

Palm Sunday

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2 Corinthians 5:8-10

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Reconciling Atonement

“The phrase ‘Jesus died for my sins’ is not just dangerous, it is absurd.” John Shelby Spong, *Unbelievable*, p154

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. 2 Corinthians 5:8-10 (NRSV)

Atonement. It’s a word that does not even exist in Greek, and doesn’t appear anywhere in the New Testament. If you were to read through the entire English New Testament in your pew Bibles, you would find the word “atoning” shows up twice, both times in 1 John, but

translators have just stuck it in there. There is no word in the original Greek that they’re translating. They’ve taken the word sacrifice and added the word “atoning” in front of it because they felt like it belonged there.

There is a Hebrew word sometimes translated as “atonement” that shows

up in the Old Testament a grand total of five times, but it is based on the Hebrew root *kaphar* that means to cover, or cover over. Like you might *kaphar* some peanut butter on some bread to make yourself a sandwich.

I share that to point out how utterly strange and fascinating it is to me that the absolutely dominant understanding of Christianity in the West for the past 1,000 years hinges on a word or a concept that never shows up in the New Testament and rarely even appears in the Hebrew Bible.

The etymology of the word “atone” derives from compounding the words “at” and “one.” So atonement, with God or with another person, is about overcoming divisions and seeking a connectedness that leaves us “at one” with each other. And that, in itself, is not a bad concept. In fact, it’s not

really even a bad way to understand Christianity or any religion. Setting aside 1000 years of Christian theological baggage for a moment, atonement as a concept speaks to an almost universal human need for connectedness--to the universe, to the divine, to one another.

St. Augustine, writing in *Confessions*, captures this with the memorable line, “Thou, O God, hast made us for thyself alone, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee.” It was Augustine’s way of acknowledging that at the heart of life, creatures yearn for connection.

But Western Christianity has, for the past 1000 years, taken this universal human experience of longing for connection and created a doctrine around it--articulating a problem called “original sin” and then creating a solution for it, calling

it salvation, and setting itself as the one and only mediator of the cure for this universal human condition.

So atonement, apart from the particular interpretation of it that I'll talk about in a minute, atonement speaks to a longing to be reconciled to God and to one another. Many of the New Testament writers talk about the life and work of Christ as a means of helping to achieve that reconciliation between humanity and God. Which naturally raises the question--just how is it that Jesus helps to reconcile humanity with God, to make us "at one" with God?

For the first 1000 years of Christianity, and for the entire history of Eastern Christianity, the answer to that question has focused more broadly on the life and the ministry of Christ, as well as his death, the meaning of which was interpreted

in different ways. But around 1000 years ago a bishop by the name of Anselm of Canterbury offered his own interpretation of exactly how Christ worked to reconcile humanity to God, and it's a concept known as substitutionary atonement.

By the time Anselm becomes a leader in the church, the Great Schism between Eastern and Western Christianity has already taken place. Western Christianity kept its power in Rome, where the Vatican still lives today. Eastern Christians were anchored in Constantinople, and that separation is perhaps one of the primary reasons Eastern Christian theology has never adopted Anselm's ideas.

But the nutshell version of Anselm's atonement theology went like this. Humanity was bad. We couldn't help but be bad because Adam listened to Eve and

they ate the apple and so now, even though we hadn't yet been introduced to Gregor Mendel and genetics, somehow we all genetically inherited Adam and Eve's sin and God simply could not ever fully love us or be reconciled to us as long as we had that stain of original sin.

But because we are mere humans, there was no way we could ever appease God's divine wrath against sin. It would take some kind of divine sacrifice to do that. Which is exactly how Anselm understood Christ's death on the cross. Like the scapegoats of the ancient Israelites, Christ took on all the sins of all of humanity and then was crucified as a way of appeasing God.

And maybe that's a formula that worked for Medieval logic, but it is horrible, damaging theology. There are so many things wrong

with it we could be here all day naming them, but just think about what that theology presumes about God.

First, God is incapable of simply forgiving sins unless someone or something dies first. That's hardly an all powerful God, nor is it an all loving God that demands death as a means of appeasement. Second, that theology ignores or overlooks everything Jesus did in his life and ministry and makes his death the only thing that matters, the only piece that meant anything to God.

And if love or divine parenthood are useful metaphors for understanding the Divine, then how does that kind of exchange -- torturing and killing someone for the sins and shortcomings of others -- what does that teach us about love or about parenting? Not anything I want to learn for sure.

Which is why I think

that atonement is perhaps the greatest hindrance to reconstructing Christianity in a way that is helpful to modern and postmodern people, and that moving beyond a thousand year old understanding of atonement is absolutely critical to the vitality of 21st century Christianity.

But that begins with setting aside one of the principal presuppositions of western Christian thought - that we are fallen sinners, indelibly infected with original sin. That piece of the conversation will be a topic for a couple of weeks from now, but to be able to speak meaningfully about Christianity in the 21st century, I believe we have to begin by setting aside that narrative.

We are not fallen sinners, but rather incomplete people yearning to be made whole. We have learned from Darwin that we are not

fallen people, but evolving people. What enables us to grow in love and gratitude to God and to the world is not an intermediary sacrifice, but rather to be loved and empowered in ways that enable us to be all that we are capable of being. And not just enables us, but encourages us.

That requires a shift in how we talk about Jesus, too. It's a way of understanding that sees Jesus not so much as a savior or a redeemer, but more as one who was connected with and able to more fully experience the life of God, showing us how to live fully. It understands Jesus as the love of God embodied in a way that frees us to profligate and extravagant love. It sees Jesus as being at one with God in a way that encourages and invites us to connect ourselves with the Ground of Being, to be all that we

are created to be.

This is a shift away from the idea that Christianity is a means of saving us from our sins, and moving to a paradigm of Christianity as a journey of helping us to find wholeness and completeness as part of our individual and corporate evolutionary journey. But that kind of shift is not an abandonment of the Christian faith. Rather, it is simply abandoning a 1000 year old aberrance proffered by one particular theologian that proliferated throughout western Christendom. The Eastern Church and the early church both offer another

way of looking to Jesus not as divine substitution for fallen humanity, but rather as a guide leading us on a path toward deeper humanity and oneness with God.

Today, Palm Sunday, begins our journey into Holy Week and reflecting on the end of Jesus' life. But rather than seeing these events as a sacrifice to appease an angry God, perhaps we can look at them as a demonstration of the depths of divine love and a willingness to live and even die in service of a love greater than ourselves. Amen.

