

March 29, 2009
John 3:14-21
First Parish UCC, Brunswick
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at + one + ment

This month we've been doing a sermon series on characteristics of vital mainline congregations. The characteristics we've been considering were identified by Diana Butler Bass in a study she did funded by the Lily Foundation. Those characteristics are: hospitality, telling our stories, reforming tradition, and the practice of our beliefs. All of these characteristics could be descriptive of many organizations, even non-religious organizations. Today we're going to talk about theological reflection. It is crucial to reflect on the content of our faith, to consider the God-talk that we use. In other words, to remember that we are all theologians – people who talk about God. The words we use, and what we mean by those words, matter.

You know the story of a group of blind people who meet an elephant and each of them is given the opportunity to feel one part of the elephant and then describe the animal. One person who feels the trunk says this animal is a long, flexible creature. Another who feels one of the legs says the animal is like a tree trunk, solid and immovable. You get the idea.

Sometimes that is our experience with Christianity. Each of us grows up in one particular branch of the Christian tradition and we often get the impression that what we have experienced or been taught is the only expression of Christianity that is valid. Just as an elephant is much more interesting and functional as a whole animal, I would contend the same is true of Christianity, as well. Today we're going to consider a theological word that doesn't come up in everyday discourse, but has several presenting facets, like an elephant.

You probably noticed the unusual sermon title. Maybe you realized that if you add the words together you get the word atonement. I separated them to illustrate that the word atonement comes from putting together the three words at + one + ment. It means to bring together, to reconcile, to make one. In theology – in our God talk – we use this word to express how our sense of alienation, our sense of separateness, from ourselves, from one another, and from God is reconciled. Atonement is about what makes us one, what makes us whole.

As Christians, we turn to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus to help us understand atonement. The name Jesus when traced back to its Hebrew roots means salvation, or the Lord saves. That's what the theological word atonement talks about.

When I meet with people who are new to church life, or who are returning after many years away from church life and I ask them what they know about Jesus, the most consistent response I get is -
Jesus died for our sins.

For many of us this has been the central expression of atonement, and maybe even the central message about Jesus. But it is not the only understanding of atonement in our heritage. Some seventy years ago Swedish theologian Gustaf Aulen in his classic work on atonement identified three main understandings of the death and resurrection of Jesus in the history of Christian theology.

- 1) Christ victorious
- 2) The sacrifice for sin (Satisfaction)
- 3) Revelation of truth (Moral Exemplar)

It's important to note that he is talking about the crucifixion and resurrection together. They are two sides of the same event in Christian theology.

Aulen suggests that the oldest understanding is of Christ Victorious. This image presents the central work of Jesus the Christ as triumphing over “the principalities and powers,” the things that hold humans in bondage, which include sin and death, but also includes the abusive structures of authority that even made the crucifixion possible. In this respect, you could say the crucifixion-resurrection has characteristics of a second exodus experience. “Let my people go.” In this view, Christ is the liberator.

The second major understanding is the one I hear from most people. This is the image of Jesus as substitute – that through his sacrifice our forgiveness is made possible. Although this has been the prominent image in many of our experiences, Aulen points out that it didn’t become dominant in the church until the early Middle Ages in the writings of Anselm of Canterbury (11 century).

I’m going to make three comments about this image of Jesus who died for our sins.

1) This view has roots in the Jewish priestly tradition and the practice of animal sacrifice that was still part of Jewish life in Jesus’ day. It was understood that the sacrifice of the animal was an act of atonement. The most significant sacrifice was the sacrifice of the lamb, which is where we get the expression of Jesus as the Lamb of God. In this view, Jesus is the ultimate sacrifice. One of the implications of this for the early Jewish Christians was that animal sacrifices were no longer necessary. This understanding was developing at about the same time that the Jewish community stopped practicing animal sacrifice also.

2) In the earliest art work of the church the images of Jesus are of Jesus breaking bread or sharing fish with others. The image of the cross didn’t become more prominent until the time of Constantine, when Christianity began to move from an oppressed, sideline movement to the religion of the state with all its issues of power and control. It’s ironic that this is when the image of the cross,

which was originally a political tool of control and punishment, became more prominent in Christian practice.

3) I find this image still speaks powerfully to people who feel that they have reached the end of their rope. Sometimes we’ve made a mess of our lives and it appears that there is no way to make up for everything. In this understanding God offers us a new beginning. We are forgiven and set free for new life.

So we have Christus Victor, liberating us from bondage. We have Christ through whom our sins are forgiven. The third understanding of the death and resurrection is of Christ as revelation. In this approach the emphasis is not on what Jesus accomplishes, but on what Jesus reveals. There are various nuances in this approach. Some focus on what Jesus reveals about the character of God, just as today’s gospel reading proclaims,

God so loves the world.

Others, following this approach, focus on Jesus as “the light” (also a prominent image in the gospel of John) who beckons us home from the darkness of exile.

So Jesus the Christ is salvation

- through liberating us from bondage.
- through forgiveness of our sins
- through inviting us back home to the God who is love.

(info about Aulen’s analysis found in *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, Marcus Borg, pg. 128-129)

Although in recent centuries the church has often focused on one of these as being primary, they all have significant witness in scripture and in people’s own experience. I want to share with you one person’s experience of at + one + ment in the midst of a very painful time. This person is Barbara Hamlin’s son in law, Tracy Church, who has since died from complications of the illness he is struggling with in the story I will share. I came across this story in Barbara’s book,

where she tells parts of her story and includes reflections from other members of her family, including Tracy. Barbara said I could share this with all of you.

At the time, Tracy was dealing with a very serious foot infection. After weeks of treatment in the hospital it was finally determined that amputation was the only possibility in order to save Tracy's life. Tracy still anguished about the decision but finally decided to let the medical team amputate. When he woke up this is what happened.

I was awake alone in my room when I came back to consciousness after the surgery. The pain was gone and I thought it had all just been a terrible dream. A great sense of relief swept over me. Then I realized that I didn't have any feeling in my right leg, and when I tentatively looked at the bed covers, the lump that was my right leg was only half as long as my left. There was no foot. The new battle had begun.

A great many people came to my room. I told them all that I was fine and that I would be okay. I told them what they wanted to hear. ... When visiting hours were over my wife also had to leave and for the first extended period, I was alone.

The battle began for real now, and the battlefield was in my head. I could not avoid the reality of what had happened and I could not stop my mind. The thoughts of it raged in my head like a forest fire. My mind spun out of control, redefining who I now was, a one-legged man with a stump, a cripple, an amputee. They turned the lights off. I slipped some. I tried to hold onto anything I could, who I was, what I was, what I believed in. There was nothing to hang on to. I was no longer me. ... I lost the battle.

Sometime in the night I started to cry. It was not a conscious cry, more of an involuntary sobbing, something my body did in

recognition of the ultimate loss, the loss of self.

There was another patient in my room, an elderly black man. I regret that now I do not even remember his name. ... He heard my sobbing and asked me how I was doing...

I finally said, "Not too good."

He said, "Now you listen to me, son, because I've been there and I know. You gotta give it to the man upstairs. You gotta let him do his job, because that's what he's there for."

He waited awhile, then asked, "Do you understand?"

I said, "Yes."

And I did. I don't know exactly how I did it, because I didn't say anything out loud but inside myself, I directed my thoughts to "the man upstairs." I said the two words I had never been able to say before in my life. "Help me." There were no bells, no music, no thunder and no angels, nothing visible or audible in response; only the immediate and tangible lifting of all my troubles and burdens. It was literally as if a tremendous weight had been removed from my shoulders. I thought clearly for the first time, and I knew who I was and what I had to do, but most of all I knew I would be okay. Then I slept the night through, the untroubled sleep of a child....

I don't know what happened that night... I only know that what happened to me that night was as real as any experience I have ever had, before or since...

I know I will never be totally alone again.

(From Minnesota to Maine: And the Stops in Between, by Barbara Trescott Hamlin, pg. 85-87)

God so loves the world.