

The Park Road Pulpit

Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church

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Finding a Way to Leave the Blood In

Exodus 12.21-27; Romans 5.1-11

Russ Dean, October 5, 2008



It may be that of all the titles of Jesus, the images that have survived and grown in the mind of the church, the image of Jesus as our Savior is the most powerful. In the birth narrative of Jesus from the book of Matthew we read that an angel comes to Joseph and warns him that his espoused wife, his fiancé, will *bear a son*. The angel gives instruction: *You are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins* (Matthew 1.21) The history of the name Jesus is fascinating. Some believe the name, which derives from Latin, was corrupted in the translation from its Hebrew source, the name Yeshua. This name, Yeshua, is related to the longer form Yehoshua (Joshua). The Hebrew noun, *shua*, means “a saving cry,” or “a cry for help,” and the prefix Yeho derives from the divine name, Yahweh, so Yehoshua can be translated, literally, “‘God’ is a saving-cry.”

Jesus – Yeshua – as the one who saves, is perhaps the image and identity of Jesus that has been most proclaimed by the church. We hear it in powerful, eloquent sermons, in densely theological essays, and in the crudely simple claim, “Jesus saves” – which we find ubiquitously scrawled across our culture: spray painted on bridges, overpasses, scratched on exposed rocks on mountain roadsides, printed on poster boards held in the end zone of professional football games. As a promotion worthy of bumper sticker theology, “Jesus Saves” is hard to beat.

This notion that Jesus saves us by knowingly, personally, dying for us is one that has been mined as gold by evangelists the world over. Many of you, as I, have been told that while he was hanging there in agony, he was thinking of... me. And the power of that deeply

individualistic, highly emotional appeal is undeniable. Thousands have made personal professions of faith in Jesus because of such an appeal.

But this notion has not gone without critique – even within the evangelical church which has polished the claim to a perfect shine. In recent years a number of evangelical scholars have taken on the notion of a substitutionary atonement – the idea that in some kind of literal, concrete way, God sent Jesus for the express purpose of dying, for you. The notion has a crude, barbaric quality – what parent would determine from the outset such an inhuman, unthinkable end for a child? What kind of tyrant does such a theology make of God? And how is the freedom, the individuality of Jesus destroyed if he had no choice in this mission? In their book *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*, which was published in 2000 by the well-established conservative publisher, InterVarsity Press, Joel Green and Mark Baker say,

We believe that the popular fascination with and commitment to penal substitutionary Atonement (that is, that Jesus was punished by God, in our place) has had ill effects in the life of the church in the United States and has little to offer the local church and mission by way of understanding or embodying the message of Jesus Christ.¹

That popular fascination perhaps reached its zenith, or its nadir (whichever your perspective), it's evangelistic high or its vulgar low ebb, in Mel Gibson's movie of a few years ago, *The Passion of the Christ*, which has enough gratuitous violence, enough sadistic torture and needless suffering to satisfy even an American audience – engorged as we are in our ongoing orgy of violence. And there's enough blood in the movie sink the proverbial battle ship.

Very near the center of Christian theology is the notion of atonement – our “at-one-ment” with God, made possible by Jesus. This doctrine has been worked out over the centuries in a

¹ The May 2006 issue of “Christianity Today,” a theologically conservative publication, is entitled, “No Substitute for the Substitute.” The issue defends substitutionary atonement in light of the fact that a growing number of theologians in their own camp have expressed concern over this doctrine. The Green/Baker quotation is found on p.30.

number of different atonement theories, each with scriptural justification – yet because the Church in our part of the world has centered its focus on only one of these, we hardly even know that Christians have always thought, variously, about the death of Jesus. Intrinsicly connected to all of these doctrines is the Cross of Christ – but is the blood what it’s really all about? Must we feast in the blood and gore of an emotionally-laden substitution to understand God’s work among us in Jesus? Writing for the mainline Protestant publication, the Christian Century, writer and scholar Mark Heim agrees with a growing number of evangelical theologians who say no. Heim believes that the story of Jesus, which necessarily includes his life, his death, and his resurrection, the whole Story of Jesus when taken together with the ancient wisdom of our sacred scripture, combine to tell us that Jesus’ message is that the mechanism of scapegoating has no place in life of a God of unconditional love, unmerited favor, unending forgiveness.²

In the book of John, the High Priest Caiaphas says to his colleagues, *What are we to do? (With this Jesus.)... You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed* (John 11.49). And so it is that a framework of scapegoating is built around the death of Jesus. Given the Jewish origin of Christian faith, with its ancient practice of blood sacrifice – a bloody image of such salvation which reaches back at least as far as the story of the Passover (today’s Old Testament text), it is no surprise that Christian faith, in seeking to make sense of the death of Jesus, reached for such images to interpret his death. But as Mark Heim says, if Jesus just becomes the final, ultimate victim, a “bigger and better” victim in this ungodly machine – rather than tearing down the mechanism of scapegoating – we build it up. Rather than Jesus’ death signaling the end of divine violence – the crucifixion becomes the highest justification of it.

² For the information from Mark Heim see the September 5, 2006 issue of the Christian Century, “No more scapegoats: how Jesus put an end to sacrifice,” p.22ff.

In his well-acclaimed series, “The Chronicles of Narnia,” the late C.S. Lewis tries to make this point. Aslan, the Lion hero, is slain on the sacrificial altar – slain, supposedly, by his enemies, in place of his friends. Of course, his enemies have another idea, altogether in mind. Rather than Aslan being a substitute, they intend for Aslan’s friends to be next. Violence only begets violence in such a mechanism. There can be no end to the killing. But in the rising of Aslan, that sacrificial stone itself is torn to pieces. Resurrection signals the destruction of such a broken system – broken under the weight of innocent suffering. So it is that in Jesus – the whole notion of scapegoating sacrifice, the one, given for the many, is destroyed.

I am utterly convinced that until the Church can disabuse itself of the notion of God-sanctioned violence – even violence which is supposed to end all violence – I am convinced that any God-sanctioned violence ultimately gives justification for all other violence. Because of the life of Jesus, the death of Jesus must tell us that God did not, does not, intend this. Yes, *God is at work in all things, to bring about good* (Romans 8.28) – but this was not God’s idea. We need to rid ourselves of our violent theology, our gory belief, and, yes, our bloody hymns that support such violence.

But... in a meaningful conversation a few years ago with a dear seminary friend, we were discussing this very idea – of ridding the church of such a bloody theology, when John made a profoundly helpful comment. “If it were up to me,” he said, “I’d do away with all the ‘blood-hymns’ (as they are sometimes called)... but I’d have to find a way to leave the blood in.”

I’d have to find a way to leave the blood in!

You see... without blood there is no life. It is the stream which carries us from one breath to the next. It is the source of our strength. And... though we must be careful how we speak of it,

careful that our language does not end up justifying violence, blood is often inseparable from our salvation. Jesus said, “There is no greater love... than love which lays down its life... love which parts with its own blood – for the sake of a friend” (John 15.13). Perhaps we cannot truly understand life, know the meaning of real love, until we have experienced this... in blood. Someone else’s blood, shed for us... Or, our blood, shed for another.

Twelve years ago an ecstatic young, first-time father, dashed to the waiting room to give to the great news – *for unto us a child is born!* (Isaiah 9.6) Cheers went up all around – a son, 9 pounds 5 ounces... Hurray! Returning to the labor and delivery room (a room well-named!), the father was not prepared for what he would witness there. A room, covered in blood. A nurse had accidentally overturned a pan and it looked like a war scene. It was the blood of labor. The blood of life. Blood given freely. Blood which tells the story of... salvation.

Jackson Russell Dean is here because of it. And so are you and I.

The heart of atonement theology is this: sometimes, we can’t go it alone. Despite the confidence of our birth, our creation in the *image of God* (Genesis 1.27), the *new creation* we become in Christ (2 corinthians 5.17) – despite all our individual strength, sometimes we need to be saved. Sometimes our parents do this for us. Thank God for them. Sometimes it’s a spouse, a friend, a co-worker. Sometimes our salvation comes at the hand of a total stranger. Sometimes the *least of these* among us need to be saved (Matthew 25). A hand up – our a hand out – so they can just make it through the day.³ And sometimes, as we have learned this week, even the

³ I weary of this distinction. Some people are so insistent that we need to give a “hand up not a hand-out.” I understand, of course, that “if you give a man a fish you feed him for one day, but if you teach him to fish you feed him for a lifetime,” but I suspect that much of our “concern” is really selfishly motivated. Sometimes people, ourselves included, need a hand-out, pure and simple. Let us be more willing to give – and to receive – such grace.

richest, the most well-educated, the most sophisticated, those who by every imaginable measure seem to be beyond need... sometimes, even they need a bailout package.⁴

You and I need to be saved. If it is true in the hardscrabble of our every day life, this truth is at least as true in a spiritual realm.⁵ An incarnational theology of atonement teaches not that God sent Jesus to be a sacrifice, that God demanded a pound of flesh⁶, be it ours or his, but that if, as we claim, we have seen God in Jesus... it is God who dies. God for us. God with us. The cross always has been a scandal – because it shows that the only power God really has is the power to give life away. Yes, you and I need to be saved. And this salvation sometimes comes... at the price of blood.

So I think John Ballenger is right: We've got to find a way to leave the blood in.

May it be so!

⁴ The U.S. Congress this week passed the much belabored \$700 billion bailout package for the U.S. economy.

⁵ I recognize in my words here an ongoing argument I once conducted with my dear friend, the late Charlie Milford, who in his elder years espoused a “no atonement” theology. I don’t know how widespread is this theology in Christian circles, but I have found it in the writing of Walter Wink of Auburn Theological Seminary. I do not have the exact citation before me, but there is a chapter in his book, *Jesus and the Enigma of the Son of the Man*, which deals with various atonement theologies. Charlie believed because we are created in the image of God, and because of God’s unconditional love, that we do not need to be “saved.” Salvation is “becoming in character who we (already are) in relationship.” Though I agreed with much of Charlie’s theological thought, and understand and appreciate much that led him to this conclusion, it is not one that I fully support. I still believe, in human terms – which perhaps give rise to our understanding of the theological affirmation – that we all have proven time and again our need for salvation.

⁶ This phrase is originally attributed to Shylock in Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice*: “The pound of flesh which I demand of him is deerly bought, 'tis mine, and I will haue it.”