

## Sermon for Pilgrim Lutheran Church | 4th Sunday in Lent | March 15, 2015 | John 3:14-21

I am serving as “Theologian in Residence” at Pilgrim Lutheran this year. In this role I occasionally preach and teach, and my writings—from hymns to poetry to essays—have been used in a variety of ways to enrich Pilgrim’s worship and learning life. During the season of Epiphany I led a 6-session small group gathering titled “Lurching Toward Lent” in which about a dozen of us wrestled with atonement theology. I was invited to preach this day, and on this text, as an opportunity to speak to a larger portion of the Pilgrim community, meeting atonement theology “head on” so to speak. ~David Weiss

This morning’s sermon is on atonement theology, which is the doctrine of at-one-ment. Let me explain.

Atonement tries to answer the question, how can we possibly make up for how much we’ve messed up with God? How can we *atone* for our sin? Or, if *we* can’t atone for our own sin, how can *God* atone for our sin for us? If we’ve been *broken off* from God how can we be *made one again*? *How can at-one-ment occur*?

Expressed more positively, atonement names the mystery of becoming “*at-one*,” becoming whole with all things: with God, but also with our fellow humans and with the rest of creation. *That’s atonement*. And no matter how much we presume to describe it with doctrinal precision, *it is a deep mystery*. And, unfortunately—no, tragically—I daresay humanity in general, and Christianity in particular, has disastrously misunderstood this mystery. And over the next fourteen minutes, doing my best not to fall headlong into heresy, I aim to set matters aright. So I encourage you to buckle up, keep your hands inside the pews, and hold on for dear life. The ride is about to begin.

I bet many of you memorized it as you were growing up. John 3:16—“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whosoever believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.”

It’s probably the most memorized verse in the Bible, nicknamed “the gospel in a nutshell.” It’s certainly among the most beloved. But there are problems here. And not just in this verse, but in the verses around it.

Now, I need you to listen carefully, because I’m not going to leave you here. We’re *heading toward good news*. But we start with a *hard look* at a text has come to make me squirm. What does it mean that God *gave* Jesus ... to be *lifted up*? And how does that lead to eternal life for us?

Because we know where this story is going, we can fill in John’s euphemistic language here and put things more bluntly. What John is really saying is something like this: “For God so loved the world that he (and I’m leaving the masculine pronoun in on purpose) that he *kill*ed ... either allowed ... or destined in some indirect way ... or *outright orchestrated down to the gory details* ... the death of his Son on the cross ... so that at least some of us—the ones who believe in Jesus—won’t perish, but will end up in heaven where we can celebrate eternally with God while some poor suckers, maybe even some of our own friends and family, are literally ‘down south’ catching hell.”

Now, I’m *NOT*, I repeat – *NOT* – going to leave you here. But I need you to stand here long enough to see what we’re up against in this verse and its nearby neighbors. Right before this, John 3:14 says “the Son of Man must be lifted up” while referring back to an Old Testament story in which Moses lifts up an image of a serpent on a pole, making clear that John expects us to see Jesus “lifted up” on another pole: the cross. And then John 3:18 adds, with uncomfortable clarity: “*those who do not believe are ... condemned already*.” Ouch.

How’s this for a catchy, gospel slogan? *Atonement: it isn’t for everyone; but you probably want to make sure it’s for you.*

Not really very cute at all. See, that's *my son, Ben*, that John is talking about. "*Does not believe in Jesus.*" "*Is condemned already.*"

So I intend to push back. For the sake of those I love. Because, while I'm no "god," I *can* love my son, even while he doesn't believe in Jesus. And if God can't love my son, Ben, right now, then there's something wrong with God. Or if God does love Ben right now, but stops loving him if he dies without believing in Jesus, there's still something wrong with God. And if God goes right on loving Ben while Ben is slowly roasting in hell, well, then there's something *really* wrong with that kind of God.

Now, I don't believe there's anything wrong with God. And I'm not worried about my son, Ben.

But my point—and the reason I'm naming names this morning—is that these texts, and the theology we often use to interpret them—are NOT innocent. Lives can hang in the balance. These words have the power to shape the way we think about ourselves or about others. So we need to approach them with the same respect we show a box of matches. Well-used, they can provide us light and warmth. But if we're not careful with our theology, someone will end up getting burned.

Sort of like a set of eyeglasses, theology takes the raw data of faith—the stuff out there in front of us—and tries to bring it into focus, so that we can make sense of what we're seeing. *But sometimes theology fails—and we know that.*

There is a theology of white supremacy that tries to make sense of racial differences—and does so with horrific consequences. There was a theology behind apartheid, slavery, sexism, and the condemnation of LGBT people. All of these theologies are attempts to make sense of raw data. All of them were, at some point, taken for granted as "the Truth." And all of them are attempts that we now see fell short, often in disastrous ways.

There are also theologies that try to make sense of the raw data that Jesus lived a holy life and yet

died a horrible death. How do we understand that? For the first followers of Jesus, this was a huge and pressing dilemma. They didn't have pre-printed Sunday School lessons to map it out for them. They had stories of a man who was uncommonly—extraordinarily, scandalously good. So good that sacred energy seemed to pulse through him. Many persons experienced healing in his presence. Many more were moved to live wholly different lives on account of him. And they had stories of his death on the cross. And the thundering question: Why?!

Sure, each Gospel concludes with the resurrection (though Mark just barely does), so it's all better in the end. But before that, Jesus does not die a peaceful death after a long life. Or a tragic death in an accident. Not even a swift death at an assassin's hand. He suffers for hours on a cross, while life is painfully, breath by breath, ripped from him. WHY?!

There is *not* one clear obvious answer. There are only attempts at an answer. We see hints of them in Matthew, Mark, Luke, John and Paul. We see more of them scattered across church history. And many of the answers drag Jesus' death right into the doctrine of atonement, marking it as an expression of God's love. Like John: "For God *so loved* the world . . ."

Honestly, I find these answers unsatisfying—or worse. For two reasons.

First, because they make Jesus' death—in all its cruelty—*redemptive*. And frankly, I don't trust that notion. I mean, if God can kill someone in order to redeem others, then what's to stop us from doing the same? We are, after all, created in the image of God. And that IS pretty much what we've done. Oh, there's a handful of twisted individuals who kill just for the joy of killing, but most of our bloody human history, from the generals we admire to the criminals we detest—from wars to vengeance to executions—is the history of people who killed *because they felt it would make things better.*

And if the story we tell about Jesus is one that says the most important part of his life—the *redeeming part*—was the brutality of his death—well, that’s a story I get queasy about telling. Not just because I don’t care for it, and not just because I don’t think it’s true, but also because it’s a story that HAS been used *theologically* to justify a lot of other killing besides Jesus. And none of those other people deserved to be caught up in this logic that says, if just these people die, it will all be better. You see, that type of thinking NEVER just stays with Jesus. It ALWAYS spills over onto other people we’d like to be rid of.

But there’s another reason, a more positive one. *Look at the man’s life, for God’s sake.* I mean that literally: FOR GOD’S SAKE. Because, as I suggested when I sent my son, Ben, to hell a few minutes ago, the way we’ve often chosen to hear this story does not reflect very well on God. And, simply put, we owe God better theology.

What if *Jesus’ life* is *atonement*? What if his life is what “at-ones” us with God and one another? John (1:16) describes Jesus LIVING, his whole way of “dwelling among us” as “grace upon grace.” Jesus entire ministry announced, revealed, and embodied our atonement. *Before* he died. In his parables. His healings. His table fellowship. People who felt broken, who were cut off and marginalized, who seemed unworthy. Jesus at-oned them—in *his life*. He pronounced the all-encompassing, overwhelming, life-transforming, community-creating love of God, which makes all persons, all things, one. *That’s atonement.* And it didn’t require Jesus’ death to make it happen. It was the result of his *life*.

There are reasons—historical, religious, psychological, and more—that led his followers to put his death at the center of atonement theology. But there are reasons—historical, religious, psychological, and more—that explain why sexism, racism, homophobia show up in the Christian tradition. Yet we’ve learned to push back against these reasons. Eventually we’ve said, it’s time to do

better. And it’s time to do better with our atonement theology.

*Atonement is what transpires through Jesus’ full presence to others.* His willingness to be the unconditional welcome of God to the people around him. His death is part of that story, not because it was needed to “seal the deal,” but because the world—the human power structures that frame our lives through injustice and bias, through greed and exploitation—those power structures has no place for a human being so fully, so *redemptively* present to others. And those powers—some religious, some political, some social—those powers killed Jesus.

I do not look at the raw data and Jesus’ holy life and brutal death, and say that his death somehow brings about our atonement. No, I say that Jesus’ holy life, his radically full presence, which announced and embodied at-one-ment to all around him, is what led to his death. But our atonement was accomplished *before* he died. And before he died he invited us to join him in the holy work of at-one-ing everything else.

John’s gospel reflects an understanding that scholars call “realized eschatology.” Coming from the Greek word that refers to “the End,” or the Last Things, realized eschatology means that John doesn’t simply think, “the End is near”; he believes that in Jesus *“the End has already started.”*

Which means that when John talks about “eternal life,” as he does in 3:16, he doesn’t mean “life in heaven.” He means LIFE, capital letters, bold print, full color, *right now*. He means life lived in infinite depth starting this very moment. He means life lived—like Jesus!—in full gracious presence to others. *Right now.*

John’s gospel is extraordinarily complex—and rich. There are SO many more things I could say about this passage.\* There is MUCH more here than meets the eye. But let me end where I started, with John 3:16, the Gospel in a nutshell:

“For God so loved the world ...” *not just us, but everything, every corner of creation ...*

“That God gave us Jesus ...” *God filled this person, Jesus, with such radically full human presence that we could not help but call him the very Son of God ...*

“So that everyone who believes in him ...” *everyone who accepts Jesus’ invitation to rest their heart on and invest their energy embracing that same radically full presence in their lives ...*

“Will not perish ...” *these people, these “fully present ones,” will not live shallow lives or lack for meaning ...*

“But will have eternal life ...” *by daring to be fully present, they will discover the full eternal depth of life, here and now.*

The stakes are huge.

*Not* because they concern our ultimate destiny, our ultimate “at - one - ment” with God. That, my friends, is sealed entirely by the unimaginably extravagant love of God. A done deal from the very beginning. What’s at stake here—and it’s huge because all the hurt and need and joy and love in the world waits on this—is whether, by faith, we start living *into* and *out* of the awareness of that extravagant love already today. *That’s atonement: at-one-ment, full gracious human presence to one another.* Starting now. *Right now.*

Amen.

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**\*Endnote:** This text really does require far more attention to do justice to it than I can offer here. I mention just four “essential” items that got “cut” due to time.

1. John is the last of the gospel writers to offer portraits of Jesus and his portrait is undoubtedly the imaginative, symbolic, theological ... and least historical. That doesn’t make it unimportant at all, but does mean we need to approach it with much more nuance. In this gospel lesson (3:14-21) all the words appear to be spoken by Jesus (no quote marks in the original Greek), but there is wide scholarly consensus that John creates Jesus words in his gospel to an extent not seen in any of the other three. So I “argue” with John in my sermon, because to argue with Jesus requires more explanation than I have time to provide.

2. In John’s Gospel the language of believers and non-believers is NOT about Christians and “other faiths.” John’s community of believers is comprised of Jewish Christians (Jews who came to regard Jesus as the Messiah). For fifty-plus years they gathered alongside others Jews in synagogues, but over the decades tension increased between these two sets of Jews: those who revered Jesus and (the majority) those who did not. Shortly before John’s Gospel is written, the majority Jews *barred* the Jewish Christians from gathering any longer in the synagogue (basically because they wouldn’t stop talking about Jesus). It was a BITTER rift, as most family rifts are. (We see bits of this “leaking” backward into John’s narrative at 9:22, 12:42, and 16:2.) When John speaks of non-believers, he is referring to the Jews who refused to believe in Jesus, and however strongly he may believe what he says, his rhetoric is painfully sharpened by the raw familial bitterness of this dispute.

3. The word translated as “judgment” in v. 19 is far more evocative than this translation implies. The Greek is *krisis*, from which we get our word “crisis.” It really means “critical point” or “moment of decision.” Because of how we mis-hear “eternal life,” we just as easily hear *krisis* as referring to God’s judgment. But this isn’t a judgment rendered by God or anyone else outside the situation; it refers to the critical nature of existential *choice* facing the person within the situation: how we will decide to invest ourselves in the next hour, day, or week.

4. Finally, John is very fond of opposing *light* and *dark* as symbolic language heavy with value. Light is always good; dark is always bad. This is a natural enough metaphor, and one embedded in the gnostic philosophy prevalent in his day. And while I may disagree with it always being used in one way, it is true that in a society where most everyone had olive-colored skin, light/dark is not nearly as loaded a metaphor as in a society like ours where the values align so uncomfortably with skin color and social power.

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