

This is the final sermon in my Lenten series about the nature of atonement and the meaning of the cross. I have been pointing out that although we sometimes think there is just one way to understand crucifixion and salvation, understandings have differed over the years, and in these post-modern times there are multiple sometimes conflicting, sometimes overlapping meanings.

The earliest understandings are grouped under the heading of *Christus Victor*. These suggested that through his death and resurrection, Jesus the Christ hoodwinked and conquered Satan the Lord of death thus saving us from sin and death.

Around the end of the first millennium, when the church was getting actively involved in the crusades and justified Christians killing people who were not like them, a new understanding developed which was articulated by Anselm. He proposed that God's honor was insulted by our sin, and that God needed satisfaction before we could be in relationship to him. So God had his Son die and because Jesus was a totally innocent man, this created a surplus of grace that was enough to satisfy God's honor for all of humanity. This is a **substitution theory** because it suggests that we deserve to die but Jesus died instead of us.

This theory was further developed and mended by Aquinas in the 13th century and again by the Protestant reformers in the 16th century. They developed models based more on the legal system, where because of our sin we deserve to die but God is a judge whose justice is tempered by mercy so he sent his Son to die in our place and pay the penalty for our sin. Thus Jesus' death brings us life.

When we say that someone who has been in prison has "served their time" the underlying idea is that a misdeed is balanced by punishment. This is known as retributive justice and our legal system is built on it. The Protestant ideas were also based in the idea that sin has to be balanced by punishment. Jesus took the punishment for us and thus paid the penalty for our sin.

There are some significant differences between the substitution theories and the earlier *Christus Victor*. First, *Christus Victor* sees the powers and principalities of darkness lined up against Jesus whereas the later theories all reflect on the sin of the individual. In them, Jesus died because of our individual sin not because of a great cosmic force. Secondly, *Christus Victor* shows Christ victorious over Satan –

Jesus death is directed at Satan. In contrast, in the substitution theories his death is directed at appeasing God.

This is a sidebar. There is another ancient theory that I haven't talked about, probably because I find it rather unpersuasive and wimpy, but for the sake of completeness I will mention it. It's generally known as the moral influence theory. This assumes that the main thrust of Christianity is moral, in other words, helping people to behave well. According to this theory, God's mission is to improve the moral character of individuals and society. The demonstration of God's love in sending his Son, and Jesus' obedience to the will of his Father even to the extent of submitting to death on the cross inspire us to better behavior and higher moral fiber and so we are reconciled with God. You will notice that in this theory it is not Satan, not God, but humanity to whom the action is directed.

Going back to the substitution theories, there are several major critiques of them. First, they all tend to focus on Jesus' death as the most important thing while his life and teaching are secondary if not completely ignored. Secondly, they suggest that God has to kill his son, to commit child sacrifice in order to set things right yet we have understood that God does not require child sacrifices. Thirdly, as a model for us it suggests that violence in family relationships is ok and so can be seen to subtly endorse domestic violence. Fourthly, if God is love as Jesus taught us, why does he need to kill anyone?

If we see Jesus as teaching non-violence why would God be violent? In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said "blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the children of God." We are called to be peacemakers, a reconciling presence in the world, because that's what God is like, and we are God's children.

So 20th century theologians have formulated theories of atonement which are based in the idea that Jesus as the Son of his loving Father was a teacher and practitioner of non-violent resistance. One of the advantages of this approach is that it takes into account his life, ministry and teaching as an integral part of atonement – of humanity being reconciled with God.

You will remember that from the very beginning of his ministry, Jesus talked about the reign of God or the kingdom of heaven. This was not some future event, something that we will experience after death, but something here and now. Jesus said "the kingdom of heaven has come near" (Mark 1:15) and that's what he told

his disciples to say when he sent them on a mission trip.(Luke 10:9) Jesus' message was to repent because the reign of God was at hand; We get to repent not to avoid future punishment but because God's reign is here.

From this perspective we can see that God's reign is quite different from the way we humans naturally live after millennia of rivalry and violence. And contemporary understandings of society help us to see that sin is not just an individual problem but a societal one. In the reign of this world there are forces which are just too big for any individual to transform. For example, it is impossible for me to live in a way which does not negatively affect the climate and still carry out my ministry among you. And I am not personally responsible for the sin of racism which puts more African-American men behind bars than white ones, but I am a part of that system and so I am implicated. This is what I have come to call the sin matrix.

Substitutionary theories of atonement are too focused on the individual to be of help with the forces of sin and violence which are bigger than any one individual.

We need an understanding which takes into account the nature of God as loving and non-violent, and that embraces both the individual's need to be reconciled with God and the overcoming of the power of the sin matrix.

Let us consider that Jesus' life and teaching is important in understanding how we are reconciled to God through him. We can argue that his teaching was centered on the kingdom of God and his life demonstrated how it is different from the kingdom of this world. Understandably, this was infuriating to the powers of this world, and in Jesus' time those powers were personified by the religious leaders and the Roman authorities. Jesus was more vocally opposed to the religious leaders than he was to the occupying forces. He described their religion as hypocritical, restrictive, rule-bound and oppressive. This did not make him a popular figure among the leadership and they began to unite against him, even uniting with the despised Romans against him. John's gospel lays it out quite clearly:

But one of [the Jewish leaders], Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, 'You know nothing at all! You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.' He did not say this on his own, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus was about to die for the nation, and not for the

nation only, but to gather into one the dispersed children of God. (John 11:49-52)

Jesus' death would unite the children of God. Because his teaching was so different and because his way of life was grounded in non-violence resistance, he was both a threat and the ideal person to be a scapegoat. Theologians who are influenced by the work of French literary critic and anthropologist Rene Girard, see that Jesus' work was exactly this, to be the scapegoat which took away the mimetic rivalry and brought peace and unity. But with a twist – Jesus was the scapegoat who was seen to be totally innocent. Thus his death and resurrection brought light to the scapegoating mechanism which humanity had practiced unconsciously from the very beginning of time. It exposed the fallacy at the root of scapegoating and enabled us to not only see our rivalry but to transform it through following Jesus' teachings and emulating his life.

That sounds a bit like the moral influence theory, but it's quite different because it includes challenging the basis of human society in rivalry and violence. Jesus showed us how to be human in a different way AND by his death and resurrection overturned the power of the scapegoating mechanism by showing it to be empty.

So, Jesus' non-violent life and teaching was such a threat to the sin matrix, the powers of darkness that they had to get rid of him. And the worst things that humans can do to each other are to betray one another, to mock, to torture and to kill painfully and slowly. All those things happened to Jesus. Humanity and the sin matrix did their very best to destroy him.

If it had ended there it might be just a footnote in history. But it didn't end there. Jesus rose again. And in so doing showed that God is victorious over the sin matrix – as Christians have understood from the very beginning – Christ is victorious over the forces of evil and darkness. But wait, wait there's more. We did our very worst and Jesus still came back. God's love and forgiveness knows no bounds. God doesn't unfriend us. God keeps coming back.

And God made it very clear that Jesus the Christ is in charge of the cosmos, not Satan or the powers of darkness. Jesus the human is with God and in God. God was changed by Christ's incarnation, death and resurrection. And we are changed as we identify ourselves with his death and resurrection which we do symbolically in baptism; and we are changed every time we too choose to forgive rather than

hold a grudge; and we are changed every time we respond non-violently, every time we stand up for those who are oppressed, every time we share our bread with the poor whether by cooking a meal or making a micro-loan; and we are changed every time we participate in the Eucharistic feast and take the body and blood of the crucified but risen Christ into our own bodies becoming flesh of his flesh, bone of his bone.

As we move towards the third decade of this third millennium there are new understandings of the atonement beginning to rise up. Every theologian has to use the metaphors of her time and generation. This is, I am tempted to say, the age of Aquarius. It is a time when we are gaining new knowledge about the cosmos. Knowledge which is changing our understanding as much as when Copernicus realized that the Earth rotates around the Sun not vice versa. Now we know that the Sun is not the center of the universe either. Creation is not limited to this planet nor to this solar system.

And so we have to ask how our ancient Scriptures apply to this newly being discovered universe. If Christ was present at the very beginning of creation and if Christ is the ultimate destination or end of creation then his great work of incarnation and atonement, the reconciliation of all creation with God, must apply as much to nebulae, quasars and black holes as it does to salamanders, eagles and humans. Is it possible that in the current destruction of this planet Christ is once again being crucified? And if so, what is our role in that, and what will the resurrection look like?

For above all, we know that our God is a God who brings resurrection. We will never fully understand the work of Christ until we see him face to face, but we can be assured that our God always brings new life even from the most distressing deaths.

Now let's just take a minute or two to ground this conversation in Scripture. God reveals Godself to us through the work of the Holy Spirit in creation, in one another and in the scriptures so any theory must be grounded and connected to the bible.

Jesus said, "Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will

glorify it again.” The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, “An angel has spoken to him.” Jesus answered, “This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.”

Jesus was troubled – as would any human be when faced with probable torture and death. As British comedian Spike Milligan said, "I don't mind dying, I just don't want to be there when it happens." We are uneasy with dying and especially when we anticipate pain and suffering as Jesus did. Jesus was troubled but he was not going to ask to be saved from what was about to happen because it was the culmination of his ministry.

Yet he doesn't say, “It is for this reason that I have come to this hour; to save your miserable souls.” No, he says “Father glorify your Name.” His prayer is that God will be glorified through his actions. And then he says “Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out.” The world of the sin matrix will be judged by Jesus' death and resurrection – it will be revealed for what it is – powerless over the power of God and of God's people. The ruler of this world, personified by Satan, the

powers of darkness will be driven out by the victorious Christ – Christus Victor. And all people will be united in Christ. His death brings us peace. There is no need for rivalry and violence.

And so we, his disciples, get to live out this new way of being. And it is still new, still challenging after 2,000 years and counting. It is challenging for us to live lives of compassion and non-violence. It is challenging for us to follow the path of Jesus, the non-violent scapegoat.

So when we gather for communion today, communion with God and with other in the Body of Christ, let us ask for strength to live in the reign of God and to claim Christ's victory over the sin matrix as our new reality.