**Atonement, At-one-ment, Attunement**

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Texts: Isaiah 49:1-7; 1 Corinthians 1:1-9; John 1:29-42

We’ve all heard it said, “Jesus died for our sins” – it’s become a foundational assumption about the Christian story. Indeed, many people believe it is a central part of the Christian story. But in fact, it has not always been a central feature of Christianity, and it may well be that when we tell that story, we miss what Jesus was about. This phrase has become kind of a shorthand for one explanation of what is known as atonement theology. In this version of the story, the purpose of the life of Jesus was to provide a sacrifice to pay the penalty for all the sins of humankind, past present and future, to restore our relationship with God (and in some versions of this story, to make it possible for us to go to heaven after we die).

There are so many problems with this story that I hardly know where to start.

First of all, this is not the story that is told in the Bible. If this is the atonement story you like, you can find verses here and there which support that story, but that interpretation is never told as a complete explanation. One of the verses would be the verse in today’s Gospel in which John the Baptist refers to Jesus as “the Lamb of God.” The idea is that John is comparing Jesus to the Passover lamb—the lamb that was killed when the Hebrew people were preparing to escape from slavery in Egypt. There was going to be a plague in which God was going to kill the firstborn in every household, but the Hebrew people marked their doorways with the blood of the lamb, and those households were spared. No death visited those homes. But this had nothing to do with forgiving the people for sin, nor was it about life after death. It is really stretching and distorting that particular analogy to say that it means that Jesus was killed to pay the price for human sin.

Second, Jesus has a whole ministry that is about teaching people, helping people to transform their lives and their understanding, and this happens before his death. As he describes his own ministry, he talks about helping people find abundant life, and about repenting (and the word that is mistranslated as “repent” is *metanoia*, which has to do which changing the way you think, finding a larger mind—not about being sorry for things you may have done wrong). Jesus was a wisdom teacher and healer—he helped people to find how to live God’s way. This is consistent with our learning a couple of weeks ago about the Bible as a wisdom book, not a rule book or instruction manual for life. And if you remember, the task of wisdom is an ongoing discernment task, asking again and again, who is God and how should we live in light of our understanding of God?

Third, God is described again and again in the Bible—both Old and New Testaments—as being forgiving, a God of mercy. If God has to be paid off with a blood sacrifice, then God is not forgiving anything, God is being paid off. Yes, there is a whole temple sacrifice apparatus that develops in response to the priestly understanding of God’s law, but the episode that may have led most directly to the death of Jesus is his coming and driving the moneychangers out of the Temple. Jesus was objecting to the sacrifice apparatus, and the way it exploited poor people, demanding payment to restore righteousness. It seems unlikely that he would have validated the whole sacrificial approach by substituting himself. Furthermore, in none of his teachings does Jesus talk about the importance of blood sacrifice to appease God. If this was the plan, wouldn’t Jesus have underscored it in his teaching? Also, there is more than one passage in the Hebrew prophetic writings where God says something like what he says in Isaiah

Stop bringing worthless offerings.  
    Your incense repulses me.  
New moon, sabbath, and the calling of an assembly—  
    I can’t stand wickedness with celebration!

I hate your new moons and your festivals.  
    They’ve become a burden that I’m tired of bearing.  
When you extend your hands,  
    I’ll hide my eyes from you.  
Even when you pray for a long time,  
    I won’t listen.  
Your hands are stained with blood. [Isaiah 1:13-15]

So even in the Old Testament there is some evidence that God isn’t attached to the sacrificial apparatus. Psalm 51 suggests that what God is really interested in is the state of our hearts:

You don’t want sacrifices.  
    If I gave an entirely burned offering,  
    you wouldn’t be pleased.  
A broken spirit is my sacrifice, God.   
    You won’t despise a heart, God, that is broken and crushed.

These teaching are very consistent with the ministry of Jesus, a ministry that focused on changing the way people lived and thought and behaved.

Fourth, even if we think God wants sacrifices, and yes, in many places in the Bible, the system of animal sacrifice is supported, there is no evidence that God wants human sacrifice. Quite the contrary, one of the stories that most people don’t like much is the story when God tells Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac, but before he does, an angel stops Abraham, and provides a ram for the sacrifice. Most people understand that one of the lessons of this story is that the God of Israel is not a god who desires human sacrifice. There is no reason to suspect that God would change course and decide that the best solution to the problem of human sin is to have one human killed to provide a blood offering.

Fifth, this atonement theory—that the death of Jesus was a substitute for the punishment that humans deserved—was a theory that was developed about 1,000 years after Jesus lived. A man named Anselm wrote a treatise in the year 1098 developing this approach—Christianity had done without it until then. Again, while there are verses in the Bible that seem to support this theory if you bring that understanding to the text, but it is not in the Bible as an intact theory.

Finally, God is better than this. Do we really believe that God needs to kill someone to deal with the fact that we are sinful? God is a forgiving God. Do any of us need to see blood in order to forgive someone? Don’t we think that God is, if anything, better than we are? More loving than we are? Does God really view us as inherently defective? After all, in Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, who were a church that had a lot of conflict—we know about it because Paul writes to them about it—Paul tells them in the opening verses that we heard this morning, “You are not lacking in any spiritual gift.” That’s a pretty significant spiritual affirmation. Again and again throughout the Bible, we see God welcoming people, and throughout his ministry, Jesus welcomed people. It doesn’t seem that people have to pass some kind of test to get into the a relationship with God.

So there are books, books, and more books about atonement theology and I won’t be able to do them all justice. I want to raise a couple of other possibilities, however, about atonement, or at least, about what God wants from us.

When I was in high school, our pastor preached a sermon on atonement, and he spoke of it as at-one-ment. Jesus embodies reconciliation. I would not want to suggest that reconciliation cannot happen without Jesus—after all, people were in relationship with God all throughout the Hebrew scriptures. However, Jesus lived out reconciliation and showed us what that might look like, so that Paul, in another letter to the Corinthians wrote, “So then, if anyone is in Christ, that person is part of the new creation. The old things have gone away, and look, new things have arrived! All of these new things are from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and who gave us the ministry of reconciliation. In other words, God was reconciling the world to himself through Christ, by not counting people’s sins against them. He has trusted us with this message of reconciliation. So we are ambassadors who represent Christ.” [2 Corinthians 5:17-20a] How does Jesus make this reconciliation happen? Paul doesn’t say—but he also doesn’t say it is through the shedding of the blood of Jesus that it happens.

I was on a flight yesterday and my seatmate was an observant Jewish man—he was wearing a yarmulke, and since our flight began before sundown, I wished him a Shabbat Shalom. We had a long talk on the flight from Syracuse to Chicago, discussing Judaism, Christianity, raising kids, medical malpractice, flying in snowstorms, the joy of siblings, and even modern U.S. politics. Including in this wide-ranging discussion was some talk about atonement. He had something interesting to say about that. He said that many Jews find the concept of Jesus as an atoning sacrifice is offensive because atonement doesn’t take place through sacrifice. Atonement, he said, is about making things right. So when you atone for something, you go to the person whom you have offended or injured and you seek to make amends. Indeed, one of the definitions in the dictionary for atonement is reparations. So my seatmate found it offensive to suggest that somehow sacrifices could substitute for this active work of reconciliation.

So what does God want from us? First of all, I think it is clear over the course of the Bible that God does want us to be actively making a difference. Discipleship is not about passively accepting what someone else has done. To quote the passage from Isaiah,

“He said: It is not enough, since you are my servant,  
    to raise up the tribes of Jacob  
    and to bring back the survivors of Israel.  
    Hence, I will also appoint you as light to the nations  
    so that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”

In other words, it’s not enough to just take care of Israel, says God, but the people of God are given to benefit the whole world, even so that God’s salvation might reach to the end of the earth. God’s not talking about death or blood or sacrifice here—God is talking about being a light to the nations. We are called to shine—in just a few weeks, we’ll also have a reading where Jesus calls his disciples the light of the world. Being a people who show what God wants will help to save the world.

And this continues our discussion of the Bible two weeks ago—we seek God’s wisdom, we try to discern what God would want from us in every situation. We try to attune ourselves to God’s ways. This gets back to my favorite verses from Romans 12:

“So, brothers and sisters, because of God’s mercies, I encourage you to present your bodies as a living sacrifice that is holy and pleasing to God. This is your appropriate priestly service. Don’t be conformed to the patterns of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds so that you can figure out what God’s will is—what is good and pleasing and mature.” The kind of sacrifice that God wants, according to Paul, is for us to live a life that is pleasing to God. And we do that, just as Jesus said, through the *metanoia* process—letting our minds be changed, learning a new way of thinking. There is a synergy between our thoughts and our actions—as we choose right actions, our minds are changed, and as we invite God to shape our minds through prayer, meditation, and inner work, we find ourselves more able to choose good actions.

So if Jesus wasn’t killed to make us right with God, why was Jesus crucified? I believe that it is clear not only from the life and ministry of Jesus, but from the lives of many saints, from the lives of Gandhi and Bonhoeffer, and from the life of Martin Luther King, Jr., that sometimes living the way God wants can get you killed. Light is not always welcomed.

And so we are called not only as individuals to shine; the Church is also called to be a light to the world.  On this day before we celebrate Dr. Martin Luther King's birthday, let us remember that he said, "The church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state, but rather the conscience of the state. It must be the guide and the critic of the state, and never its tool. If the church does not recapture its prophetic zeal, it will become an irrelevant social club without moral or spiritual authority. If the church does not participate actively in the struggle for peace and for economic and racial justice, it will forfeit the loyalty of millions and cause men everywhere to say that it has atrophied its will. But if the church will free itself from the shackles of a deadening status quo, and, recovering its great historic mission, will speak and act fearlessly and insistently in terms of justice and peace, it will enkindle the imagination of mankind and fire the souls of men, imbuing them with a glowing and ardent love for truth, justice, and peace. Men far and near will know the church as a great fellowship of love that provides light and bread for lonely travelers at midnight." [Martin Luther King Jr. - A Knock at Midnight (11 June 1967)]

My sisters and brothers, be light, be love, be a sign of God’s kingdom. Amen.