

### *An Expensive Lesson Ignored – Part 3*

**Nehemiah 9:29-32 NRS** And you warned them in order to turn them back to your law. Yet they acted presumptuously and did not obey your commandments, but sinned against your ordinances, by the observance of which a person shall live. They turned a stubborn shoulder and stiffened their neck and would not obey. <sup>30</sup> Many years you were patient with them, and warned them by your spirit through your prophets; yet they would not listen. Therefore you handed them over to the peoples of the lands. <sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, in your great mercies you did not make an end of them or forsake them, for you are a gracious and merciful God. <sup>32</sup> "Now therefore, our God-- the great and mighty and awesome God, keeping covenant and steadfast love-- do not treat lightly all the hardship that has come upon us, upon our kings, our officials, our priests, our prophets, our ancestors, and all your people, since the time of the kings of Assyria until today.

**John 18:33-37 NRS** <sup>33</sup> Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" <sup>34</sup> Jesus answered, "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?" <sup>35</sup> 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?" <sup>36</sup> 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." <sup>37</sup> 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. <sup>33</sup> 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. <sup>34</sup> 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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Over the past two weeks we have examined several important concepts. The first was that when you look at the whole scope of the Bible, we see that it is a love story – God’s steadfast love, mercy, and grace, even though we have often been fickle and rebellious.

Second, we learned that the word *atonement* means to be reconciled, in a restored relationship. We misuse the word’s original meaning if we use it to mean to be saved or to be forgiven.

Third, we noticed that the New Testament writers and the church leaders in the first few centuries used a variety of terms to describe the significance of Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection.

Fourth, we noted that ideas and concepts can evolve over time and eventually bear little resemblance to the original thought. Last week we looked at three concepts that illustrate how that can happen.

The first was the doctrine of original sin. From the story of Adam and Eve came the idea that humans were sinful at the very core and that this was passed on from generation to generation through the act of procreation. Each of us bears the guilt of our ancestors and we all are the property and under the rule of Satan. This doctrine characterizes God as cruel, judging and condemning us for something over which we have no control. It ignores the fact that many people in the Old Testament are praised for being righteous. And scripture tells us that we are each only responsible for our own misbehavior.

Next, we looked at how the use of the word ransom in conjunction with the crucifixion developed into a theory that Jesus was offered to Satan as a payment to release all people from Satan’s dominion. Satan accepted the deal, not realizing that Jesus was divine as well as human, and found that he had no control over the Son of God. So Satan

lost control over humanity and Jesus, as well. This doctrine is built on the doctrine of original sin and then proceeds to have God playing by Satan's rules and using deceit and trickery to snatch us from the devil's clutches. It paints a disreputable picture of God and is blasphemous!

Finally, we looked at a second common understanding of atonement, the doctrine of substitutionary atonement. This understanding of atonement is built on the medieval concept of honor. Our sinfulness is an offence against God's honor. Since we owe all obedience and honor to God, we have nothing to offer in compensation to God to restore the relationship. The only logical compensation would be the offering of the one who is both God and man, Jesus. But this doctrine, besides being based on the doctrine of original sin, reduces God to a bookkeeper who keeps accounts on sin and is incapable of mercy, grace, and forgiveness.

This morning we will take a quick look at another understanding of the meaning of the cross, Penal Substitutionary Atonement. In today's legal system the penal code is about the punishment legally mandated for various offenses. Penal Substitutionary Atonement is about crime, that is, sin, and the punishment which is required for justice. We are guilty before God's judgment and the only appropriate punishment is eternal death. Only punishment will satisfy God's wrath and so, Jesus suffered the punishment due to fallen humanity. He was subjected to the penalty for our sin.

John Calvin, whose formal training was in law, was involved in the development of this doctrine. Charles Hodge at Princeton brought the concept to full force in the late 1800s and early 1900s. It became one of the five fundamental beliefs required to be a Christian in some churches.

All of the problems with Anselm's Substitutionary Atonement apply to the doctrine of Penal Substitutionary Atonement. In a doctrine that is about satisfying the demands of justice we should notice that punishment of the innocent and acquittal of the guilty is the perfect example of **injustice**. Karl Barth said that the concept that Christ offered satisfaction to God's wrath was unscriptural. And the idea that Jesus was killed as punishment for the sins of humanity raises questions about whether our sins, coming after the fact, so to speak, are covered and are already forgiven. Guilt is inherently non-transferable. A legal transaction in which an innocent victim is made to pay the penalty for the crimes of others is not the Christianity of the Bible. Also, a vengeful Father punishing his Son for an offense he hasn't committed sounds a lot like cosmic child abuse. Many have criticized this doctrine of atonement as lifting up violence as holy. Some have said that Jesus took on the sins of the world just like the Old Testament priests would ceremonially place the sins of the people on a goat each year. That's the origin of the term scapegoat. But Jesus was killed. The scapegoat was released into the wilderness which was its natural habitat.

Please take the pew Bible and together we will read Psalm 103:8-12.

"<sup>8</sup> The LORD is compassionate and merciful, very patient, and full of faithful love. <sup>9</sup> God won't always play the judge; he won't be angry forever. <sup>10</sup> He doesn't deal with us according to our sin or repay us according to our wrongdoing, <sup>11</sup> because as high as heaven is above the earth, that's how large God's faithful love is for those who honor him. <sup>12</sup> As far as east is from west -- that's how far God has removed our sin from us."

Brothers and Sisters, take note of how God's character is described in this passage. Any understanding of the death and resurrection of Jesus that runs contrary to this description of God's character must be rejected.

Although it is easy to identify particular verses in the New Testament that **seem** to support one approach or another, there is little in the evangelists or even Paul that suggests the development of a systematic account. Rather, the often incidental way in which the images of ransom, substitution, and other terms are introduced suggests something

different. The New Testament authors used a variety of metaphors, employed to highlight in various ways what the authors saw as the indispensable role of Christ in human reconciliation with God. But when we take metaphors and instead interpret them literally, and then build extensive doctrines far beyond anything originally conceived, it can cause all kinds of problems.

I was struck by this situation years ago when I saw the movie “Gandhi.” A native of India met an Anglican priest and told him, “Ah, you would like my second cousin. He, too, is a cannibal and drinks human blood.” That’s how the Lord’s Supper can look to someone from the outside. Their view of some explanations of atonement as sacrifice or as punishment of the innocent to forgive the guilty must be just as jarring and strange. The idea that God is a trickster, dangling Jesus as bait for Satan to take, doesn’t describe a God who can be trusted. So is there some other way of understanding the crucifixion and resurrection besides the understandings that have been dominant for many centuries – ways that don’t violate the steadfast love, mercy, and grace of God?

In Luke’s gospel we read that Jesus taught, <sup>27</sup> " Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you. <sup>28</sup> Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who mistreat you. <sup>29</sup> If someone slaps you on the cheek, offer the other one as well. <sup>35</sup> Instead, love your enemies. . . . If you do, you will have a great reward. You will be acting the way children of the Most High act, for he is kind to ungrateful and wicked people. <sup>36</sup> Be compassionate just as your Father is compassionate. <sup>37</sup> " Don't judge, and you won't be judged. Don't condemn, and you won't be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. (Luke 6:27-29, 35-37 CEB) <sup>4</sup> These teachings are so contrary to our sense of justice, our sense of fairness, our concept of common sense, that we think that Jesus must surely have been speaking figuratively.

In the passages that we have read for three Sundays now, Jesus tells Pilate that God’s kingdom isn’t like a Roman kingdom. He won’t resist violence with violence. And on the cross, in horrible pain, Jesus doesn’t damn his tormentors, but instead prays that they be forgiven. If the devil or suffer punishment for someone else, but because this is the way of living that he’s been preaching. If he had acted differently, Jesus would have been a hypocrite, not living out his own teaching. And if he were a hypocrite, he most certainly would not have any claim to divinity.

In First Peter 2:21 we are told, “Christ suffered on your behalf. He left you an example so that you might follow in his footsteps.” Jesus suffered on our behalf because only by living exactly what he taught could he show that he indeed meant what he said. Jesus could do nothing else but be the message, live the message, show us what is right, and true, and eternal in value, in short, how to live in accord with God, in synch, in love, in atonement. Jesus taught that we should act like children of God, that is, act like those who are part of the family and have been well trained by our parents.

For two weeks I have suggested by the title of this sermon series that there is some expensive lesson that we have ignored. The lesson is expensive – it cost Jesus his life and subjected him to terrible torture. And we have ignored it. We don’t want to hear about loving our enemies. We don’t want to leave vengeance to God. We don’t want to forgive. And so we ignore the lesson that fits talking the talk and walking the walk together in perfect agreement. We’d rather concoct some farfetched theory that violates the nature of God, but puts all of the action on God and leaves us out with no responsibility, no participation in our reconciliation with God, our atonement.

G. K. Chesterton observed that “Christianity has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found hard and left untried.” It is hard. And it can be dangerous. Those who live lives of compassion and peace are sometimes a threat to the powers that be. Gandhi was imprisoned by the British. Martin Luther King, Jr. was labeled as a communist and

the FBI bugged and tailed him for years. Nevertheless, perhaps the most often repeated commandment in scripture is “Fear not.”

And so, Sisters and Brothers, Jesus calls us, by teaching and by example, to live lives that are in accord with the ways of God, not to be rebellious children, but to be reconciled with God by obedience, to live in a state of at-one-ment with our Lord. Our God is a God of steadfast love, mercy and grace, who is slow to get angry, and forgives iniquity, transgression, and sin. As children of God we are called to live in the same way. In so doing we become reconciled, at one with our loving God. Will we fall short? Yes, but will we try? Amen.

Love, mercy, graciousness, and forgiving are not easy.  
God does not expect us to be perfect.  
But God does expect us to try,  
Rather than ignore, the duties of God’s children.