

Atonement

Sermon for the Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost, October 20, 2024

Readings: Isaiah 53:4-12; Psalm 91:9-16; Hebrews 5:1-10; Mark 10:35-45

Sermon text: The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities. ...because he poured out himself to death, and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors. Isaiah 51

For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many. Mark 10:45



I often preach about the beauty of creation, the sense of gratitude we have, or ought to have, for being alive and blessed, the joy and peace God wants for us and which we can find in our hearts through prayer and grace. I don't talk that much about sin and regret, guilt, confession and judgment. Sacrifice. But I do like to talk about what follows through the grace of God: forgiveness, restoration and reconciliation. In one theologically charged word: Atonement.

Atonement. But before I get into that let me tell you about my walk up to the cell tower on Red Wing hill with a heart shaped stone.... [tell story of finding rock on path and carrying it uphill].

Atonement is one of those words that lead to scratching of heads. From the Oxford dictionary we read: reparation for a wrong or injury.

"she wanted to **make atonement** for her husband's behavior"

- (in religious contexts) reparation or expiation for sin."an annual ceremony of confession and **atonement** for sin" — as in Yom Kippur the day of atonement
- in Christian theology: the reconciliation of God and humankind through Jesus Christ.

Let's highlight two words from these definitions: reparation (for a wrong or injury) and reconciliation (restoring right relationship).

So an act of atonement repairs and restores a broken relationship by some means, some act or exchange.

Sort of a strange example in this definition: a wife atoning for her husband's behavior! Seems like that should be his responsibility—but there you see a classic example of a innocent, though related party interceding on behalf of the actual culprit—the clueless or possibly bad-tempered or badly behaved husband. I confess already!

Yet just so in Christian theology we have the example of Jesus Christ, an innocent man, interceding on behalf of often clueless and sinful humanity, some members of which have rejected his teaching and instead had him executed for subversion and blasphemy.

But it started with a goat, the scape goat. *Azazel*.: In Leviticus 16 we read that on the annual day of atonement (Yom Kippur):

Then Aaron shall lay both his hands on the head of the live goat, and confess over it all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their transgressions, all their sins, putting them on the head of the goat, and sending it away into the wilderness by means of someone designated for the task. The goat shall bear on itself all their iniquities to a barren region; and the goat shall be set free in the wilderness. (Leviticus 16:21-22)...This shall be an everlasting statute for you, to make atonement for the people of Israel once in the year for all their sins." Lev 16:34).

But, judging by the prophetic words of Isaiah as preserved in several of his so-called suffering Servant passages, there was felt need to do more than sacrifice a goat. The scapegoat was a person whom was laid “the inquiry of us all”. By a perversion of justice, he was stricken for the transgression of the people and his life made an offering for sin. Yet “out of his anguish he shall see light” and the righteous one shall make many righteous and bear their iniquities—he bore the sin of many and made intercession for the transgressors”.

But who was this mysterious person. The Ethiopian eunuch traveling on the road from Jerusalem wondered that when he encountered the apostle Philip. he was prophetically talking about Jesus, Philip said, and proceeded to tell him the story of Jesus’ life death, and resurrection. He was baptized and became the legendary founder of the Ethiopian Christian Church, still active today.

So why is Jesus the perfect one to make atonement for the sins of humanity?

Ah, here’s where the author of the letter to the Hebrews provides an extensive commentary. He writes at the beginning of his letter or sermon that Jesus was God’s “Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he created the worlds—the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being” (1:2). and that he was sent by the Father to “make purification for sins—after which he rose from the dead, ascended into heaven and “sat down at the right hand of the majesty on high” (1:3). But he was not only the Son of God, divine, he was the brother of all people, indeed all living beings—fully human, sharing flesh and blood, suffering and temptations —and death—with sinful humanity. Why did the divine take on humanity and mortality? So that “through death he might destroy the power of death, that is, the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in fear by the fear of death” (2:14-15). “Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people” (2:17).

So the self sacrifice of Christ, the suffering servant, is not a defeat but a victory over death and the devil- the *Christus victor* theory of atonement. and it only needed to happen once for all time: As Hebrews says, “Christ appeared once for all at the end of the age to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself” (9:26).

Jesus in his death combines the roles of the priest making the offering on behalf of the people (Hebrews explains he is a priest of the order of Melchizedek as distinct from the lineage of Aaron), the scapegoat bearing the sins, and God to whom the sin offering is made. And in this dramatic inclusive way the people—with whom Jesus is kin— are restored and reconciled to God and each other. Or

at least the slate is wiped clean, the door is open. This is what the author of Hebrews refers to when he writes “so then a sabbath rest still remains for the people of God... Let us then therefore make every effort to enter that rest” and “since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession... let us even approach the throne of grace with boldness so that we may find mercy and grace to help in time of need” (4:9,11,14, 16). There is thus a “new and living way that he has opened for us through the curtain (that is through his flesh)” (10:20). Meanwhile, on this side of the veil, “do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God” (13:16).

But I would like to conclude with a short story of my climb up the mountain with a heart shaped rock, which I placed as an offering and sign.... {check out the video version of this sermon on our youtube archive page!}. Amen.

