

Cross Thoughts

What happened on the cross is a great source of confusion for people of faith and I want to take this opportunity to reflect on this question with you and more specifically to focus on what I think is the greatest misunderstanding about the cross and that is the theory of substitutionary atonement.

Many flawed teachings have emerged through the centuries, but the primary one that shadows our faith is the theory of what happened on the cross comes from a theologian named Anselm of Canterbury.¹ He came up with the theory that God sent Jesus to suffer on the cross as a payment for human sin.

Anselm lived in a feudal society in which offenses against a nobleman could only be satisfied by a person of equal rank and stature --- if an offense against a nobleman could be satisfied at all. So Anselm, though a fine theologian, did what many of us sometimes have a tendency to do. He chose to shrink God down to the same shape as his limited socio-

¹ 1033-1109 A.D. (Archbishop of Canterbury 1093-1109)

economic context and came up with what we call substitution theory of Atonement.

The theory goes like this: Humans had sinned against God. This being so, it would then take someone equal to the rank of God to satisfy or “atone” for such an offense. Therefore God sent Jesus to be sacrificed on the cross for our sins. The very Son of God would die to make amends for the sin that humans had perpetrated.²

But, as logical as that notion may have seemed to Anselm, he was blind to its fatal flaw---our ways are *not* God’s ways. As the prophet Isaiah has told us, “My thoughts are not your thoughts, and my ways are not your ways," says the LORD.”³

And it is a tragic fact that every time we try to shrink God’s thoughts down to our thoughts or shape God’s ways into our ways, someone ---- usually someone with no socio-economic voice or power---- tragically

² Marthaler, Bernard L. *The Creed*, Mystic, CN: 1987.

³ Isaiah 55:8.

ends up hung a tree. Or...they are burned at the stake, stretched on the rack, or otherwise vilified and crucified for daring to declare that God has enough love, justice and mercy for all.

Now I offer this little theological history lesson because this little theory, like a bad strand of DNA, still worms its way into how we think about God. And how we think about God really matters---it matters because how we think about God determines how we think about the world and about whom and what it means to be the Church; to be people who follow Jesus.

And this is a particular tragedy for those who seek to follow Jesus, because this notion is totally at odds with what Jesus himself teaches us about God. As Joan Chittister says, “This God of Anselm’s, who demands the life of Jesus in a bloody sacrifice, *is most definitely not* the God whom Jesus describes. The atonement model of God leaves us with a vengeful God, an angry God, a manipulative God, or a masochistic God.”⁴

⁴ Chittister, Joan *The Search for Belief*, Ligori/Triumph 1999, 2006.

This is not the God who hears the cries of God's people. This is not the God who proclaims liberty to the captive and wipes away every tear from every eye. Anselm's vengeful, violent image of God robs us of the loving God who welcomes the prodigal home with open, aching arms and it makes us forgetful of the God who counts the hairs of our head and feeds the sparrows of the sky.

Our God is a loving God. Jesus showed us with his never-failing demonstration of God's compassion and mercy, that his God, the God he lovingly calls Father, would never, ever send a son to be killed in some kind of blood sacrifice designed to appease a divine ego.⁵ So please, once and for all we need to put away this horrific idea.

We need to do this more than anything because if we do not claim the real tragedy of the cross, we are destined to continue repeating it again and again. As people of faith we must come face to face with the fact that it was in fact *people* who wanted Jesus crucified—not our loving and merciful God.

⁵ Ibid.

Jesus' death was the result of an oppressive government and a rigid religious institution that feared his message of justice and mercy for all. Jesus' message deeply disrupted the status quo of both institutions. As Dorothy Sayers says, "They did away with God in the name of law and order, in defense of scripture and creed."⁶

If we continue to hang the shame of the cross on God, we are destined to continue shrinking God down to human thought instead of letting ourselves grow into God's expansive, life-giving and saving truth.

Jesus came only to lead us into a greater love for God and for one another. Jesus came to show us, in the flesh, what the world looks like when we fulfill our God-given potential. Jesus holds out a vision of what the world could be if we embraced God's love for all whom God created. A people of love, justice and mercy--- that is who we are meant to be---this is the image of God that is stamped on our souls at our birth.

⁶ In Barbara Brown Taylor's *Home by Another Way*, pg 88.

So on this day as we stand at the edge of Holy Week and bear witness once again to the shame and pain of the cross, we are invited to remember a couple of very important things.

First we are invited to remember the horror of what it looks like when we create a God in our image, distorting God's thoughts and ways to fit our sometimes small and fractured way of being. Every time we do this it looks like Jesus hung on a tree in order to keep the peace and protect an institution.

But secondly we are called to remember who God *really* is; we are called to embrace and act out of God's unlimited and ever-expanding hope for all. If we want to know what this love looks like, we simply look once again with new eyes and saddened hearts at Jesus hanging on the cross and we listen to what he says: "*Father forgive them, for they know not what they are doing.*"

Jesus gave us the grace and mercy of forgiveness as his parting gift; he showed us compassion and love right until the end. We showed God the

worst of whom the human creature can be by hanging God's son on a tree ----and we walk away forgiven.

God does not deal death. God always and everywhere brings life. This is the message of Christ's passion—this is the message that Christ wants us to share with the world.

We are not saved by some one-time blood-thirsty transaction of a malicious God. We are saved each and every time we follow Jesus and offer compassion over hatred, when we love mercy more than revenge, and when forgiveness frees us from the poison of hate and our need for someone else to suffer because we are afraid.

Jesus loved us unto death and asks us to love each other the same way.

We can come up with countless theories to evade the impossibility of what he asks of us, but in the end, there is no substitute for the hard, but liberating work of following Jesus---even if it kills us. Amen.