

Graffiti



The words that define our faith have the potential to embody the beauty and mystery of our faith. But all too often, they instead become boundary markers, marking who is welcome and who is not. In this series, we seek to recover the beauty of these words, and through them, the beauty and power of the faith into which God has invited us.

What is Atonement

"Atonement" is a word that relates to Jesus' death and resurrection. It comes from the word "to wipe away" and it deals primarily with Sin. If Sin is what separates us from God, then Atonement is how God wipes away Sin and restores us to relationship with him. Asking what "Atonement" means is really to ask how what happened on the cross brings us back into a relationship with God. (It's a bit of a cheesy way to think about it, but it works: think of "atonement" as "at-one-ment". How does God bring us back into a relationship with him? How does Jesus make us one again? (Trinity stuff)

So if we're going to ask how God makes us one with him, we need to ask how we got separated in the first place. The word we use in theological circles to describe this separation is "Sin".

Now Sin is a word that's almost worthy of its own week in this series because it's so misunderstood. If I were to ask you what you think of when you think of sin, what would you say? Most of us would probably agree that Sin is things we do that are bad or wrong.

As I was working through this talk, I remembered a story from my childhood that I think illustrates very well how most of us understand sin and God (and atonement, whether we realize it or not).

Spoon Story

Is that anything like your view of Sin? In the picture of God you have (or have been given), is he some sort of Cosmic teacher or judge who carefully records every bad thing you do – puts marks by my name on a chalkboard or files them away?

Because if that's more or less your picture of God, and more or less how you understand Sin, then I bet your God is pretty angry most of the time. Because God isn't like Mr. Parker – we can't lie to him. He sees everything we do, and the more checkmarks we get by our names, the madder and madder he gets until he just can't help himself... he *has to* smite us.

That's where Jesus comes in... just when God is about to really get us good (probably worse than making us miss recess), Jesus steps in and takes our punishment for us, allowing himself to be tortured to death on the cross so God can feel better and we can still go to heaven. We get to be one with God because God took his anger out on someone else, and he can bring himself to let us into heaven anyway.

Now that's somewhat of a caricature, but have you ever heard something like that picture of God?

If you were here when we talked about Grace, you remember that we talked about the Exchange Economy we all grew up in, that everything has to be fair and even. This is Exchange Economy Atonement - that there's so kind of divine ledger sheet up in Heaven and God is keeping track of every bad thing we do, then punishing Jesus for it so that the scales are even and we can still get in. Understanding Sin mainly as bad things we do and Atonement primarily as some sort of

punishment makes the cross part of a sick penal system in which God is mainly someone to be afraid of. We've all done bad stuff, so we all deserve punishment.

Is it any surprise that so many people look at that God as someone to be afraid of? That so many people who follow the Harsh Teacher God end up so judgmental and cruel?

If that's the God we're taught we worship, then is it really so shocking that so many people bear wounds from the Church? I bet if we wanted to we could stop right now and compare scars we've all received from Christians, from people who claim to serve God, but are better known for their body counts than for their love

If we're honest, even the most pious among us will admit that more often than we like, we serve this Exchange Economy God. This god who spends the better part of each day angry at all us wicked sinners who can't seem to get anything right and who took it out on his kid instead of us. If that's who God really is, then we're *right* to be afraid of that God. That god is terrifying.

But as we've already seen, that couldn't be further from the picture the Scriptures paint. According to the Scriptures - as we saw when we looked at Trinity - God is Love.

We have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. -- 1 John 4:18

Do you hear how the Scriptures speak of God? Not as some harsh teacher. Not some condemning judge.

No, God is Love. And because God is love, we don't have to fear punishment. More than that, we can have boldness on the Day of Judgment! When we understand who God is and what Love truly is, we don't have to be afraid of anything!

So if God isn't a god of wrath and condemnation, are we saying that Sin doesn't matter? That it's no big deal? Well, no; actually quite the opposite. If we understand that God is Love, and that anyone who comes to God doesn't need to fear punishment, then Sin is actually a much bigger deal. The stakes are much higher than mere right and wrong.

A couple of weeks ago, we discussed God's grace - that this whole huge beautiful world full of everything we could ever imagine wanting is gift after gift from God. We talked about the fact that we can choose how we use God's gifts - we can take them and waste them if we want. But that's what the Scriptures call Sin - the actual word means 'to miss the mark'. To not fulfill your purpose.

And the Scriptures tell us that if we choose to use what God has given us badly, if we choose not to live as we were created to, it will lead to death. Not because God is offended, but because God is the source of life. And if you're moving away from Life, then you're chasing Death.

Why is Sin such a big deal? Because the stakes aren't right and wrong. What's at stake when we talk about Sin really is life and death. Sin isn't a legal problem. You don't go to jail if you sin. According to the Scriptures, the consequence of Sin isn't punishment. The wages of Sin is Death. That reframes our whole discussion, helps us understand Sin better.

Listen to Paul describe Sin to the Christians in Rome:

“When you were slaves of Sin... what advantage did you get from the things of which you are now ashamed? Those things culminate in death... because the wages of Sin is death.” – Romans 6:20-23

Death. Sin enslaves and kills us. We can go our own way, abuse the gifts God has given us, and when we do, it traps us, enslaves us. Kills us.

That's where our fear comes from. That's how I felt when my teacher confronted me - I felt trapped. Why hadn't I come forward already? Was I content to let Lauren take the fall? So I felt my only way out was to lie again. A bigger lie this time. So I got stuck deeper, with stronger guilt. And the deeper I got, the less I felt free to tell the truth. I was trapped. And of course I didn't die, but my friendship with Lauren sure did. My life was less full at the end of that tragic third grade day than it was when I came to school.

A bit later in his letter to the Romans, Paul goes on to describe a life enslaved to Sin:

What I don't understand about myself is that I decide one way, but then I act another, doing things I absolutely despise... I realize that I don't have what it takes. I can will it, but I can't do it. I decide to do good, but I don't really do it; I decide not to do bad, but then I do it anyway.

My decisions, such as they are, don't result in actions. Something has gone wrong deep within me and gets the better of me every time. It happens so regularly that it's predictable. The moment I decide to do good, sin is there to trip me up... I've tried everything and nothing helps. I'm at the end of my rope. Is there no one who can do anything for me? Isn't that the real question? The answer, thank God, is that Jesus Christ can and does. He acted to set things right in this life of contradictions where I want to serve God with all my heart and mind, but am pulled by the influence of sin to do something totally different. – Romans 7:15-25

Can you imagine that Sin could be a force, a power, a whole way of living that actually traps and ensnares us? A power from which rules and regulations can't save you? A whole system that deals death and leads us further and further from life? Let me show you what this looks like:

In Luke 15, Jesus tells a story about a father who has two sons. The younger son decides he's had enough of the ole homestead and takes his share of the inheritance and heads to the big city. He blows through all his money on "dissolute living" as the Bible says (which is code for drugs, sex and rock-n-roll). He figures out that once he's out of money, no one thinks he's all that cool anymore, and he ends up working for a farmer, feeding pigs and deciding if he's hungry enough to eat some of their slop. (which is the modern day equivalent of working at a landfill and seeing some leftovers someone threw out and thinking really hard about eating them). And here's the kicker – the rules don't leave him anywhere to turn. He can't go home, because according to the laws of his day, his father was well within his legal rights to have his son executed.

You get the picture, right? This kid made a series of bad choices, and each one took him further and further down a road he never thought he'd find himself on. Each decision has taken him deeper and deeper, and now he's so close to rock bottom he can touch it. He doesn't see any way out. And the rules aren't going to help him because he is in the wrong. He's the bad guy. The rules will only kill him.

Have you ever been there? You made some bad choices and you're getting in deep. And it seems like everything you do only makes things worse. You feel trapped, but you don't know what to do because it's all your own fault.

Another story: in John 4, Jesus meets a woman who comes to a well to get water. And what at first seems to be an innocent meeting between two thirsty people soon turns into something much different. We find out that the woman has been married 5 times. And now she's living with a guy who won't even marry her.

Now, we don't know much about this woman. We don't know why she's had five husbands - though the text seems to indicate that she's divorced, not widowed. She comes across as a woman who's been used and abused her whole life, to the point that now she's not even really human - just some guy's sugar on the side. She's a complete outcast from her whole town - she's at the well in the middle of the day to get water (which is why she meets Jesus alone). Women came to get water in the morning or evening when it's cool, not at midday. Only *that* woman would have to come in the middle of the day. And she's no different at this point from the boy in the previous story - according to the laws of her day, the other people in her village could stone her to death whenever they chose to.

The rules won't help her either, not because she's the bad guy, but because she's one of those people who slip through the cracks in the rules, one of those people the rules hurt instead of help.

Can you relate to her? Have you been hurt by what someone else has done to you? Does your life bear the scars of choices other people have made? Do you feel judged or outcast and think maybe (probably) that there's nothing you can do, that this has become your lot in life, that you're condemned to hot, lonely journeys to the same well, day after day?

And Sin affects more than just you and me. Lauren was profoundly affected by my choices. Or consider the boy's party friends who abandoned him when he ran out of money. Or the men who had tossed aside the woman at the well. Sin has ensnared all of them, too. It's a slavery we all sell ourselves into. It's a cancer on the human soul, and it kills us.

Death isn't just the physical state of not being alive anymore. Of course that IS part of death, but we can be walking dead long before we actually expire. Our lives can become empty and void of meaning, we can end up drained of purpose and direction. We can live lives that bring pain and death to the people around us. We live as slaves to death so that the moment we draw our last breath becomes the inevitable outcome of a sad, empty life. THAT is Sin, and THAT is Death.

Do you see how much bigger the stakes are than we thought? Sin isn't a matter of right and wrong; it's a matter of life and death! Sin isn't mainly a legal problem; it's a life problem. Our separation from God doesn't mean that we're going to get a spanking; it means we're going to die, that we're already in the process of dying. That's why the Bible doesn't talk about the Cross

mainly in terms of a penal system. *Sin isn't mostly a legal problem.* So if that's true, if Sin is a whole way of living, a life that we enter into and become trapped in, how does God rescue us from it? How does God Atone for us?

The Bible speaks of the Cross as part of a system by which God frees people from slavery, a celebration in which God affirms life in the face of death. The Scriptures look to the Jewish Passover festival to help us understand what Jesus does for us.

Now, since most of us aren't observant Jews, and we weren't raised celebrating Passover, let me give you a bit of background:

Early in the history of God's people, the Israelites were slaves in Egypt. And the decisive moment when God freed his people from slavery became known as Passover. On that night, the Angel of Death came to Egypt and was going to kill every firstborn son in the whole country. The only people who would be saved from the Angel of Death were those who killed a lamb and painted its blood on their doorposts.

The Israelites did what God commanded, killed a Lamb and used its blood to protect themselves and their families, and the Angel of Death passed over them. The Pharaoh finally caved and set the Israelites free, and so Passover became the biggest holiday of the year for the Jewish people – sort of like Christmas and Easter are for us.

So when the earliest Christians – who were all Jewish – set about trying to understand the significance of what Jesus did on the cross, they looked to Passover to help them understand what God was doing, how God was overcoming Sin and working to make us One with him again.

At the very beginning of John's gospel, his story about who Jesus is, John the Baptizer sees Jesus and says this:

"Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" -- John 1:29

And the week that Jesus is crucified, he is in Jerusalem celebrating the Passover feast. The meal that he eats with his disciples where he institutes Communion is the Passover meal. So when he says, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood", he is referring to the Passover Lamb.

Jesus is our Passover Lamb. When we're trapped in Sin and Death, when we've been enslaved by our own choices, when we feel the weight not only of how others have hurt us but how we have hurt others, we come to the Cross of Jesus and we see that we are covered by his Death. Jesus frees us from the consequences of Sin. After we've sold ourselves into Slavery to Death, Jesus breathes new life into us.

We spoke last week about the Incarnation. That Jesus became human - the very Word of God became one of us. That he came here to show us the way back to God, and died so that we could return.

The Cross is the very place where we learn who God is. Because the Cross is where we killed the very Word of God. If God were like us, if God lived in the Exchange Economy, how do you think God would've responded when we crucified him?

If you had the power to reshape the very fabric of reality just by speaking, how would you have responded to the people who were torturing you to death? (If you aren't sure, think about the last fight you had with someone).

This is the Word of God, who said, "Let there be..." and ignited the core of the sun.

This is the Word of God, who said, "Let there be..." and hung the stars in the sky.

This is the Word of God, who said, "Let there be..." and caused mountains to jut into the heavens.

This is the Word of God, who said, "Let there be..." and breathed life into you and me.

This is the Word of God who was tortured and nailed to a cross and who had the entire universe at his command, who with a single breath could've summoned the armies of heaven to destroy the people who *deserved* it and when he finally spoke, he said,

"Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." -- Luke 23:34

Behold: the Lamb of God, who takes away the Sin of the World.

Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.

There's no fear in that. There's only love.

Remember the boy who left home? He decided to go home - he had nowhere else to turn. He had this whole speech all worked up, a big apology to his father, and when he came over the hill, his father sees him and takes off running to meet him. He can barely even get his speech out before his father is yelling at people to get a big party together.

The son was terrified to face his father, and all his father could think about was throwing the biggest party that little town had ever seen.

And that woman who came to the well all by herself? She's the only person in John's Gospel that Jesus tells he's the Messiah. She's so excited when she leaves him that she runs back and tells the whole town, and because of her, the whole town comes to faith in Jesus. When the disciples return from that same town, they only bring back food; she returns with a whole town's worth of followers.

What kind of God would throw a party at the prodigal's return? Not a god of judgment and condemnation. A God of Love.

What kind of God would let a used up, scandalous woman make his followers look like fools? Not a god of rules and regulations. A God of love.

What kind of God would pray forgiveness over his enemies while they are in the very act of killing him? Not a god of Exchange and punishment. A God of love.

God isn't about making you afraid. When we understand God as the God with an Axe to Grind, the Harsh Teacher God, we live lives and religion that are based on rules, judgment, condemnation and fear.

Just like third-grade me, we'll be too afraid to stand up and apologize for bending the stupid spoon. We'll stay trapped in slavery to the Sin that has entangled us. Because we're afraid. We're afraid of the consequences, afraid of the God who can't wait to zap us. So we'll just get trapped deeper and deeper.

But hear the author of Hebrews, speaking of how Jesus made us one with God: *Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death. -- Hebrews 2:14-15*

By dying, Jesus destroyed the power of death. We don't have to be afraid anymore.

Jesus did not come to make us good. He came to make us alive! He didn't bring us rules; he brought us resurrection! He didn't bring us fear. He brought us love.

Why do we need to hear that so badly? Well, I wish my spoon story had a happier ending. I wish I could tell you that I had manned up and confessed. I wish I could tell you that Lauren and I reconnected on Facebook or something and I'd been able to apologize. But no one ever told third-grade me that integrity is more important than recess. That friendship is more valuable than gold.

If Death has been defeated, if God has rescued me from this whole sick system I've bought into, then I am free to choose God's harder right over my easier wrong. I can quit living like a slave to my own fears and insecurities because my choices don't define my reality anymore.

I have been set free by the Lamb of God, and my identity and purpose are grounded in him, in his reality. And even better, I can call even my enemies to the same freedom. That's good news. That's perfect Love that casts out fear.

Brothers and sisters, Jesus is our Passover Lamb. His blood covers me. It covers you, too. He offers us freedom from the slavery we've sold ourselves into.

Communion Set-up

That's why we gather around this table. This is the celebration of the Lamb of God who takes away your sin. By dying, Jesus defeated death. He bought you back out of the slavery you sold yourself into. If you are covered by the blood of the Lamb, the Angel of Death will pass over you and you can step boldly into the freedom of Christ.

Prayer of Consecration

You don't have to be defined your sin, slavery and death anymore. You're invited to come and experience the forgiveness of the Lamb of God who has covered over your sin and set you free.