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Date: April 10, 2020,
Sermon: "Substitutionary Atonement, Love"
Scripture: Matthew 27:27-31
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe

Matthew 27:27-31

Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the governor's headquarters, and they gathered the whole cohort around him. They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on his head. They put a reed in his right hand and knelt before him and mocked him, saying, 'Hail, King of the Jews!' They spat on him, and took the reed and struck him on the head. After mocking him, they stripped him of the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him.

Despite the lovely name, Good Friday is the toughest, hardest day in the Christian faith, no matter how you cut it. Skipping the religious part entirely, it's still the story of the execution, the willful murder of an innocent man.

Jesus was a nice person. He never hurt anyone. He had a following, not much, and they never hurt anyone either. You can believe the miracles he did or not, you can like his teachings or not, but none of that ever hurt anybody. But it is true, some leaders are so insecure, so afraid, they can't handle anyone not under their thumb. The head of the Roman government, Pontius Pilate, actually declared that Jesus was innocent and still had him killed.

In Church, however, we can't skip the religion part, can we? Good Friday is central to who we are, and the story doesn't get any easier with religion added in. Christianity has struggled to understand and explain the crucifixion of Jesus since the day it happened. Priests, bishops, popes, scholars, pastors, denominations, Church-wide conferences—all the big people and great minds and deep thinkers and you, Church people—we've all had a go at explaining it.

Here's the classic, historic, approved, if you will, explanation: "Substitutionary Atonement." In plain English, "Somebody's gotta pay." My Funk & Wagnalls College Dictionary, which always seem to muddy the waters of any word I looked

up, would have probably said, “Substitutionary atonement’ is the idea that somebody was designated to be the substitute as the atonement.” Plain English is better: “Somebody’s gotta pay.”

Here’s “World Religion 101”: The entire history of world religions from Neanderthal cavemen to Adam and Eve, from one end of history to the other, from one part of the world to another, everywhere and always, the basic idea has been “Somebody’s gotta pay.” How that happened was sacrifices. People made sacrifices to God. For two main reasons: 1. Appeasement. 2. Influence. To keep God happy *and* to convince God to help you.

In ancient times, you wanted good crops and healthy babies. As time went on, you wanted military victories, peace, a good economy. The basics. The sacrifices to God changed over time from the obvious to the cruel to the logical. It probably began with the fruits and vegetables, some portion of your crop or animal herd. Sadly, sacrifices included humans. And then animals. A blood sacrifice. All to show God, “See how sorry we are . . . see how bad we feel . . . see how much we need you . . . see how important we know you are.”

We don’t like to think that way, not in 2020, in a lovely and loving New England Church, where just about everything we teach and do goes back to one of the shortest verses in the Bible: “God is love.”

We hang on to that for dear life, so it’s hard to imagine a farmer bringing a portion of his crop to be burned on the altar; hard to imagine families dragging sheep, goats, rams, birds, to be killed on the altar; hard to imagine royalty and clergy and military leaders sacrificing human capital, slaves, captured enemies, prized human possessions on the altar. Blood and burning and killing seem so ugly, primitive, senseless.

Which is how we end up with “substitutionary atonement.” God puts in a substitute. Jesus. No more blood animal sacrifice, no more burning crops. No more killing. Jesus’s willing sacrifice on the cross becomes our atonement. “Atonement,” to atone, is to make things right. To pay your debts. As I said, “Somebody’s gotta pay.”

In religious terms, our sins, our imperfections, our persistent choice to do things wrong creates distance between us and God. Somebody’s got to bridge the gap. Somebody’s got to atone so that one side and the other get back together. Somebody’s gotta pay.

There is an old Gospel hymn I used to sing. It’s not in our hymnbook. But in an old-fashioned way it explains it all in plain English:

*"Jesus paid it all
All to him I owe
Sin had left a crimson stain
He washed it white as snow.
Jesus paid it all."*

You still might be left wondering why that was necessary, especially in such an awful way. Couldn't God just make us do sit-ups, wash our mouths out with soap, run laps, write on the blackboard a million times "God forgive me, I'm really, really, really, really sorry!" Or, really, really instituted "purgatory," made us all do some hard time?

Instead, God spoke the language of the day. We all do that. Depending on the situation, we choose our words, our stories, our euphemisms, our accent. When Alida comes back from Appalachia every summer, she brings home that sweet, smooth Virginia accent that she grew up with. When we do our "Sports Worship" service, with so many athletes in attendance, we bring the language of sports and faith together. Jacob, wrestling, St. Paul, running the race. We talk about focus and practice and effort and teamwork and cite examples of Christian faith and athletic prowess. We've had pro-basketball and -football players, college stars, All-Americans, team captains. We use the language that makes sense for that setting.

That's what God was doing on Good Friday in ancient Israel 2,000 years ago. People understood sacrifice. People understood someone standing in for everybody else. And so do we. If there is one thing Americans agree on—it may be the only thing—it is the value we place on those who serve on the front lines, those who risk everything, those who pay the ultimate price, those who bear the fullest cost of sacrifice: Our soldiers. Our police. Our fire department. And now, at long last, we recognize our doctors, nurses, our medical staff—no different from a private on Iwo Jima, a fireman on 9/11. We call them heroes. We treasure their families and their memories. They are precious to us. They "paid it all."

That's Good Friday. That's why we call it "Good." On Good Friday, God spoke a universal language of selfless sacrifice, of love without limit, of someone paying it all to set us free.