelings. It can be something that's hard for unbelievers to find attractive – and something that even believers would rather avoid. So, off and on, for some time now, I've been trying to understand *atonement*.

It turns out that the word has changed meaning over the centuries. The word *atone* came into use in the 1300s. It's the marrying of two words, at and one. That's easy to picture from the way it's spelled. And we used to pronounce the word *one* as *on*. We still have that pronunciation in the words *alone* and *only*. The word *atone* meant "at one," in accord, or, as we might put it, "in synch with each other." The word *atonement* came along a little later, and it is "at-one-ment," that is, the condition of being one, being in accord, being reconciled together. The word came to be used theologically to refer to the reconciliation of God and humankind. We're told early on in Genesis that we're made in God's image, but we all know that many of us seem to bear very little resemblance to God. We need to be in better accord, to be reconciled, to bear a greater resemblance to God. We misuse the word *atonement* when we use it as if it were another term for forgiveness.

What do the scriptures say about Christ's death? What terms do the New Testament writers use? The gospels only talk about Christ's death as ransom, as do several of the epistles. Several writers, however, offer more than one view: Peter writes about the death of Jesus as a ransom and an example. The letter to the Hebrews talks about ransom, the removal of liability, and Christ as victorious over the power of evil. In Second Corinthians Paul uses the concepts of reconciliation and substitution. In Romans, he writes about appeasement, example, and substitution. In his other letters, Paul speaks of ransom and Christ as victorious over death and sin.

How are we to understand all of this? Is the cross a gift that redeems us? Is it a means of reconciliation, or an example for us to follow, or an act of substitution for us? Is this all about being freed from bondage, or not being held liable? Is Christ's death about appeasing an angry Father, or our becoming children of God? Is this a model of suffering and obedience for us to copy, or was Jesus taking on the burden of our sin?

Is there only one correct way to think about the meaning of the cross? Or, might there be one major meaning and other ways of understanding support and complete the picture in some way? Do some of the understandings of the cross use figurative speech? Christians throughout the centuries have wrestled with all of this and we'll do the same next week.

God is merciful and loving –
always has been, always will be.
Atonement is about reconciliation –
reconciliation between us and God.