

March 1, 2015

TEXT: Mark 8

TITLE: "Saving Salvation: Amazing Grace"

We gathered on the couches in the youth room with napkins full of popcorn and grapes. We've just finished assembling a timeline of key events in Jesus' life: his birth, teaching at the temple, healing a blind man, riding to Jerusalem on a donkey.

I turn to a new page on the flip chart and write the word "Atonement" across the top, and tell the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> graders in the room that we're going to talk about God's saving work in Christ. I break up the word with two lines—showing how this one word is made of three: at-one-ment, and we start to talk about how Christ's life, death and resurrection make us one with God.

"In the world today, who are our saviors?" In colorful markers, words fly to the flipchart: Firefighters, Doctor, Lifeguards.

Next question: What do these earthly saviors save us from, and what do they save us for? Hands raise: they save us from fires, from illness or injury, from drowning. And a common theme arises as we note that each of these earthly saviors saves us for life—for wholeness and for health.

"What about Jesus, I ask?" What does Jesus save us from?"

Together we make another list: Jesus saves us from sin. Jesus saves us from brokenness. Jesus saves us from death. Jesus saves us from hell.

The questions get harder, as I then ask: And what does Jesus save us for? Jesus saves us for relationship with God. Jesus saves us for relationship with one another. Jesus saves us for wholeness. Jesus saves us for abundant life—for eternal life in heaven.

But, how?

We notice that our ideas about how Jesus saves us focus on the cross. Most of us grew up hearing the teachings in church and Sunday school, and felt that we could say with some degree of confidence that Jesus died on the cross to save us from our sins that we might inherit eternal life. We know that Jesus' death on the cross was a show of great love for us—of unconditional love. We were pretty sure that Jesus could have escaped that painful death, that he could have saved himself if he wasn't so committed to saving all of us.

But then how turned to why: Why the cross? Why is the cross a central symbol in the theological equation that demonstrates that saves us? Did Jesus take our sin upon himself, so that sin died on the cross that day? Or did the death of a sinless Jesus serve as a perfect sacrifice to overcome the sins of the world? Was Jesus' death a ransom for our sins – and if so, was that debt paid by God to the devil for the release of souls or by Jesus to God so that the gates of heaven might be opened?

When we looked at these possibilities we saw other questions emerge, questions like: Who is responsible for his death? Are we responsible, as the sinful people he died to save? Is Satan responsible—a force of evil that needed to be somehow satisfied if God's people would be freed from Satan's deadly

grasp? Was Jesus responsible—a willing martyr for the redemption of all? Or is God responsible for the death of God's own son?

As our conversation took life, we noticed how questions about the atonement quickly lead to more questions than answers – questions that have been asked over the last two millennia by theologians from Origen to Abelard, from Anselm to Athanasius, from Weaver to Girard. These theologians all recognized that the way that one answers these questions says a lot about the character of God, about the location of power, and about our truest selves.

Look, for example, at the model of atonement theology with which we're all probably most familiar: substitutionary atonement. This theory says that we are all sinners—which we know to be true. We are told that the wages of sin are death. So, either we are relegated to die because of our sins—or someone has to die for us. So into the equation comes Jesus, a perfect sacrifice, who took our place through his death on the cross. He took on the forsakenness of God and endured the suffering of crucifixion to pay our penalty. His crucifixion satisfied God, and we became heirs to eternal life.

Now, while this notion demonstrates Jesus' love for us, it paints a picture of a Creator for whom blood sacrifice was a requirement for salvation. We can't help but wonder, "Why?" Why would the God of life only be satisfied through a retributive death? If God is almighty—isn't there another way? We wonder, where is the love?

Holocaust survivor Ellie Wiesel raises his concerns about this understanding of God. He looks to the story of the binding of Isaac—where Abraham, obedient to God, takes his son Isaac up to the top of Mount Moriah to offer him as a sacrifice before God. But before Abraham could lower his knife, an angel appeared and spared Isaac's life, finding a ram in the thicket to sacrifice instead. Likening this story to the story of the crucifixion, Wiesel says that the "main difference between Judaism and Christianity is that on Mount Moriah, the father did not kill his son while on Golgotha he did. And for that reason, Wiesel says, he is eternally grateful that God made him a Jew."<sup>1</sup>

Some Christian theologians have questioned, too, whether any act of violence could, in fact, be redemptive. Womanist Theologian Delores Williams suggests that it is problematic to locate saving work of Christ in the on the cross itself—as the cross is an instrument of oppression and violence. She writes:

The cross thus becomes an image of defilement, a gross manifestation of collective human sin. Jesus, then, does not conquer sin through death on the cross. Rather, Jesus conquers the sin of temptation in the wilderness (Matthew 4:-11) by resistance—by resisting the temptation to value the material over the spiritual...; by resisting death...; by resisting the greedy urge of monopolistic ownership.... Jesus therefore conquered sin in life, not in death.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Taylor, Barbara Brown. *God in Pain*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998),115-116. Here Taylor is referencing Wiesel in *Messengers of God: Biblical Portraits and Legends*. (New York: Random House, 1967), 67.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid 166.

Richard Rohr too challenges the notion that violence is a part of God's modus operandi. He writes:

If God solves problems by domination, coercion and violent demand, then we can too. Grace, mercy and eternal generosity are no longer the very shape of God, as the Trinitarian nature of God seemed to say... We end up making God very small and draw the Godhead into our own ego-driven need for retribution, judicial resolution and punishment. Yet that's exactly what Jesus came to undo!<sup>3</sup>

Yet here we have, in our text for today, a story in which Jesus tells his disciples, clearly, that the son of man is heading for the cross. He will need to suffer many things. He will be rejected by the chief priests and Pharisees. He will suffer, die, and will rise again after three days. The cross is a critical part of the story. And Jesus makes it clear that we can't avoid the cross just because it makes us uncomfortable. It is, in fact, the inevitable destination of Jesus' life-saving ministry.

Peter, like us, does not understand. He, who just confessed that Jesus is the Christ, struggles to see a path toward salvation that is shaped by the cross. The suffering of which Jesus speaks does not meld with the ministry of which he has been a part—a ministry of freeing people from bondage to oppression, of healing the sick, of welcoming the outcast, of proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. Peter, like us, has his eyes set on what can be—what he hopes life will be—with Jesus around.

Perhaps that is why he followed Jesus in the first place. Maybe Jesus' new way of doing things gave him hope. Maybe he thought that because Jesus could perform miracles like no other, that they would be...well...safe. He doesn't want to see that sometimes there is a cost to make a change, that it can be risky to challenge the status quo.

But Jesus knows that the road ahead will not be easy. He knows that those with power will flex their muscles if they feel threatened. He knows that others use weapons to exercise their authority, but that Divine authority is exercised through love.

The love of God in Christ – the love to which Christ calls us—is not easy. It makes demands of us—demands that involve prioritizing the needs of others; demands that involve taking risks; demands that involve acting with integrity, expressing solidarity with the marginalized, and bearing burdens not meant for us.

For Jesus, love led to the cross. Jesus taught of a love that crossed party lines, that dismantled archaic authorities, that was freely given even and not sufficiently earned. This type of love ruffled feathers and scared many who had the power to put their fear into action. This type of love SAVES.

In this light, Jesus did not die to pay our bills, he died because he would not stop being who he was and who he was, was very upsetting. He

---

<sup>3</sup> Rohr, Richard. *Things Hidden*. (Cincinnati: St. Andrew's Messenger Press, 2008), 202.

turned everything upside down. He allied himself with the wrong people and insulted the right ones. He disobeyed the law. He challenged the authorities who warned him to stop. And when he would not stop, they had him killed, because he would not stop being who he was.”<sup>4</sup>

Jesus’ death was inevitable because deaths like his are what happen when one “publicly and vigorously” challenges the domination system of the day.<sup>5</sup> Jesus died because he came to preach about the kingdom of God that offered love to the outcast, mercy to the sinner, and sight to the blind. Jesus died on the cross because the love he came to share was so transformative, so powerful, so thoroughly healing that he couldn’t be quiet about it. And so he died on the cross to show the extent of God’s solidarity with humanity, and he rose from the grave to show that nothing could stop God’s love.

Richard Rohr writes “Jesus is, in effect, saying, “*This is how evil is transformed into good! I am going to take the worst thing and turn it into the best thing, so you will never be victimized, destroyed or helpless again! I am giving YOU the victory over all death!*”<sup>6</sup>

The cross is the turning point of the story—but the cross is not the whole story. God’s saving love in Christ is so vast that no solitary expression can manifest its full meaning.

God’s redemptive love in Christ is seen in the fullness of Christ: Who lived and loved perfectly to usher a new model of justice into the world; who died on the cross to show the solidarity of God’s love for us in Christ; Whose witness calls us to higher moral ground that directs us away from the bonds of evil; whose resurrection from the grave overthrows the hold of sin and death once, for all.

This, Beloved, is truly amazing grace. Thanks be to God. Amen.

---

<sup>4</sup> Taylor, Barbara Brown. *God in Pain*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 117.

<sup>5</sup> Borg, Marcus and John Dominic Crossan. *The Last Week*. (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2006), 161.

<sup>6</sup> Rohr, Richard. *Things Hidden*. (Cincinnati: St. Andrew’s Messenger Press, 2008), 188.