

Atonement Remix
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Cynthia Lapp
Hyattsville Mennonite Church

Luke 15:3-7
Micah 6:6-8
Psalm 22:1-11

I went to a conference two weeks ago entitled “Non-violent Atonement.” You may remember that before hand, I asked for your prayers. I was afraid I might break into song in the middle of the conference to deal with all the talking. Thank you for your thoughts and prayers. I was able to restrain myself from singing during lectures though I did explode into drumming a couple of times between sessions. My hands were sore and swollen for several hours afterward but I sure felt more integrated.

While atonement is one of the theological concepts that under girds us as Christians there is not agreement on what it means. What is atonement? Many people use the short hand, at-one-ment. Others might call it salvation. How is it that we can be reunited, become at one again, with the Holy One? How can we be reconciled to God and receive forgiveness? This is a question that is not original with Christians. The holiest day of the year for Jews is Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, when people gather to repent and seek forgiveness from God. In the Christian tradition we have been taught that the way we receive forgiveness is through Jesus’ death on the cross. The script is something like: God demanded that Jesus die on the cross so that all who believe will be forgiven. Over the generations theologians have come up with numerous variations on what the atonement means. Our interpretation is of course affected by our life experience, which parts of the bible we read and what else we read along side the bible.

One of the presenters at the conference, Peter Schmiechen, former president of Lancaster Theological Seminary in PA, maintains there are ten atonement theories and he is ready to say that nine of these are valid. Of course not all those present could agree that there are ten theories. Some presenters were lobbying for only one valid theory (their own of course) while one presenter said we ought to include two more theories to make it an even dozen, 12 being a biblical number. You may begin to see why I needed some drumming time. As people in a peace church we ought to be questioning at least some of these theories. If we believe that God wants us to be peacemakers we need to look again at how we become one with God. Is it through violent death willed by God for God’s own son? What kind of God is it that demands human sacrifice in order grant forgiveness? What kind of God is it that asks a child to die? We could say it is not all that different from a world leader who asks lots of sons and daughters to die so that the rest can live in relative peace and wealth. You see where this image and idea can lead, indeed have led us.

When Our God demands violence in order to save us, it is not a far stretch for those who are in power to demand violence, to justify violence, indeed, to act violently themselves.

When our picture of God demands violence it is very hard for us to resist violence in ourselves. We are after all made in the image of God. Or is this image of God made by us, made in our likeness? I readily admit I wanted the conference to be something it was not. I wanted it to be feminist, to talk about liberation theologies, to tell those attending what a non-violent atonement really means for the way we live. I came home from the conference with plenty of unanswered questions.

You won't have to listen to all my unanswered questions this morning, I promise. I do want to look together at three scriptures that give us three different understandings of how God is present to us and how we are present to God. Three truths, perhaps competing, about how we are forgiven, how we are made one with God. One of the very difficult parts of the atonement is that Jesus died. He not only died - he suffered. He was human. He felt pain, he bled, he was abandoned by almost all of his friends and admirers. These words from Psalm 22 give voice to Jesus' pain.

Psalm 22: 1-11

To the leader: according to The Deer of the Dawn. A Psalm of David.

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?

O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;

and by night, but find no rest.

Yet you are holy,

enthroned on the praises of Israel.

In you our ancestors trusted;

they trusted, and you delivered them.

To you they cried, and were saved;

in you they trusted, and were not put to shame.

But I am a worm, and not human;

scorned by others, and despised by the people.

All who see me mock at me;

they make mouths at me, they shake their heads;

'Commit your cause to the LORD; let him deliver—

let him rescue the one in whom he delights!'

Yet it was you who took me from the womb;

you kept me safe on my mother's breast.

On you I was cast from my birth,

and since my mother bore me you have been my God.

Do not be far from me,

for trouble is near

and there is no one to help.

These words of the psalmist are most familiar to us because the gospels tell us that it is what Jesus cried out on the cross. There he was, dying for all of humanity, or so we have said in our hymns and theology. Jesus is crying out to God with this pitiful plea, “why have you abandoned me?” We hear the inner turmoil. Where does that leave us? What kind of God is this that abandons us in our deepest need, that allows suffering, that has a formula for forgiveness that demands this kind of suffering? Maybe we are asking the wrong questions. Maybe it is not that God demanded Jesus suffering. Maybe it is that God *wanted to enter into human* suffering through Jesus. It is not that God abandons us but that God is with us. In Jesus, God knows our suffering. It is not taken away but it is known. As Mennonites we have too often said that because Jesus suffered, because the martyrs suffered, to be a true follower of Jesus means you must suffer. NO (and again) NO. We can see God with us in our suffering but God does not call us to suffer for sufferings sake. It may be that we feel closer to God when we are in turmoil, when we endure through the long dark night. But it may also be that we feel totally and utterly abandoned. It is not the violence that brings us to God, it is not in suffering that we are forgiven. But sometimes we can be alert enough to realize that God is with us in the midst of suffering. Tony Bartlett, another one of the presenters from last week, calls this idea *abyssal compassion*. God is with us in the abyss, we are not alone in the abyss, compassion is with us. Does it make our suffering go away? We know it does not. We still struggle with mental illness, abuse in families, the loss of a home due to fire, hurricane or a tsunami. There is still war, rape, death. Unfortunately violence and suffering are part of our experience. While sometimes it may seem like small comfort, God does meet us there in the abyss. Sometimes this is in a mystical way, an inexplicable presence with us. More often it is our job as the community to be the presences of Christ for each other in the abyss.

Rebecca Anne Parker in the book **Proverbs of Ashes** puts it this way:

*“It wasn’t the willingness to bear pain,
or carry burdens of others that transformed life
in the places that had been harmed by violence.
It was strong relationships
among human beings who offered their presence to one another.”*

We not only call out to God we call out to each other. We must be the presence of God to each other in the midst of the pain and suffering. So let’s take a leap and suppose that God does not demand that we suffer in order to be forgiven, in order to find oneness with God. If it not suffering then what does God want? This is the question that is often asked and answered by the prophets. In the book of Micah God has lost patience with Israel so God takes the people to court. In Micah we hear God’s lawsuit against the people. God makes the case for how God has been present to them and yet the people do not understand what God is saying. They keep asking what it is that God really wants.

Micah 6:6-8

*'With what shall I come before the LORD,
and bow myself before God on high?
Shall I come before him with burnt-offerings,
with calves a year old?
Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams,
with tens of thousands of rivers of oil?
Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?'
He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the LORD require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?*

God is not demanding sacrifices of animals or children. God is requiring action, humble action in justice and mercy. While this may seem cheap monetarily and fit our requirements for non-violence it is certainly not an easy way out. To change our actions, to do justice in a loving way, this is not only what Micah asks but what Jesus taught as well. And we still have a hard time living it out.

Is this finally what saves us, doing justice? Clearly some one would say no, this is works and Jesus is about grace. But then we must ask again what kind of grace is it that demands a human sacrifice? If God is not demanding year old calves in Micah, what is God demanding centuries later? Jesus himself struggled with how to explain this God that he was so very connected to. In his ministry he told story after story to illustrate what God is like. We heard one this morning, the parable of the ever forgiving father, and the prodigal son. Let's listen to another story of how God operates when one is "lost."

Luke 15:3-7

So he told them this parable: 'Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost." Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance.'

This parable is the first in a series of three similar stories in Luke 15. The parables of the lost coin and the lost or prodigal son follow. Here is a very different image than we have in Micah. The shepherd is seeking out the one that has gone the wrong way. The shepherd does not seek out the lost one in order to punish but in order to restore, to bring the wayward one back. Is this the kind of forgiveness that God offers?

In these parables God does the work. All the lost one must do is stop resisting. This is the picture of forgiveness that Jesus gives us here. This is at-one-ment, being made one with God. This is not a picture of individual salvation. The sheep that is lost is brought back to the flock. The father brings the son back to the family, to the community. This is what Jesus was doing in his ministry. He healed and restored, body and soul. We often make Jesus our “personal savior”, but in these parables we see that it is not only about me and God or me and Jesus, it is about being brought back into the fold, being brought back into relationship with others.

It is in community that we find our life sustained. Community does not let us off the hook, being restored to the group by God does not mean that life becomes suddenly easy. Who knows what kind of fences will need to be built to keep that wandering sheep safe? We are led to believe though that bring connected to something larger than ourselves is what saves us. Isolation and aloneness mean death.

Atonement is a complexity; there are no easy answers and we have hardly even begun to ask the questions this morning. These three passages of scripture, while not the common examples, give us some glimmers of what atonement is. Here in this congregation we live the truth of each of these stories. We work to be present to the pain and suffering right here among our community. We also know the gift of working for justice through love. Some of us even know the miracle of being found and reclaimed by love and restored to the fold. May we continue to live into unity with God and with each other, binding ourselves to Christ, to justice and to each other.

Amen.