

Did Jesus Need to Die a Violent, Bloody Death for Us to Know Salvation?
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(Editorial note: For reasons that elude Rev. Newcomb, when delivering this sermon at the second service, he often wondered off from his manuscript to make a point, and then skipped things in order to reconnect with his intentions. Thus this is not a close transcription of what was actually said, but is an accurate facsimile of what he intended to say.)

We have all heard the phrases that are commonly used to express the truth of the Christian Gospel, that "Jesus died for our sins," or that "our sins are washed as white as snow by the blood of Christ." And as we sang this morning, there are plenty of hymns and accompanying theologies that focus on this one aspect of Jesus' life, death and resurrection, that speak primarily of the blood of Jesus as a source of redemption:

*"There is a fountain filled with blood drawn from Emanuel's veins;
And sinners plunged beneath that flood lose all their guilty stains.
Lose all their guilty stains..."*

Now, I have to admit that that hymn is not sung often in UCC and mainline Protestant settings, in fact when I requested we sing it this morning to go along with this sermon, Anne in our office looked back at our record of when hymns were sung last, and found that we have never sung that hymn here in David's Church until today. Your welcome. So, if you let that visual image sit with you for a while, it's almost as gruesome as the Red Wedding in Game of Thrones. Blood & violence everywhere, but now viewed as a necessary component for us to have a relationship with God.

And to be clear, it is that very real combining of the blood and violence of Jesus' death on the cross which, in the minds of many, has become closely associated with the concept of salvation and forgiveness that has given pause to many modern day skeptics and Christians alike. And for Christians like myself and Pastor Michelle who were raised in a more conservative context with a strong emphasis on conversion, which was emphasized pretty heavily by regular revivals and calls to repentance, where the death of Jesus became closely with an emphasis on personal guilt and shame... after all, "Jesus died for YOUR sins!" That's right, if you were a better person... if you hadn't looked so long at that Sports Illustrated Swimwear issue, or had told your Mom the truth when she asked where you were last night... well, Jesus wouldn't have had to die a painful, violent death.

Last Spring, as we were getting close to Holy Week, I posted on my Facebook page an article by Baptist pastor Chuck Queen titled "It's Time to End the Hands-Off Attitude to Substitutionary Atonement," and a long theological argument ensued as a variety of my friends and especially some of their friends had an adverse response to that article's explanation that this was a theological approach that was not only less than helpful, but was actually hurtful to the faith experience of many modern thinkers who want to draw near to God and are being told that the path to follow Jesus is now covered with the blood of a violent sacrifice. I addressed that topic as an aside in one or more sermons back then as Good Friday drew near, but it was suggested that I revisit it again in the August "You Asked For It" sermons, and that I try to explain the issue without all the big, theological words, so people could hear and understand. And so, this morning I'm going to try to avoid using words like "justification," and "expiation," so we can all get on the same page and know what we're talking about. So here we go.

Let's start with some definitions: the technical name for this thinking is called the "penal substitutionary atonement" theory. It's the belief that Jesus was *punished*, or *penalized*... a term from the legal community, you broke a law and committed the crime, now you have to do the time... So, it's the belief that Jesus was punished as a *substitute* for the sinners of the world, which is you and me and every other person that ever lived... and Jesus goes through all of this instead of us to *satisfy* the demands of justice so God can justly forgive our sins. That's Penal Substitutionary Atonement and it's the dominant belief of many Protestant Christians today, but especially Evangelicals in the US. And because this is the most vocal and oft quoted group of Christians in America today, it's assumed by many that what they say they believe is what we all believe, but as I want to share today, that's just not so.

One of the reasons it's so commonly accepted as the way to think and talk about Jesus' death and our salvation is that it's one of the 5 fundamentals that conservative Protestants have insisted all Christians have to believe in order to be considered orthodox (with a small O). The other four are the inerrancy of Scripture, the divinity of Jesus, the virgin birth of Jesus, and the conviction of the actual physical return of Jesus to end the world as we know it. When I jokingly acknowledge that in some circles I am considered a Heretic, that's what I'm referring to. So, while they may not speak of it as I have here, this is the belief that underlies the thinking of many of our more conservative Christian sisters and brothers... so it's no surprise to learn that many people think that when we say we are Christian that we think that way too. And, of course, many of us are comfortable saying that Jesus died for our sins, but when we say that we have not loaded it up with all the theology and bloody baggage that says that Jesus was executed with a violent death on the cross as a substitute for our own death for our sins, so that we celebrate such a death rather than being repulsed by it,

and talk about all that blood and the guilt and shame it induces as not only the best way to think about all this, but as these conservative folk have declared, for them and many, it's the *only* right way to think about it.

So, let's step back and unpack that language a bit, and see why there are other ways, and I think much better ways, to think and speak about it, shall we? And remember, when I began, I spoke of the "penal substitutionary atonement" theory... that's right, it is only one theory among others... Eastern Orthodox and Catholic Christians have never bought it, and as of late most Mainline Protestant Christians are distancing themselves from this view, especially Christians who lean toward a progressive reading of theology. So, let's talk about one of the main problems with this way of thinking.

The biggest problem with Penal Substitutionary Atonement theory, in my humble opinion and that of Chuck Queen, is **what it says about God**. The logic behind this approach suggests that the reason that Jesus was required to be punished as a substitute for all sinners is that God is Holy & Just, and therefore it dishonors God when humanity sins, so the only way to restore humanity to right relationship is some form of punishment. This is an idea that owes a lot of its logic to an expectation that took root around the year 1000, which tended to compare the devotion owed to God with the expectations of honor that were required by the subjects of a Feudal Lord, and we can thank the theologian Anselm for that, who said that God's very nature required "satisfaction."

While some saw that Jesus in his faithful life unto death as a way to satisfy God's requirement of justice and holiness for being dishonored, there were others who saw Jesus' violent death as the substitute who accepted the necessary punishment to set things back in balance. God's anger at being dishonored, this theology teaches, must be assuaged. This thinking became solidified into a strongly stated theology about 500 years later in the thinking of Protestant Reformers, uniquely crystallized by Calvin, who had trained as a lawyer, and who saw God more like the ruler of a city state than as the One who Jesus pointed to in his life and teaching. In the formulation of that theology, it's as if God has to punish Jesus to save us from God's anger and need to punish someone... that can't be right.

So, let's start there. **What did Jesus actually teach about the character and person of God?** Remember the parable of the Prodigal and the Older Brother, where God is viewed as a loving parent who welcomes back the lost son who returns from a life of degradation and riotous living in Las Vegas only to be welcomed fully back into the fold, given a ring & a robe, and with no punishment required. The only one suffering here, is the fatted calf that was served up at the celebration. And then, when the father realizes that the older brother is jealous and angry about the party for the delinquent younger brother, the father gets up

from the table and goes out to where he is sulking to reconcile his divided family and bring him in to participate in the celebration. Again, no punishment was required. In this story, it's not a transaction, but rather is transformative, rooted in God's unrelenting love and grace.

When Jesus encounters people who are labeled as "sinners," he doesn't punish them, he doesn't withhold grace and forgiveness until they say some creedal prayer or even confess their sin, he welcomes them at the table of fellowship, as they are, and in loving them he calls them to their best true selves. He sees that powerful thief Zacchaeus stuck in a tree and invites himself to a dinner party at the Tax Collector's home, no punishment required. Jesus encounters the woman caught in adultery and forgives her, no punishment required. The nameless prostitute who comes to Jesus at the Pharisee's home, and weeping, washes Jesus' feet with an ointment and her hair and her kisses, and Jesus accepts her love, saying she has been forgiven much, no punishment required. It happens over and over again in the Gospels, Jesus speaks of God's graceful and forgiving love, and he hasn't even died yet. And each time no punishment is required. God's love and grace, as described by Jesus, is not a transaction of buying forgiveness by blood sacrifice, but rather an expression of God's transformative presence and care.

When Jesus teaches his disciples to pray, he includes those wonderful words of confession, "forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors," and forgiveness is given, no punishment required. Jesus even says that we are praying to one who is so kind and gracious that we can call God "Abba," like a child says "Papa" or "Mama." Jesus sees God as a loving and forgiving parent, who doesn't punish or even spank a child, who doesn't give us a snake when we ask for bread, but who seeks to give us what we need. So, any theology that says we have to be protected, or that we need to see a substitute punished so that God can look at us as beloved children, is not a theology based on the life and teaching of Jesus. Because Jesus teaches us again and again, in parable and story, in the loving way that he dealt with the vulnerable and needy people he encountered, that God is love. And love requires no punishment, love needs no substitute. Love is shown in grace. Love is shown in a full and caring embrace. And Jesus teaches us that that is what God does, that is who God is.

Now, one of the reasons I think this kind of bloody thinking took hold, is that Christians have always struggled to make sense of Jesus' death, that terrifying ordeal on the cross, his execution by Rome and Pilate and the powers and principalities of the world where he lived. We see that struggle in scripture, in the Gospels and again in the writings of the early Church and in the creation of the Creeds. Obviously the arrest of Jesus blindsided the disciples, they weren't prepared for this to come about even they knew Jerusalem was dangerous for prophets and teachers and would have preferred Jesus not go there. They knew

many of the Hebrew prophets had been killed there because they dared to say things that challenged the status quo, they spoke uncomfortable words, spoke truth to power on behalf of God, and were killed for their effort.

But the disciples, like many Jews of that time, were expecting the kind of Messiah to lead the Hebrew people the way King David had done as a military leader, they wanted him to raise up an army like the Maccabees. So, when Jesus leads the disciples out to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray, and when Judas leads the Roman soldiers to find Jesus, betraying him with a kiss, we learn Peter had brought a sword. He wasn't any good with it, but he thought it would be necessary to be armed to follow Jesus in the next phase of his work. Do you see how easy it is to misunderstand the Jesus who taught his disciples to turn the other cheek, who practiced non-violence, and said "blessed are the peacemakers," and here's one of Jesus' closest disciples arming himself. So the violence of his treatment by the Romans and his death on the cross created an existential uncertainty in the earliest believers in Jesus. What could it mean, why did he have to die?

And there is no simple answer to that question, but I am convinced that the answer to that question can never be that God required it in order to overcome sin. Jesus had modeled again and again, that sin is no obstacle to God's love, and forgiveness. So part of the problem is in our text itself, which refuses to say that Jesus was killed by the Roman Empire and Pilate, which is the simplest explanation for what happened. The text, especially John's Gospel, consistently puts the blame on the Jews, which I believe is primarily because the early Christians, and Paul especially the most celebrated missionary of the early church, needed Roman benevolence, or at least their indifference to be able to share this Gospel message, this good news about Jesus throughout the world where Rome ruled. But if anyone asks you who killed Jesus, it wasn't the Jews (which is what the Neo-Nazi White Identity movement teaches) and that belief explains the anti-Semitism which inexplicably has existed throughout Church history. Let's be clear Jesus was a Jew, his earliest disciples were all Jews and Jesus wasn't killed by The Jews, he was nailed to that cross by Romans.

So, he died on a Roman cross, but we can't and should not blame all Italians, of course. The reason the powers that be killed Jesus is the same reason totalitarian governments have always imprisoned and killed dissidents who challenged their authority by challenging their right to power. Jesus was asserting the values of God, he spoke openly of the Kingdom of God and believed that every single person that has been born is a Child of God, made in God's own image. Jesus taught that the Kingdom of God was at hand, those are the first words he speaks in the earliest Gospel Mark, and you cannot keep preaching those words in a totalitarian empire like Rome and not run afoul of the powerful armies whose job it is to keep civilians in line.

Jesus was killed because he insisted that the leper and the prostitute and the shepherd and the fisherpeople, and the women and the children he encountered were just as important as the men who were Roman soldiers and rulers. He was going against the grain, he ruffled the feathers of the powerful elite, and when people began to follow his message, and support his cause, and rumors began to spread that he might be the one God had promised who like Moses would lead God's children to freedom, the Romans did what the powers and principalities have done and they killed him.

And scripture says he overcame death and rose again. In Jesus, life overcame death. Love overcomes hate. The willingness to serve and love and care overcomes the power that threatens to take a way life, and those who are weak and vulnerable discover they no longer need to fear the powers of Rome, that they are set free from the fear of death, which can be death itself.

So, we may not ever fully comprehend why God allowed Jesus, whom we have come to see is the very human face of God, to die upon that cross, but here's what I think we can learn from it. In Jesus we experience how very far God is willing to go to participate fully in our humanity, how God in Jesus is willing to experience the most challenging parts of human existence and experience, even cruelty and violence, and finally even death itself. In Jesus' death we experience how far God is willing to go to know human life and pain, and to free us from fear of the power of death. In Jesus' death and resurrection we hear again that God loves us enough to go where we will all eventually have to go, and by passing through death into resurrection, we learn that we too can face what ever is placed in front of us, and know that God is on the other side waiting for us.

So, in Jesus God teaches us that there is no longer a need for a scapegoat, or a sacrifice like those described in the Old Testament for sin. In fact, in Jesus we see how God no longer requires suffering and sacrifice to experience God's loving kindness, care and grace. Suffering comes, because life in the real world is hard, and living is not always as easy as it looks. And when we try to serve others as Jesus models, we will indeed be required to sacrifice on behalf of love. To love each other we have all learned to sacrifice our own will to show kindness, mercy and care for others, and depending on the circumstance we may one day find ourselves living as Jesus did, "laying down his life for his friends." But it's never because God requires us to suffer, or for a substitute to suffer, for our sins, or that Jesus had to die because the cruel Hebrew God demands blood and sacrifice... but rather because that is the way of life for all who seek to love as Jesus did. And thank God that Jesus reveals for each of us, God's love and forgiving grace. Let go of your guilt, Jesus says to us. Let no one try to shame you because you are human, because you have sinned. All have sinned and have fallen short of the glory of God, the Bible says, so get over it.

You are made for love... God's salvation is a free gift of grace, and God's desire is for each of us to be transformed in and by that love. You are God's beloved child, and God wants only that you love God, and your neighbor as yourself. Amen.