

Matt. 26:26 While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body."²⁷ Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you;²⁸ for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.²⁹ I tell you, I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom."

Col. 1:15 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation;¹⁶ for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him.¹⁷ He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.¹⁸ He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything.¹⁹ For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell,²⁰ and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

We Believe: The Atonement

Matthew 26:26-29

Colossians 1:15-20

Imagine you are a six- or seven-year-old kid in the middle of summer, playing outside and it begins to rain. A gentle summer rain that feels like Mother Nature is cooling you off. So you and your playmates stay outside running and sliding and laughing, and just having a great time. You do, however, get dirty. In no time you're covered with mud from head to toe. Then your mom calls you inside for lunch. You run to the door soaking wet and covered with mud, and, everything inside the house is pure white. White carpeting, white walls, white furniture. Pure, clean, perfect white.

You have a problem. There is no way Mom is going to allow you into that house covered with mud. But you're hungry and the food is in the house. You need to be washed clean before you can come in the house.

In an oversimplified but similar way, this is the problem Erin talked about in her sermon a few weeks ago: we are sinners who need to be washed clean of our sinfulness. Erin made the crucially important point that we have a really hard time realizing and admitting the depth of our own sins. We see it much more clearly in the people around us, but have a hard time seeing it in ourselves. And when we do see it, our sinfulness looks understandable and minor. But it is there whether we are aware of it or completely blind to it, and it is not minor. Like six-year-old children who've been playing in the mud, we are covered with sin. Not only in the places where we can see it, but in all the nooks and crannies of our lives that we cannot see. And there is no way we can enter the kingdom of heaven covered in sin. There is no way we can walk into the pure, clean, sinless realm of God with our sins getting everything dirty.

We must be washed clean before we can come into the presence of God. This must be done for us because we cannot do it for ourselves. Like children with a hose, we can wash away some of the sin, but there's too much and it's in places we can't reach. Someone must wash it from our lives – and that someone must be without sin. A sinner cannot wash the sins from another sinner. Why? Because, as a sinner, I can't see all of the sin in you. It's like seeing the air in which we spend our lives. You can't see it, but that doesn't mean it isn't there. Only someone who is without sin can tell what sin is; only someone who is not in bondage to it can remove our sin from us.

It takes a sinless savior to take the sin away from you and from me. As Colossians says, "*in [Jesus] all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.*"

That is what Jesus has done for us. He has paid the price for our sins, washed us clean, made us righteous, and made it possible for us to be at one with God. We call this *the atonement of Jesus Christ*. The word *atonement* literally means *at-one-ment*. To atone means to make up for, or to pay for, one's wrongs. Jesus' death atones for our sins, pays for our sins, accomplishes forgiveness, and makes us at-one with God once again. Jesus has done for us what we cannot do for ourselves: he has given his life in order that we might have life eternal in the holy presence of God. He has taken on our sin so that we might become righteous. He has purchased our freedom from sin by submitting himself to death on the cross.

This is the crux, the crucial assertion of the Christian faith: that we have been given the gift of freedom from our sins and a free pass into the realm of heaven, the reign of God. And when I say the crux, the crucial assertion, I mean that literally because the words *crux* and *crucial* come from the word for *cross*. The cross is the crux of the Christian faith.

Two questions immediately come to mind: how and why?

How? How does Jesus' death achieve forgiveness for our sins? How does the shedding of Jesus' blood wash us clean? The Bible does not give us that answer. It uses lots of metaphors: it says that Jesus's death is like someone paying the price for our sins; it's like he takes on himself the punishment we deserve for our sins, as when a judge issues a penalty for breaking the law and someone else takes on the punishment; it's like he is the sacrificial lamb whose blood is shed for the forgiveness of our sins; or like a great battle between good and evil and his death defeats the powers of evil within us and in the world. There are lots of metaphors – but no explanation of how exactly Jesus' death removes our sins. We don't know the how of it, but then if God were to explain it to us, we probably wouldn't understand it anyway.

The second question is, why? Why does Jesus have to die for our sins to be removed? Can't the

God who created the universe with a word forgive our sins with a word? The answer is clearly, no. If there was another way for God to reconcile us to himself, God would have done that. Even Jesus says at Gethsemane, "Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me." You know that, if it were possible to accomplish our salvation any other way, God would have answered his beloved son's prayer. In Mark's gospel Jesus even says, "Father, all things are possible for you, remove this cup from me." He's saying, there's got to be another way; you can do anything; find another way. And yet, there was no other way.

- God so loved the world that he gave his only son. (John 3:16)

- In Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them. (2 Cor. 5:19)

- God made him who knew no sin to be sin, that we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Cor. 5:21)

- Jesus himself says it: "this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." (Matt. 26:28)

Tim Keller uses this analogy to help us understand:

"If I'm in a boat with a friend and we're in a swift river, and the friend says to me, 'You know, I just don't know how to tell you how much I love you. I know what I'll do. I'll jump out of the boat and drown myself. Then you'll know how much I love you.'"

If the person jumps out of the boat will you be moved? Will you say, "Now there is a friend who really loves me?" Or will you say, "I wish I would have grabbed him so I could have taken him to a hospital so we could have put him under medication; the poor man is obviously deranged?" Why? Because your life wasn't in jeopardy. If he didn't have to die, then for him to voluntarily die is not an act of love; it's an act of derangement.

Do you hear that? If he didn't have to die, then his death is ridiculous. It's senseless. It's illogical. On the other hand, if the boat is sinking and I can't swim, and he drowns but saves my life, and it's the only way I would have been saved, then I know that he loved me. He gave his life for me because I really was in peril. He gave his life for me because I was really dead unless he got me out.¹

Why did Jesus have to die for our sins? Because God loves us too much to allow us to be separated from him. It is at once the most baffling of all beliefs, and the most wonderful of all convictions. It is the Gospel, the Good News. It is grace. Jesus did for us what we could not do for ourselves: wash the mud of sin from our hearts, our minds, our souls, our lives so that we can be righteous and pure enough to be in God's presence forever.

This is the gospel that has the power to absolutely turn your life upside down. If we really understand the messages of the last few sermons that Erin and I preached:

- First, we are created in the image of God.

- Second, that image has been distorted [by sin] but not destroyed.

- Third, God's plan is to restore God's image in human beings through Jesus Christ, the true image of God, by washing away, removing our sins from us;

- and that God has done this through his death and resurrection, and there is nothing you have to do but believe it and receive it,

- then you realize that the only response possible is the giving of your whole life to glorify the God who has done this for you. The only appropriate response is to live your life for the One who gave his life for you.

Amen.

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¹ Keller, T. J. (2013). *The Timothy Keller Sermon Archive*. New York City: Redeemer Presbyterian Church.