

Chuck Blaisdell, Senior Pastor
First Christian Church
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The ABC's of Faith: Atonement

Ephesians 2:4-8 NRSV But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ - by grace you have been saved - and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.

II Corinthians 5:17-20 So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

2 Peter 3:8-9 But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance.

I shall never forget a conversation I had with a man, in my first year or so of ministry, many years ago. He was reflecting with me on his childhood, and on his relationship with his father. It was both a candid and painful conversation, as the man recounted how he was never sure of his status with his father, he was never sure how much his father loved him, he was never sure if he'd done enough, achieved enough to merit his father's love. And even when he did things well, he always worried that he could backslide and his father could withdraw his affection, his love, his approval. The man said that he could still recall just how anxious and sad he was too much of the time as he worried about these things, and he confessed to me that he would have given

anything to truly feel “at one” with his father. The most poignant thing about this conversation, though, was the fact that this man – a successful, delightful, wonderful man who had lived a beautiful life full of love for others – was at the time of our conversation ninety years old. His father had died thirty-five years before, but that feeling of never knowing, never being sure, never feeling “at-one” went oh-so-deep.

Comedian Woody Allen, a died-in-the-wool urbanite, Manhattan city-dweller, who positively despises the out-of-doors, once said that it was his desire to be “at two with nature.” However, I’ve never known anyone who wanted to be “at two” with God; no, religious folks have this desire, even when they can’t quite put it into words, to be “at one” with God, to be in harmony with God, to know that God loves them. Even most of the non-religious folks I have known wanted in some way to be attuned with whatever they conceived of as ultimate reality. In fact, it’s become one of those “new agey” buzzwords, “at one with.” But it’s really not so new, for to be at one with the world or (unlike Woody Allen) one with nature or one with ultimate reality is a quest that in one fashion or another has animated virtually every religion since the dawn of humankind.

In the Christian tradition, that question has taken the form of “how can I know that God loves and cares for me? How can I be at one with the will of God for my life?” Like my ninety-year-old church member, we too want to know not only whether God loves us, but sometimes can wonder how is it possible that God Could indeed care about us. God seems so awesome and we know how small we can be. God seems so perfect and we know what a mess of pettiness and perfidyl we can do. How can we know such a God, how is it possible that such a God would deign to care for us? How can we be “at one with” God? Did you notice the word that opens this new sermon

series on “the ABC’s of faith”? It’s the word “atonement.” Atonement. Take the word apart and it becomes even clearer “at-one-ment.” And a huge amount of Christian thinking since the dawn of the Church has been concerned with answering those questions of indeed how we can be attuned with, at-one-with the will and desires of God; how can it be possible that God – transcendent, perfect, holy God – could love such ones as us? And whether you have ever heard the word before this morning or not, I daresay that you have indeed heard answers to those questions, and you have heard about “atonement” whether you ever called it that or not. So this morning, I want to talk about some of the ways that the answers to these questions have been offered, and I want to say that one of those answers does NOT in fact manifest the nature of the God whom we worship.

It is a theological commonplace for folks to say that “Jesus died for our sins.” But we have to be extraordinarily careful about what we mean by that because if we are not, we can make God into a terrible monster. You see, when some folks say that “Jesus died for our sins,” they are wanting to say that that death was required for our atonement. It even goes by a fancy theological name called “substitutionary atonement.” What does that mean? Well, folks who say this claim that the reason that Christ was born was in order to be a blood sacrifice offered to a God who was infinitely angry with human beings, and therefore only such an infinite sacrifice of God’s own Son – in “substitution” for us – could atone for humanity’s sins and thereby, as it is often put, “pay the ransom” for human beings. But here is the problem with such a view of what “atonement” means, of what Jesus’ role is, and of what kind of God is depicted it

such a view. To say it plainly, such a view makes God into a monster. I would invite you to use the test that I've offered before here: If a human parent were so angry with his children that he required that one of his children be put to death to satisfy and assuage his anger, we'd not call that good, we'd call Child Protective Services. If that is the case, then why in the world would we want to say something like this about God? Moreover, such a view with its preoccupation with blood and ransom and pain as somehow being required in order for us to be saved is not part of the gospel, and it was an interpretation that was not, in fact, offered until the 11th century. Moreover, it is really only in the last hundred years, that this "sacrificial ransom" view of what "atonement" means has really taken hold among some folks, especially in America, and there are too many American hymns, for example, that you can find that give this awful view that God required the killing of His own son in order to save humanity.

So, if that is not a view of what the word "atonement" means that we want to profess, what is the alternative? Well, there is actually a much, much older view of what "atonement" means and it is also much more Biblical as we can see in our three scriptures for today. Two of our scriptures are from the Apostle Paul, who, remember, actually has the earliest written material that is in our New Testaments, and one is from Peter – or a student or admirer of Peter – writing near the close of the first century, but all three scriptures state something that is oh-so-important when we are trying to think about who God is and who Christ is and what happened through Christ. For you see, we often make a mistake when we begin to think about God's relationship to us and what Christ's life, death, and resurrection mean for us. And that mistake is this: we

tend to think and act as if our relationship to God is up to us, we tend to think and act as if God is somehow simply and only some sort of scorekeeper who is just waiting – and maybe even wanting – for us to mess up, to foul up, to muck up. Which makes us anxious and which makes us yearn, ever more insistently yet ever more futilely for what more we can do to assure that God loves us, to have a certainty that we have done enough, done the right things, and haven't inadvertently failed somehow. Yet as with the story of the man with which I opened this sermon, that simply tends to lead us deeper and deeper into anxiety and sadness and the feeling that we have failed somehow, that we can never “atone” for the bad things we've done.

But each one of our scriptures today wants to remind us that indeed that way of thinking is a mistake, a terrible mistake that leads not to life abundant but to a life of anxiety and despair. Because when all is said and done, we can't make God love us any more than we can make God not love us. God is love. Period. End of story. If you think otherwise, then you need to hear and re-hear and hear again Paul's words: *“...God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ ... so that ... he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.”* Does this sound like an angry God who demands a blood sacrifice of His son in order to love you, in order to save you, in order that your sins be “atoned” for? I don't think so. Or take Paul's other words this morning, words that should settle any question of whether or not our salvation, our status with God depends on what we do or don't do: All *“this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ....”* Note the

verb tense: reconciled. In other words, it's a done deal. We are at-one-with God – which is what reconciliation means after all! – simply because God has made it so.

But we cannot leave things there without noting that there is one value that we can claim from the “substitutionary atonement” view even if we rightly reject its bloody sacrifice notions, and that is that God is a morally serious God and desires and expects us to live well, to live morally, to seek to realize the highest possibilities, to aim at excellence instead of settling for mediocrity. God is not just a warm and fuzzy life coach who will affirm whatever we do. No, God is in fact angered by behavior that hurts others, God is incensed when the poor are exploited or the earth is misused or the stranger vilified or those who are “different” are shunned and bashed. And God will confront us with those things, God will hold before us where we have failed and will invite us, challenge us, prod us to do a better job of living out Jesus’ mandate to welcome the stranger and clothe the naked and feed the hungry and welcome the immigrant and use our words to build up and not tear down. Just like any parent worth his or her salt, God will never cease wanting to teach us and show us what is right, and will do us the honor of expecting us to live up to those things. So the fact that God loves us no matter what doesn’t mean we get a pass on bad behavior; it doesn’t mean, as one writer once put it that we can “love God and do whatever we want.” No.

But when all is said and done, we cannot and should not confuse God’s desire for us to behave well and self-givingly with any view that says if we don’t do so then God won’t love us. Because we have seen where that path leads – to anxiety, sadness, futility, and despair. But the good news this morning is that God is infinitely, infinitely patient with us, God is the eternal optimist. That’s what Peter is saying in our

final scripture for the morning; did you hear it? *“...do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. The Lord... is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance.”* You see, that’s not a threat but a promise and a hope: God wants, desires, hopes that all will indeed come to know the joy of a life live at-one with God, that all will realize that it is through God’s infinite grace and mercy that we are saved not our own doings, that all will know the satisfactions of seeking to live a Christ-like life, sure in the knowledge that God is on our side, cheering us on, holding us up, chastising us when we need it and forgiving us so that we can move forward into new life. May all of us, in this new year, experience ever more deeply this way of being at-one with God! Amen.