

UNDERSTANDING SACRIFICE

In our last worship gathering, we focused on the “why” of the death of Jesus. It is common, of course, to hear that the reason Jesus died was to satisfy God’s desire that Jesus, in some way, “take our place.” According to the usual scenario, it was *we* who deserved to die, not *he*; but God wanted to place our collective sins on Jesus and let him suffer and die in our stead. Then, as we frequently are told, we were forgiven as a result of Jesus’ sacrifice. It’s commonly referred to as “the blood atonement.” Let’s take just a moment to *review* this important issue.

There are passages in which certain biblical writers, especially, Paul, stated that his preaching of a so-called “blood atonement” was not accepted by the majority of people in his day. In fact, as Paul put it, they thought that the idea that a loving God could want an innocent person to die before God would be willing to forgive anyone was “foolishness.” As you may remember, I offered *another* possible interpretation of why Jesus died, based on numerous biblical passages that usually are ignored in churches today. My conclusion was that the strongly engrained Jewish background of Paul that taught him to believe in the efficacy of animal sacrifice to satisfy God and protect people could be the reason that Paul attempted to understand the purpose of Jesus’ death: A sacrifice of *some* kind had to be offered. So he and a few others concluded that *God* did it. It was God’s *will* that Jesus die; and, somehow, we are cleansed or “saved” by the shedding of Jesus’ blood. As one of the biblical writers expressed it, “There is no remission of sins without the shedding of blood.” That, I think, is an archaic notion from Jewish tradition that even our *Jewish* friends no longer embrace!

But does that mean that a biblical understanding of the importance of sacrifice is of no value? I think not. It is simply that our understanding of sacrifice needs to be updated to include Jesus’ teaching on the primacy of love—the chief motivation for all Jesus did and tried to do, and, I believe the *true* reason for his death. Let’s think about it.

Have you heard the story of the Spider and the Sage? It is a very popular parable in India, and I think it incarnates the constant emphasis of Jesus on God’s *love* as his motivation and as God’s will for all *we* say and do. It also, I believe, was the motivation for Jesus’ willingness to die despite the fact that he easily could have avoided death.

In the wonderful, imaginative Indian parable to which I alluded above, there was a devout person who prayed every day beside the Ganges River. One day, after praying, he saw a poisonous spider struggling to stay alive in the water; so he cupped his hands

and carried it ashore. Just as he placed the spider on the ground, it stung him. The man didn't know it, but, as the story goes, his constant prayer that love would fill the world caused chemicals in his body to dilute the poison.

The next day, the same event reoccurred. Then, on the day after that, the kind man was again knee deep in the river, and he saw the same spider that had stung him before falling again from a branch into the water. The spider struggled to stay alive. So the man, filled with compassion, reached down and, with cupped hands, saved it. So the spider said, "Why do you risk your life to keep helping me? Don't you realize that I will likely sting you every time, because *that's what I do?*" As the man took the spider to dry land, he replied, "I'm doing it because that's what *I do!*"

When you and I reach out to another human being, we sometimes get stung. But, as followers of Jesus whose motivation was love, *that's what we do*. I believe that God did *not* want Jesus to die. It was not *God* who killed Jesus. Misguided and unloving *human beings* did that; and *their* lack of compassion is why Jesus' message of love was and is so needed. It's why Jesus seemed to feel that his own sacrifice might be worth it to increase our awareness, to awaken us to our need to love and be loved. For Jesus, *reaching out* was more important than the *sting*. That, I believe, is why Jesus died. Sometimes, that's what love does. Sacrifice is *still* of value. His *and* ours. It's what we do!

As always, I love and believe in each of you.

Your pastor and friend,

John