

THE VOCABULARY OF FAITH
8) The Cross (Atonement)

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During this summer season, we have been considering “The Vocabulary of Faith,” those words that have become so interwoven into the fabric of Christian language that they have, at times, suffered from lack of clear definition and understanding. A significant part of the “dis-connect” that our current culture has experienced with “the Church,” has to do, I believe, with language that we sometimes use—language that means certain things to certain people while leaving other people confused and unclear as to what in the world they are talking about.

So it is that we have been exploring some of these loaded words—words like salvation, evangelism, discipleship and belief. Our hope in doing so is that we might rekindle and reclaim these words in ways that reflect the true intent of the word and the meaning that it holds for us.

This morning’s “word of the day” is, perhaps, the most loaded of all the loaded words of Christian vocabulary. To speak about “the cross” is to address the concept that that is absolutely central to our faith and our witness. To put it quite simply, there is no Christianity without the cross.

The cross, you see, serves to remind us of the great love that Jesus had for humanity. In John’s Gospel, Jesus tells his disciples, “There is no greater love than this—that one should lay down their life for their friends.” Jesus not only said that, but he demonstrated this teaching in his own witness—laying down his life for others. The cross reminds us of this love.

It should be pointed out, however, that the cross, over the centuries, has come to represent other aspects or dimensions of faith—not all of them helpful and not all of them positive.

I will never forget that on a visit to La Paz in Bolivia, I went to a museum in which there was an ancient parchment that featured a crude drawing of the Spanish conquistadors marching into Bolivia with the cross of Christ at the head of the procession. In the eyes of those native people who experienced the Spanish conquest, the cross was a symbol of fear, war and oppression.

When you stop to consider the oppression and violence generated by such endeavors, you can certainly understand why some cultures view the cross very differently. Rather than represent the witness of sacrificial love, it has come to represent the self-centered greed of a lust for land and resources.

My focus, this morning however, has less to do with the cultural or sociological meaning of the cross, and more to do with its theological significance. Simply put, the cross and the way we understand it, has much to say about how we understand both the nature of God and the nature of the Christian faith.

I grew up in a world in which the understanding was pretty clear. Jesus died on the cross in order to save us from our sins. He was the sacrifice that a just God required in order to forgive the sins of humanity—mine included. As a result of this understanding, we sometimes referred to Jesus as the “sacrificial lamb” and sang hymns about the redemption made possible by the blood that he shed upon the cross. The cross, in this understanding, was instrument by which this sacrifice was made.

This understanding of the cross and the role that it played in the overarching drama of salvation is one that theologians have referred to as, “**substitutionary atonement**,” the idea that Jesus was the substitute, designated by God, who satisfied God’s demand for justice by undergoing the punishment that we all deserve. This is what is often meant by the expression, “Jesus died for our sins.”

It is important to note, at this point, that the substitutionary theory of atonement was not formulated in scripture and was not a part of early Christianity. While various writers, including the Apostle Paul, referenced the sacrifice of Jesus and often linked his death with that of the Pascal Lamb of the Passover observance, the substitutionary theory of atonement did not evolve until nearly 1100 CE when Anselm of Canterbury put forth the idea that, God’s retributive sense of justice required that the penalty of human sin must be paid for from the human side.

Anselm’s Theory: Substitutionary Atonement

- **We are all sinners and cannot, therefore, pay the debt of our sin**
- **Only the perfect human can pay that debt**
- **God became human in Jesus to pay the debt of our sin**
- **In Jesus’ death on the cross, that debt has been paid)**

The problem, in Anselm’s understanding, was that since we are all sinners, we cannot adequately make that payment. This payment can only be made by the perfect human, who also happens to be divine. So, wrote Anselm, God became human in Jesus in order to pay for our sins. In Jesus’ death on the cross, that debt has been forever paid.

Over the last thousand years, give or take, Anselm’s theory of atonement has gained acceptance to the point where some consider it to be a theological given—to be accepted as doctrine. It is, however, important to keep in mind that there are other ways of understanding the crucifixion of Jesus and its significance in our faith.

In his book, “Speaking Christian,” Marcus Borg suggests that Anselm’s theory of substitutionary atonement creates three major problems or stumbling blocks. I will name them briefly.

First of all, Borg suggests that this theory completely obscures the historical meaning of Jesus’ death.

Anselm's Substitutionary Atonement Theory:

- Obscures the historical meaning of Jesus' death

The historical reality, of course, is that Jesus didn't just die—he was killed by religious and political authorities that were threatened by his courageous witness. To say that this was merely a part of God's plan tends to diminish the fact that Jesus was killed by the forces that opposed his vision of the coming Kingdom of God. He died, of course, but not for the purpose of making it possible for God to forgive our sins. He died because of the sin of those who were more concerned about their own privilege and power than the rights and the dignity of others.

Secondly, and more to the point, this theory of atonement raises some disturbing questions about the nature of God.

- Raises some potentially disturbing questions about the nature of God

If Jesus chose to die on the cross in order to fulfill God's plan, what does this say about God? Is our God really a God who required human sacrifice—a blood offering if you will—in order to offer forgiveness to all?

Was God not a forgiving God before the witness of Jesus or was it necessary for Jesus to die in order for God to suddenly become a forgiving God?

The answer, at least from my perspective, is pretty obvious. God has always been a forgiving and loving God—even when humanity did not understand that love. Jesus' death on the cross merely served to underscore the power and the passion of that love.

Finally, Marcus Borg suggests that the third problem with the theory of substitutionary atonement lies in the fact that it distorts what the good news of the Christian gospel is all about.

- Distorts the "Good News" of the Christian message

To put it very succinctly, the focus here is placed upon the importance of being forgiven so that when we die, we can all go to heaven—the ultimate reward for living the Christian life.

In a previous message I have suggested that I believe that the word, "sin," is an important word in the Christian vocabulary. I do not question its importance or the need to incorporate it into our understanding of life and faith. But I do question the tendency to make sin the central focus of the Christian experience. I don't believe that it is.

I believe that the central thrust of the gospel of Jesus Christ is that it opens the door to a changed or transformed life—a life lived not out of guilt, but out of grace...not out of the fear of God's judgment or retribution, but out of the hope that by the transforming power of God's love, we can live changed lives—lives that, in turn, can change the life of our world.

For these and other reasons, it is important for us to rethink our understanding of the cross and its significance in our life and faith. There is no question that the cross is central. The only question is how we understand its centrality.

I believe that the key to cultivating a new understanding of the cross and its significance lies in our understanding of the meaning of the word, **sacrifice**. It's true that the Bible references many examples of sacrifice, but they were not examples of substitutionary sacrifice. They were, instead, part of the ritual used for thanksgiving, purification, and petition. But the understanding of sacrifice as substitution was simply not a part of the mindset of our spiritual ancestors.

By definition, to sacrifice is to “make something sacred by offering it to God.”

And that is precisely what Jesus did in his choice to go to Jerusalem and face the great likelihood that he would be arrested and executed for his willingness to stand in opposition to the political and religious system that kept people in bondage. He could have avoided Jerusalem. He could have played it safe and lived out his days peacefully in the hill country of Galilee.

But Jesus understood that God has called him to a greater cause and a greater mission. He understood that his purpose in living was to allow the love of God to fully express itself within the witness of his teaching, his healing and conviction. And he understood that in order to truly do that, it would be necessary for him to sacrifice his own desires and ambitions for the sake of others and their hurts and their hopes. As he himself said, “There is no greater love than this—that one should lay down their life for their friends.”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the great German theologian and man of unflinching faith, understood the meaning of the word, sacrifice.

As Hitler's Nazi forces gained greater and greater power, Bonhoeffer became a catalyst in the underground resistance movement, helping to form what was known as the Confessing Church. As the Nazi threat grew greater, Bonhoeffer accepted an invitation to come to America and teach at the Union Theological Seminary in June of 1939.

It didn't take him long, however, to realize that he had made a mistake in coming to America. In a letter to his friend and colleague, Reinhold Niebuhr, he wrote: **I have come to the conclusion that I made a mistake in coming to America. I must live through this difficult period in our national history with the people of Germany. I will have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trials of this time with my people... Christians in Germany will have to face the terrible alternative of either willing the defeat of their nation in order that Christian civilization may survive or willing the victory of their nation and thereby destroying civilization. I know which of these alternatives I must choose but I cannot make that choice from security.”**

Bonhoeffer returned to Germany on the last scheduled steamer to cross the Atlantic. It was not a choice that many would have made, but it was a choice that Bonhoeffer, out of his sense of

love and commitment to his faith and his people, had to make. And it was, of course, a choice that would cost him his life. In the wake of the foiled plot on Hitler's life in 1944, Bonhoeffer was arrested and imprisoned at Flossenbergl where he was hanged, just hours before the Allies liberated Germany in April of 1945.

Bonhoeffer could have stayed in America where he could have enjoyed a brilliant academic career and all the notoriety that went with it. But instead, he took Jesus' words to heart: "There is no greater love than this—that one should lay down their life for their friends."

Like Jesus, the One he chose to follow, Bonhoeffer understood that, at the very center of his faith, stood a cross and the willingness to take it up by laying down his own life. If you are looking for the meaning of the cross and the significance that it might hold in your own life and faith, you would do well to start and end precisely here.

Amen.