

Sermon: "At-one" Text: John 16:1-16 April 3, 2022 Lent 5
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When I was about 10 years old, my family attended a United Church. I also belonged to a boy's club in a local nondenominational church. The floor hockey was the attraction.

After the game our leaders would talk to us about the Bible and every week they focused on the coming judgement. We were all sinners and God was going to judge everyone but Jesus had died on the cross for our sins so to avoid the fires of hell and the wrath of God, we could accept Jesus as our Saviour and he would pay the price for our sins. And we had to stop sinning of course. Every wrong action, every stray thought we had, drove the nails a little deeper into Jesus' hands on the cross. Really, they said that...

To reinforce the message we were given little comic books each week. I remember the pictures of trembling sinners standing fearfully before the giant throne of an angry God. On the way home from the club each week I was feeling pretty fearful myself. But the floor hockey was fun so I kept going back.

Today is the last Sunday in Lent. We are drawing close to the cross, to Golgotha and the death of Jesus. In boys club we were given a particular perspective on what the cross on Calvary means. On the cross Christ paid the price for my sins.

The idea that the cross is where Jesus pays our debts to satisfy God's judgement is what is called *substitutionary atonement* theory. It's the idea, commonly expressed, that on the cross Jesus takes our place, serves as a substitute for us, and pays the wages for our transgressions. The reformation thinker John Calvin writes "We could not escape the fearful judgment of God," except that our guilt "...was transferred to the Son of God."

With substitutionary atonement theory we might see reality as great courtroom. We are all guilty. We are all condemned. But our defender, Jesus, offers to take our punishment for us. Jesus goes the cross and God accepts this sacrifice on our behalf and we are forgiven

This way of thinking about the cross, that Jesus pays the price for us, is popular and you do encounter it in many places in the modern Christian tradition. For some there is great power in knowing that our wrongs are taken from us and that we are forgiven. It works very well for some people. They find strength in it

Substitutionary atonement really doesn't work for other people. For some it gets in the way of our forming a good relationship with God

God, according to substitutionary atonement, is angry and maybe vengeful. It takes a sacrifice of an innocent to offset God's wrath. Jesus is loving in this scenario, but God? This God is scary... unapproachable. Fear rather than love may mark the relationship we have with this angry God. I know I was pretty afraid of God when I walked home from floor hockey as a child.

So.... as we approach the cross in the final days of Lent and as we draw close to Good Friday, with Holy Week beginning next Sunday, I wonder what is our understanding of the crucifixion? What do we think of when we reflect on Christ broken and bleeding on Calvary's cross?

Do we see Jesus taking our place? Paying the price for our sins? Or is there something else that we see?

It might be helpful to know that the idea of substitutionary atonement only emerges in the Christian tradition about 500 years ago. It's a relatively recent idea. It's not the only way to think of the story of the crucifixion. There are several theories of atonement in the history of Christian thought. There are a variety of ways to reflect on the cross.

For example, for the first 1000 years of our faith the cross was seen as a divine sleight of hand. God gives Jesus to death but then takes him back on Easter Sunday. This is the *Christus Victor* theory of atonement. Think of Aslan in the Lion, the Witch and Wardrobe – a tale CS Lewis built on Christus Victor atonement theory.

God in this point of view is not angry but triumphant in love: God in Jesus redeems us, ransoms us, revives, restores, and reconciles us. It's an act of grace. It's a gift. God is love and God is on our side.

Another way to view the cross, is as a part of a bigger story. Sometimes we may take the cross and set it apart from the rest of the gospel. At boys club they didn't teach us the parables of Jesus, or tell stories of the miracles, or have us memorize the Beatitudes. They just jumped ahead to the cross... Every week we stood before the cross

But the early church saw Good Friday's cross as part of a greater story.

One of the great thinkers of the first centuries of Christianity was an Egyptian bishop named Athanasius. He wrote that the whole of Christ's life, not just the events of Good Friday, was God's loving sacrifice. He thought of Christ as a crown prince who chooses to live with the common people. Being born in a stable, living as a child refugee under threat, growing up in a backwater town, learning a trade, wandering in rural places, being betrayed, and unjustly tried and crucified by the powerfuland then rising to life again. All of this, according to Athanasius, is the sacrifice of God. The cross is part of it but the whole story shows God's self-giving love. In Jesus God lives with us and dies with us and lives again with us, close to us.... In Jesus God shares the whole human condition with us. All of it, the whole story of which the cross is a part, is a great sacrifice of love.

Another thought as we think of the cross...Some centuries ago, there was a debate in the Western Church. They imagined a world that was free from pain and sin and conflict. The world was like Eden. It was flawless and peaceful and whole. And they asked the question: if the world was perfect and there was no sin or blemish would Jesus have come to that world?

One side of the debate said no. Why would Jesus come to a perfect world? There is no one to save. There is nothing to redeem; there is nothing to make whole.

But the other side of the argument said that even to perfect world Jesus would come. Jesus comes not just to save the world but to be in it, to be with us...however we are, Jesus would come to be close to us in love.

Eventually everyone came to consensus and decided that the second side of the discussion was right. Even to a perfect world Jesus would come. So it's not just about sin and forgiveness.... the work of Jesus is bigger.

One more reflection on the cross of Jesus. In a book called, *Millennium*, historian Tom Holland writes about how Jesus was pictured in churches after 321CE, when the Roman Emperor Constantine made Christianity the faith of Empire. Jesus was depicted in cathedral and basilica as Christ the King, Christ the Emperor. Jesus was like a heavenly Emperor, reigning over all things. Jesus was commonly pictured as the cosmic ruler of all.

When the first millennium approached its conclusion the western world was in turmoil. The Empire had retreated. There was political instability and conflict and disease and great insecurity. In the 9th Century CE, in the Cathedral in Cologne in what is now Germany a new image of Christ began to appear; the image of Christ crucified, six feet in height was the central image in this holy place. People may have had a small crucifix, a few inches high, in their homes. But Christ crucified emerged as a new common image of Jesus in places of worship. And people were shocked - astounded by this image of the suffering Christ in a public place.

The Imperial Christ reigning in glory was now a crucified Galilean, suffering and dying with the common people. The image of a suffering Christ astonished the Christian world.

Christ was no longer high above, remote in glory. This Jesus was one of us. Human, suffering, vulnerable. It was a time of great change and upheaval, of plague and instability and conflict. The crucified Jesus reminded people that God was with them in it all.

In our world of pandemic and war and strife and stress, as we reflect on the cross of Jesus in the coming weeks, may the cross remind us that God is not remote and angry but is with us in the mess of our world. Jesus is facing the darkness with us. So let's look to the cross in these final days of Lent and may hope and courage be found there.

Amen