

**This Sunday's texts:**

Leviticus 26:6-13

Acts 2:36-41

John 20:19-23

**Atonement**

**Pastor Jim Cords**

**February 20, 2022**

The gospel reading according to John, the twentieth chapter:

On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord. Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you. And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

The gospel of the Lord. **Children's Message:**

At the children's sermon during the first service, I simply asked the kids if they had eaten at a restaurant anytime recently. Most of them raised their hand. Have you guys eaten at a restaurant recently? Where did you eat? You're looking at her and you don't know where you ate? Just pick one. Your brother help you out a little bit? What was the last restaurant you remember eating at? Five Guys – decent restaurant, good burgers. I like the fries. So how much did it cost you? Did you pay? About 15 bucks? That's good. At the first service, they're littler kids so they don't have 15 bucks. None of them had paid. Somebody else had paid the bill and that was the whole point because we're talking about atonement today. We're talking about somebody else paying the bill, but that doesn't mean the food was free. That didn't mean it didn't cost something. It just cost someone else something.

As we move to the sermon today and we recognize that we're talking about atonement, I want to ask this question. You don't have to raise your hands unless you really want to. We're reading through the Bible and we've recently finished Leviticus. I just want to say if you're one of the people to read through Leviticus, good job! Way to hang in there! Oh my goodness! The details of all those sacrifices! I thought I was going to go crazy. So you're not alone even the pastor says that. It's alright but if you kept going, good job because Numbers is different. I don't

know if you knew this, but Numbers is not always about numbers. There's some good stuff in there too.

What Leviticus really reminds us of and it's something that we, in fact, do sometimes forget in our culture and in the culture of the contemporary church is that sin is a real problem. Sin is a real problem that God takes very, very seriously. So the details of those sacrifices are to figure out how are we going to deal with this sin that separates us from God. As far as we were going through that reading and I was looking at the holy day and the Jewish festivals of Yom Kippur, one of the greatest holy days of all, it is talking about this atonement, this God covering our sin.

Sometimes when I go to lunch with people, there's a little bit of tug-of-war over who's going to cover the check. The word "atonement" in Hebrew means to cover, but it doesn't necessarily mean cover like to hide, but rather cover as in to take care of, like who's going to take care of the check. I've been known to say something like I got it covered, to which most of the time I get arguments. Usually, I say hey I invited you, so I get to pay. Next time, if you want to pay, you invite me and we're all good. I want you to hear that I invited you, so I get to pay.

I want you to think about the God who invites you back into a relationship with him. The God, who is concerned that sin has separated us, wants us back in relationship and he's going to pay. Even if we caused the separation to happen because of our sins, God wants us back and so he covers our sin.

Now most of the time here in the West, we live with a spirit of individualism and so we think sin is a problem that's pretty much between only me and God. But atonement takes a different tack. Atonement is the holiest day in the Jewish Hebrew calendar because atonement isn't just for you. It's for *us*. The priest makes a sacrifice so that he can come into relationship with God. He can bridge that gap. He's purified by his sacrifice. Then he makes a sacrifice for all the people, so that our community is forgiven, not just an individual.

I want you to think about that for a moment because, in a few minutes, we're going to have Holy Communion. Most of the time when we think about communion, we think about the fact that I confess my sins and I receive Christ anew in the holy sacrament, receiving the body and blood of Christ for the forgiveness of *my* sin. But it's more than that. I want you to think

about that when you come this morning. It's more than that because what happens when you come to communion and receive Christ anew, we're receiving forgiveness for our sins. There's a communal part of this communion. It's not just you and Jesus. It's us together as the people of God, so that we can be reconciled both to God and to one another. Communion should be a time when we're forgiving one another.

We're getting a little personal here. Husbands and wives don't raise your hand, please, and no elbows, ladies. Sometimes in our houses, we don't always get along perfectly and sometimes when we come to church, you're thinking, man, he really needs it today. But communion should be a time of restoration for the community. It should be a time of reconciliation between us and God, but also between us. It's a time when we recognize the other person's forgiveness as well as our own. It's a communal thing this atonement, this forgiveness.

Oddly enough, that the covering language is the Hebrew language, but the word atonement actually, believe it or not, comes from an English word and this is actually a pretty good way to interpret it. It's "at" "one" "ment." Here's my problem. When I do something wrong or failed to do something right, I feel bad. Sometimes I feel really bad. Matter of fact, there are times I feel so bad that I feel like maybe I'm disqualified from God's love and forgiveness. Maybe this time it's just been one too many times. So I have that struggle and I feel the guilt and it's an awful feeling. And then I'll hear the gospel proclaimed and I'll realize that Jesus died so that I could be forgiven and I feel the guilt maybe begin to melt away a little bit. And I go whew, I'm forgiven. As if the reason for Jesus dying is so that I don't feel guilty. Do you hear that? Are you with me?

Because what I want you to understand is the reason Jesus died is for "at" "one" "ment." The reason Jesus died is that the barrier that the guilt creates between us and God could be taken away because God wants to be at one with us. He wants to be in relationship with you. He forgives you to take away those things that will separate you from him and from one another. It's not just so that we feel better. It's so that we reconciled in our relationships and that's what this idea of atonement is about. It's about coming back together and forgiving one another so that we can be back in relationship.

I have to have to stop and interrupt myself though because I've preached on this before and many times at the end of the service, someone will come up to me, usually a woman who's been abused and she will have heard me say go back into the abusive relationship. I am not saying that. God is amazing at restoring and forgiving us, but if someone is hurting you, don't think I'm telling you to go back and keep getting hurt because I'm not saying that.

Leviticus 26:11 says this. "I will put my dwelling place among you, and I will not abhor you." I'll be with you. That's God's desire - to be with you, to spend his life in relationship. God isn't eager to look down on us because of the mistakes we make or the things we failed to do. God isn't sitting up there saying, oh man, I'm so upset. That Jerry, what a pain in my backside! No, God is saying this is the son I love and if he's struggling with something, I want to make it right. I don't want to let that mistake keep us apart. God's about being with us. He created us for that.

Listen to the way Acts speaks of this in verses 36 and 38. "Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah." Can I get an amen there? "Peter replied, 'Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, for the forgiveness of your sins.' And then listen: "'And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.'" What is that? What is the gift of the Holy Spirit? It's the very presence of God, living in you. God forgives you, so that he can literally reside in your person, make your body a temple of the Holy Spirit. Now I know you probably think like I do – well, that's a pretty crummy house. God makes it a beautiful dwelling place, so that he can reside in us and be with us.

Listen to the gospel of John. "Again Jesus said, 'Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.' And with that he breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'" Now listen. "'If you forgive anyone's sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.'"<sup>1</sup> Did you know that? Did you know that if **you** forgive anyone's sins, they're forgiven? It isn't because of you. It's because of Jesus. Jesus actually, when he resides in you, chooses to work through you.

Now sometimes we pastors mess up because we really like being able to give a word of absolution. It's a really cool part of our job. We love it. But sometimes we do it in such a way

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<sup>1</sup> John 20-21-23

that you get the impression that **we** can do it and miss the fact that **you** can do it. The God residing in you can, through you, bring forgiveness to the world through you. You're his ambassador. You go forth with his authority. So if someone has something in the way between them and God, you have the power to remove it. Why? Because Jesus died for them. So we just proclaim again. For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, that those who believe in him can forever be with him, forgiven, renewed.

Again, forgiveness isn't just so that I don't feel guilty anymore. It's so that I can live back in a restored relationship. And God, believe it or not, isn't just concerned about me and Jesus. He's actually concerned about us too. How do we live as ambassadors of reconciliation in the world? We do it by the authority of Jesus, to speak that word. In Luther's time, there was a little confusion about this and so there was a little bit of a battle going on about whether or not it was pastors and priests who had this authority, but not, you know, **y'all**. Not the *laity*. Not just every *believer*. And Luther made it clear. No, no. Jesus through *his* work, through *his* authority, has empowered *his* people to bring forgiveness to the world. Relationships are restored.

I remember sometimes being questioned about the person who goes to the bar on Saturday night and is there drinking at the bar and his buddy says him "Hey, you know you've had a few too many. Let's hold off." and their answer is something like "It's alright. I'm going to church in the morning. I get forgiven. It's all good." As if God doesn't care. But God does care and the forgiveness that he brings is a restoring forgiveness.

Listen again, even in Leviticus. You might have breezed by this in your skimming. I mean I know I kind of almost missed it. Here it is in verse 12 of chapter 26. It says "'I will walk among you and be your God, and you will be my people.'" Brothers and sisters in Christ, we are the church. We are the reconciled people of God, sent into the world as ambassadors of reconciliation.

And our world needs it desperately. They need to know that God loves them and forgives them, not looking down on them, ready to pounce, but looking down on them ready to embrace. And he will use even us.

One more story. I grew up in an alcoholic family. What that means is that in my family when things got stressful or hard, my mom ran into the bottle. Basically, that means she

emotionally disappeared. So we learned that when things are tough in relationships, you just kind of hide for a while and hope it goes away. That's why it's called dysfunctional because it doesn't work. But I'll tell you sometimes when things are hard, it's easy just to say let's just wait a while and hope it gets better. I know it's been a hard month for me. It's kind of getting even harder as we're counting down the days, Jonna. It's not easy to say goodbye. It's not easy to see you leaving. It hurts. It's hard. Don't run away. I don't have any idea how it must have felt for Pastor Dan after 25 years in this community to be going away, but I'm sure it hurt a lot. I'm sure it was really hard to see him go, but don't run away. Embrace. Be reconciled. Use this opportunity of this week and our party next week to let Jonna know how much you love her and how much you appreciate her love and ministry. Because God is about reconciliation. He's about "at" "one" "ment." Thanks be to God! Amen.