

“JESUS BECAME LIKE US”

Galatians 4:4-7

August 4, 2019

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

1) The word “atonement” is not one we typically use in everyday life, and increasingly use less and less in the Church. Even if we cannot define it, explain it, or describe it, for people in this congregation, as I begin talking about it many will recognize it and possibly say, “That’s the religion I ran away from.”

Atonement is a theological word that combines several Christian concepts or beliefs, any one of which might be the poison pill that some of us will no longer swallow, while other concepts or beliefs may be personally important, foundational, even, in the spiritual journeys of some of us.

Around a thousand years ago, Anselm, the archbishop of Canterbury, took different ideas from the Bible and earlier church theologians and created what was later called the Substitutionary Theory of Atonement. It has been the dominant explanation of what happened with Jesus on the cross and how Christians are saved through Jesus ever since. I should be a little humble with a theory that has stood the test of time for 10 centuries. I should be, but I’m not going to be.

Here are four (4) basics of what Anselm first taught: 1) Human beings are born defective, born in original sin, which has irreparably broken human relationships with God because God must punish sin, 2) God sent Jesus to earth to fix this problem, 3) Jesus, a perfect human, sacrificed his life on the cross for the sins of humanity, thereby quenching God’s anger, and repairing the breach between God and humanity, 4) Therefore, humans may be saved from sin and death by faith in Jesus.

That’s it in a nutshell. I apologize if anyone is experiencing a wave of PTSD.

Maybe when Anselm constructed this model in the 11th century, it made perfect sense to peasants living on the lands of feudal lords, but it has significant problems for people of faith trying to follow Jesus in the 21st century.

The “wrath of God” image is really a downer, not to mention that the whole thing begins with human beings are defective. Then, there’s the fact that God NEVER forgives in this story. NE-VER. That’s troubling, isn’t it? God receives payment for sin. God gets the pound of flesh. But there’s no forgiveness. I told the folks in the “First Thought” hour, that it is like a mafia business transaction. That doesn’t go over too well in our 21st-century, pluralistic world.

So, how do we approach the cross without this theory coloring our thoughts about the cross? How do we read the Bible – both the Hebrew Bible and the Christian New Testament – without these atonement glasses that distort the messages from God we are reading?

First, let’s acknowledge that Christianity did pretty well for a thousand years before this theory. Lots of people were Christian in the first millennium and they didn’t believe this stuff. Second, we need to approach the cross. Too often liberal Christians just ignore it, because while they know they don’t like the traditional atonement, they haven’t figured out what they do believe. So, they just avoid it. We are going to face it and begin reimagining it.

2) “When the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children.”

Paul writes this sentence in the middle of his short letter to the Galatians. He is teaching them, or re-teaching them, to have faith in Jesus Christ, instead of trying to earn God’s righteousness by keeping the Mosaic Law (as Paul understood it). And notice that Paul doesn’t say, “When the fullness

of time had come, God killed Jesus on a cross in order to redeem those who were under the law.” The cross is not the conduit whereby we might become the children of God. No, it is that Jesus is born of a woman and born under the law.

The incarnation of Jesus, not the crucifixion, is the way by which we receive adoption as God’s children – Jesus’ sisters and brothers. The cross is one moment in Jesus’ life, one moment in his incarnation – of God taking on flesh, of becoming human, but it is one part, not the whole.

It is in the incarnation, where God becomes human, that we become one in Christ and with God.

Irenaeus, a bishop in the 2nd century, once said something like, “Jesus became like us, that we might become like Christ.” Jesus became like us. When the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law. Jesus became like us, that we might become like Christ.

God wanted to become more like us, so that we might become more like God.

And God gets more than God had anticipated. The moment Jesus is born in a manger, Jesus had to die, was destined to die. Why? Because he had to save sinful humanity? No, because that’s what it means to be human, to be mortal. Whether it was the cross, or cancer, or old age, Jesus was going to die. And then, what? What was God going to do, then? Leave Jesus in the grave? Hardly.

Once God jumps into the incarnation, once God becomes like us, God invites death into God. The immortal enters mortality. And God has a resurrection reaction.

3) I worship the God described in Exodus 34: “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for a thousand generations, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin.” And because God’s steadfast love is so great, I do not believe humanity’s relationship with God has ever been irreparably broken. I do not believe in original sin. The story of Adam and Eve is the magical story of every human being that grows up from an innocent age where you can stand naked and not be ashamed – every toddler has done that right? – to when you eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil sometime in childhood and realize actions have consequences and that everything dies, even you. And when that happens, God has to send you out into the world; you can’t go back to being a toddler.

The story of Eve and Adam is not the story of original sin that was passed down to every generation. It is the story of human becoming, of growing from an innocent child into a mortal human being that understands all our actions and decisions have consequences. And that’s how God made us, because only beings like that can have full, mutual relationships.

And that’s why God became human, so that God might have full, mutual relationships with us. God had to find out what it was like to be human and in doing so God found out how wonderful being human is and how terrible being human is.

For me, in one sense, this redeems God.

Human life on this planet can be so beautiful and wonderful at times that it can take your breath away. It can also be so brutal that it can make you wonder if it has any meaning.

If God had stayed far away in the heavens, safe from all our brutality, then I don’t think that God would be worth worshiping. Certainly, that kind of God wouldn’t be worth dedicating my life to that God. We know that God didn’t stop the Holocaust, or the killing fields of Cambodia, or the slavery and death of 10 million Africans, or the genocide of indigenous peoples by conquerors and colonists. All those things and much more happened in human history and are still happening. I couldn’t worship a God who stayed safe and away from all that.

In the fullness of time, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law.

When Jesus was born in a manger, God left the heavens above and became like us. Embedded in all the wonder and beauty of life as we experience it by being human, Jesus also became embedded in all the brutality that can happen. Jesus joined us in struggles and sufferings. As Luke says at a key moment in Jesus’ ministry, “He set his face to Jerusalem.” Jesus faced the injustices of his day. He

confronted the way we treat the poor and disadvantaged. He called us to love our enemies and bless those who persecute us. That we should forgive 70 x 7 times, or indefinitely. And that we should be merciful and perfect as God is merciful and perfect.

Jesus was killed unjustly, fighting the forces that oppress people – in his case Empire and bad religion. And in doing so, God suffered like a Jewish mother in a gas chamber, or an African chained to a boat crossing the Atlantic, or a runaway teenager sold into the sex market. It didn't stop any of those things from happening. History tells us it didn't. But it changed God.

If there's an atonement that happens on the cross, it's not humanity being changed to appease an angry God, it is a God being changed by the hate of angry humans. When God absorbs into God's being the worst that humans can do to each other, and when death finally happens in God, God has a resurrection reaction. God will not allow death and evil and sin to be the final word.

At this moment God finally becomes Emmanuel – God with us, which was promised in Matthew's birth story. So, wherever life takes us, moments of wonder and beauty or even moments of terror and tragedy, God is with us. God has walked the pathway of the suffering and the oppressed. And when all of us walk into our final moments we walk into a pathway God has already crossed, we do not walk alone.

And a God who would leave the safety of the heavens above to do that with us, well, I believe that's a God worth worshiping and one worth following with our lives.

Jesus became like us, that we might become like Christ. AMEN.

SPEAKING CHRISTIAN: ATONEMENT

1) Marcus Borg didn't have a chapter titled "Atonement" in his book. But the atonement affects several of his chapters – Jesus' death, salvation, sin, and a couple others.

I'd like to spend this time with better a more interested group focusing on some deeper questions about the tradition atonement theory, while in the sermon I'll be driving us towards some alternatives.

2) What we commonly call the atonement began as a theory around year AD 1000 that combined several Christian ideas. The Substitutionary Atonement Theory began with Anselm, who was first a monk and then later became the archbishop of Canterbury. Technically, Anselm's theory was the Satisfaction Theory of Atonement, which was later adapted by Thomas Aquinas and John Calvin, bringing it to its current form. That said, what Anselm proposed a thousand years ago is still largely intact.

It is important to note that Anselm lived from 1033-1109, nearly a thousand years ago. This means that Christianity did well for a thousand years without it. To be transparent about my bias, I've said in a sermon in this sanctuary that Christianity would do well with another 1000 years without it.

3) Anselm began his theological work with a question: Why did God become a human?

The reason – To save humanity

4) Why did humanity need to be saved? Because of sin. Not just common variety sin, the kind we pile up throughout life from the unintentional and regrettable to the deceitful and malicious. The big reason was that humanity was defective. Since Augustine, a 4th century theologian from North Africa, Western Christianity believed that human beings were born in "original sin."

All humans carry in their DNA (although Augustine didn't know DNA existed) the original sin of Adam and Eve, so that, even a sickly child who only lives a few minutes after birth dies as much a sinner as you and me.

Now, if I lie to you, I can later tell you the truth and ask your forgiveness. If I steal, I can later repay you for what I stole, and ask your forgiveness. In both cases I can ask God for forgiveness.

BUT how do you seek forgiveness, or reconciliation, for a defect in your character, your whole being? How do you make amends for that?

5) Complicating things, was the acknowledgment that the Priestly theology in the Hebrew Bible clearly said that God cannot stand sin, that God cannot even stand to see it. So, whatever is sinful, must be removed from that which is holy. God—the Priests thought—had to destroy sin.

(Now, I should remind you that this was only one theological strain in ancient Israel. The Deuteronomists emphasized justice and a collection of other writers emphasized God's love. But these Priestly writers influenced Anselm and others.)

All of this meant that you had a collision heading humanity's way and it wasn't looking good. Humanity had a defect. 1) All humans were born in original sin. 2) God hates sin & has to destroy it.

Q & A ---

Before we move forward, let's see if we have any questions or comments or musings on these two foundations for traditional Atonement theory – All humans are defective, born in sin & God hates sin and must destroy or punish it.

- Being born in sin, a defect in your being, is different from saying all humans sin.
- Evangelical Christianity had to convince people that they were sinful, bad, etc., in order to get them to say they needed Jesus. It's a necessary part of their Salvation story.
- What if these two basic pillars are wrong?

6) In traditional Atonement theory Jesus is sent to earth to get between humanity and God as they head towards this collision course. Anselm thinks this is why Jesus came to earth.

7) God becomes human in Jesus. The incarnation was important to this theory. The plan is for Jesus to pay for humanity's debt of sin with his own life. He will be the sacrifice for humanity. God has to punish sin, so God will punish Jesus for humanity's sins. Jesus has to be human in order to pay for sin. A human sacrifice is needed to pay for humanity's sins. But not any human will do. Jesus must be perfect. Jesus must be sinless. Jesus is infinitely the best human, and therefore he is qualified to pay for the infinite sinfulness of humanity.

All of this creates the rather odd emphasis on Jesus' sinlessness. If Jesus were a sinner like you and me, then he wouldn't have been the perfect sacrifice.

One problem with this idea is that if Jesus is not sinful, and humans by definition are sinful, how was he fully human?

8) Jesus being the perfect sacrifice, gives up his life, allowing God to kill him, quenching God's wrath against sin. God's anger (or honor in Anselm's day) being satisfied. God accepts payment of Jesus' life and grants salvation to any human coming in the name of Jesus.

9) God kills an innocent man – God's own son – for the crimes of others. This great injustice God rights by resurrecting Jesus on Easter and granting resurrection to all who come in Jesus' name.

10) Jesus in clearing humanity's name, bring reconciliation between humanity and God – atonement.

PROBLEMS WITH THIS THEORY

- God never forgives. God just receives payment – a mafia business transaction.
- It sanctions violence as a sacred means achieve peace. God kills Jesus to achieve peace with humanity. Therefore, using violence to achieve peace is sanctioned by God.
- Jesus suffers and dies to save others. So, people forced to suffer can be told to endure their suffering for the sake of others as a way to imitate Jesus. Abused wives, slaves, segregated minorities, the list goes on...
- It's based in the idea the human are defective. What if humans are okay, mortal, but okay?

- There's no grace, no love, no forgiveness. There's not much we would admire or teach our children to do.
- It destroys Jesus' link to us; he is not really fully human unless he struggles with sin and mortality as we do.
- Finally, it's not really based in the Bible. The Bible talks frequently about God's forgiveness and steadfast love. The Bible talks about human sin a good deal, but always within the framework that God forgives and restores the relationship. It is never seen as irreparable. And there's nothing in the Bible about original sin. Augustine got his theory from a terrible interpretation of the Second Creation Story.

ALTERNATIVE

- 1) If human beings are born okay, just as normal, mortal beings and their relationship with God has not been irreparably harmed, then there is no need for Jesus to die as a sacrifice.
- 2) If God is loving and forgiving, then there is also no need for Jesus to die as a sacrifice.
- 3) If you knock one or both of those foundations of atonement theory out, then the whole thing falls down.
- 4) But it brings us back to Anselm's question – Why did God become human in Jesus?
- 5) Did Jesus have to die? Yes. Why?
- 6) If we buy into the myth of the incarnation, then Jesus had to die. To be human is to be mortal. Therefore, with his birth in a manger, Jesus was destined to die. Just like each of us are destined to die.
- 7) What if Jesus had died another way? What if he was killed by accident? Carpentry accident. Splitting wood. Gashes his leg terribly. Incredible loss of blood. Infection sets in. Dies within a week. What if he dies from cancer, or old age?
What happens then? Does God leave Jesus in the grave? Was dying on the cross the ONLY way Jesus could die for us? Or with us?
- 8) Of course the gospel writers didn't theologize, or philosophize, about Jesus' death in this way, wondering what would have happened if he died another way. They wrote about the way he did die. He did die on a cross. This shocked them. They felt it must mean something. And they struggled to figure out what it meant by looking to their Bible – the Hebrew Bible – and by their experience with Jesus.
So, we, too, must approach the cross and ask like explorers, what does it mean? We are not trying to solve Rubik's Cube, where the answer has already been pre-determined. We are like explorers crossing a horizon we've never seen before.

FIRST THOUGHTS... AN OUTLINE FOR AUGUST 4, 2019

SPEAKING CHRISTIAN: ATONEMENT

Background

- 1) Tradition theory of Atonement has been amended over a thousand-year period. It has gone by the following names:
 - A) Satisfaction Theory of Atonement – Anselm 11th century (God honor is satisfied)
 - B) Sacrificial Theory of Atonement – Aquinas 13th century (Jesus is a sacrifice)
 - C) Substitutionary Theory of Atonement – Calvin 16th century (Jesus is a substitute)
- 2) Each of these developments are based on two foundations that set up the theory of atonement
 - A) Humanity is defective, born in original sin. Its relationship with God is irreparable.
 - B) God hates sin and must destroy or punish it.

Question – What if the two basic pillars that set up the atonement are wrong?

Theory

- 1) Jesus came to earth to save humanity from its collision course with God's wrath.
- 2) Jesus, by being both divine and human, can represent humanity because he's human and yet by being divine he is also the perfect human. Jesus is sinless, so he's a perfect sacrifice. Jesus is human, so he can substitute for humanity.
- 3) By giving his life on the cross, his death quenches God's wrath and desire to punish sin. Humanity is cleared of its sin. And humanity's relationship with God is repaired.
- 4) Therefore, humans can seek salvation through their faith in Jesus.
- 5) God rights the injustice of killing an innocent man – God's own Son – for the crimes of others by resurrecting Jesus and granting resurrection to all who come in Jesus' name.

Problems with the Theory

- 1) God never forgives. God just receives payment—it's kind of a mafia business transaction.
- 2) It sanctions violence as a sacred means to achieve peace.
- 3) In suffering and dying to save others, it sets up an abusive paradigm for those forced to suffer.
- 4) It requires the basic idea that humans are defective and are a problem – not have a problem.
- 5) There's no grace, love, or forgiveness in the story. Not much to admire.

- 6) Jesus has to shed a key part of being human—our fallibility—to be a “perfect” human.
- 7) It is not really based in the Bible.
 - The Bible talks about God’s forgiveness and steadfast love frequently.
 - The Bible talks about sin, but always in the framework of God’s forgiveness and reconciliation.
 - Human sin is not portrayed as irreparably breaking the relationship with God. “Original” sin is not a concept in the Bible.
 - The gospel stories reveal Jesus to be very human, even what we—in other people—would call sinful.

Thoughts for thinking about Alternatives

- 1) If human beings are as God created them to be and not defective, then there is no need for Jesus to die as a sacrifice.
- 2) If God is loving and forgiving, then there is also no need for Jesus to die as a sacrifice.
- 3) Go back to Anselm’s question: Why did God become human in Jesus?
- 4) Did Jesus have to die?
- 5) What if Jesus had died another way? Would God have left in the grave?
- 6) Does the myth of the incarnation lead to the myth of the resurrection?
- 7) The gospel writers wrote about the death Jesus had. He did die on a cross—a terrible death. It was so shocking; they felt it must mean something. They looked to their Bible—the Hebrew Bible—and by their experience with Jesus. This is not a bad place to start, either.
- 8) We must face the cross with Jesus. Can’t get to Easter without crossing through the cross. But we are not trying to solve the Rubik’s Cube, where the answer has already been pre-determined. We are like explorer’s crossing a horizon we’ve never seen before.