

Reading Hebrews - Atonement Part 1
All Saints Sunday 2018
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I was talking with some students last week about Graham Greene's *The Power and the Glory*, a novel set in early twentieth century Mexico. Christianity is outlawed (which it was). The priest is on the run from authorities as he moves from town to town hearing confessions and performing the Mass. He also a broken man, struggling with his own failures.

The novel explores the dark struggle of the priest trying to survive and serve in the midst of his fallibility. Before the persecution, he was an honored priest, but now he's become a whiskey priest. He lives in fear of death and he is so aware of his frailty, yet, he does not feel like he can leave, he must serve the people.

As our class discussed the book, one of the students raised the question about human free will and God's sovereignty. Suddenly students going back and forth discussing our freedom, God's rule and various related theological themes. The students are not actually quoting scripture, but drawing upon their awareness of scripture, some of which was not necessarily right. I try to let them wrestle and process their ideas without solving it.

At some point, I offered to them a few thoughts from different Christian thinkers across the ages. I said, "You guys have actually raised one of the fundamental questions of the church, here's how different Christians have thought about it across the ages."

Then it gave me just a small teaching moment to talk about the value of knowing church history and learning from voices before us. Many of the questions that we face in life are not unique to us, but Christians before us have wrestled with very difficult questions about what it means to be a person of faith. It's a great wealth, a great resource for all of us to go back and read these writers. Sometimes their writing is a little difficult to understand, but many times they're not difficult at all. There's a great value in learning the voices from the past. That's why I love to encourage books, and put a bunch of new books out there if anybody's interested.

This is a great way to think about All Saints. On All Saints Day, and then on All Saints Sunday, we're celebrating the promise of God, that in Christ he has promised to redeem us. And not only to redeem us, but according to Jude 24, to present us blameless before the father, which is that we will be completely holy. There is a sense in the way the New Testament reads that we are saints in Christ, we have been ... the righteousness of God in Christ has been imputed to us, while simultaneously we are people on a journey toward sainthood, both are happening at the same time in the New Testament.

We are declared holy, and yet we are being made holy. The reality of the declaration is being formed in us, in the way we think, and live. That tension of being the declaration and the formation are both true. As we celebrate All Saints, we are celebrating God's promise that he is making us saints. But we are also celebrating the importance of the treasury that has been given to us. We have a treasury of writing that spans over 2000 years. This writing is not simply

philosophical treaties, but includes songs, poems, and prayers. In fact, the great treasury we have is prayers. Our Liturgy filled with Scripture and ancient prayers of the church. John Chrysostom, one of the early preachers of the church, influence the formation of liturgy and daily prayer. Every day, the church prays the prayers of John Chrysostom. There's something beautiful about that, this treasury that's given to us. There's a value for remembering things, which is not typically a habit of many Christians, but I think it's a treasury to remember saints, to remember their stories, to listen to what they share with us.

There is value in that, of listening, of respecting, celebrating what God has done in them. Learning from them, even sometimes if we disagree, which we are free to do. It also might train us to value, and listen to the people across the table from us, that they have a treasury as well. And in spite of their flaws, which we may be more aware of, they are gifts of God to us, and often being transformed by his grace. There is value in learning how to face, and listen, and celebrate the gift of God, and the people around us, and the people of other cultures.

Ryan brought us these songs from other cultures today. It was particularly interesting at the Synod that Isaac and I went to this weekend, they had readers from different languages, so we could not hear the scriptures in English. It was a celebration of the different cultures that were present at the Synod. We had a woman reading in Hispanic, and then a man reading in Karen, which is an Asian language. It was quite beautiful to see that even in our little Synod there are all sorts of cultures represented.

I set that up as we talk about Hebrews 8. This passage is filled with rich questions that all of us have struggled with. Sometimes maybe we've not struggled with enough. We accepted simple answers, without really wrestling with the challenges. It immediately was in the chapter, Jesus is in heaven before the throne. We're told he's the great high priest.

If you read the Old Testament, we talked a little about high priest before, and I'm not going to spend a long time on it, but we're told he's a great high priest, who would stand before the throne, interceding. If you read the Hebrews passage, he's sitting at the throne, at the right-hand of the throne. He is both king and priest in that image. It doesn't say the word king, but the image of sitting is ruling.

There's all sorts of interesting things happening within that text. Then it raises the question of heaven, what or where is heaven? The Bible actually has all sorts of different ways it talks about heaven. It's not as quite as clear as people think. Some people, for much of history, put heaven in a spatial plane, and said heaven is a place where we go at some point. Then others came along and said, "No, heaven," this would be called apocalyptic, or temporal, "heaven is something that is revealed. That actually even now we are living in the very place where God will transform into heaven, and it's just we haven't behold it. When Christ fully unveils our eyes, we will see his glory all around us."

Both of those images are in the New Testament. If we go to the Old Testament, it says very little about heaven. There's all sorts of interesting things to struggle with in relation to heaven, but alas, we don't have time. Then, big part of the passage today is about covenant, and that it's quoting Jeremiah. If you can imagine Jeremiah is writing this prophecy, when Jerusalem is

collapsing, the covenant has appeared to fail, the people of God who are meant to carry the blessing of Abraham to the nations have become even worse to the nations, is what Jeremiah says. They're even more sinful than the nations. They're even, according to Ezekiel, they're even more sinful than Sodom and Gomorrah, that Israel is even more sinful than Sodom and Gomorrah.

The other nations are shocked at the evil that is happening among the people of God. Jeremiah is saying Babylon is on its way to destroy you, and you have to accept this as the judgment of God. There's no way to escape from it. God has declared that the marriage between him and Israel is no longer valid. The covenant has been broken. In the middle of the walls collapsing, and an army invading, Jeremiah says, "But behold, the days are coming," the Lord says, "Behold the days are coming when I will make a new covenant." He gives a promise in the midst of the chaos.

The whole Bible works on the idea of promise. God gives promises, and people wait, sometimes years. Sometimes they wait in such way that the promise extends beyond their own life. That would be we're coming up to this in Hebrews, where they wait their whole life for a promise that they don't see fully realized.

The writer of Hebrews goes so far as to say they were waiting on us, they were waiting on us to arrive. They didn't know it, but they were waiting on us. There is this sense of promise that carries us into the future that is true in the idea of covenant. Once again, we can't spend much time on it. Now I've said all those things, and we almost have no time left, so, briefly, we get to the most difficult part of the chapter probably, at the end of the Jeremiah promise, there is the notion that Christ will forgive all our iniquities, and forget them. They'll completely be blotted out. This is the, once again, the action of the high priest.

But, in Israel the high priest, can only go before the throne of God on behalf of the people once a year. Once a year on the Day of Atonement, he goes before and cries out for the people. This is to keep the land holy, and the people holy, but it does nothing to their conscious. It's not actually transforming them. It's to keep God from leaving Israel, that's the role of the high priest. He has no spiritual formational role in the people. All it does is keep God from leaving. But now we've been given a very different high priest who is actually blotting out the sin within us, he is actually transforming us, and incorporating us into a new covenant.

The big word that has been attached to this action is atonement. That all of a sudden throughout church history opens up a whole bag of worms as to what that word means. Across the generations, different people have talked about what atonement means. What does it mean? What is Christ doing that is making us forgiven permanently? The early church, some talked about how atonement was really about God tricking the devil. The devil was holding us captive, and Jesus comes as bait on the cross, the devil takes the bait, kills Jesus, and Jesus breaks the power that the devil has over us. Then he is the harrower of hell.

Most of us wouldn't understand atonement that way, even if we don't use the word. We understand it a different way. What we understand is through a gentleman named Anselm of Canterbury. I'm just briefly going to mention a little about Anselm today, then we will stop.

Anselm lives about 1000 years ago. He was not trying to write a best-selling novel, or best-selling book of theology, he wasn't trying to compete for some academic honors. He was a monk. His father was wealthy. He gave Anselm a good education. He wanted Anselm to be a politician. Anselm rejected it. He ended up just wandering across Europe. Eventually he becomes a Benedictine Monk.

In the Benedictine world, to be monk, is to work hard, and to pray hard. It's work and prayer. In his case, work meant study, was to study and write. He was a bookish man that wanted to be alone. He enjoyed the quiet, but he was made the prior of his monastery. Eventually, in a strange twist, he makes a visit to England, and they practically held him captive, making him the archbishop of Canterbury, which he was really terrible in that role. He was always fighting with the king. It was really, a big mess. His whole reign as archbishop, there was always a political controversy going on between him and the king. Because all Anselm wanted to do was just be quiet, study, write, that was what he felt called to do.

For him, study was an act of prayer. It was an act of devotion to God. He believed that we worship by using our minds, and thinking about the things of God. In fact, he comes up with a very famous statement that some of you may have heard, he said, "Knowledge does not lead us to faith," he said, "actually, faith is a gift of God that opens up our eyes." Then he says, "And then we have a hunger in us to know God, and so we cry out for understanding." So we simplify what he writes as, faith seeking understanding. That is the great dictum of Anselm, a person of faith seeking to know God.

For him, this seeking is an act of worship. He says, "Contemplation of Christ is a form of devotional thinking that leads us to love, and it makes us great lovers," life is about reason a pilgrimage of longing between earthly faith and eternal vision. We're longing, and pressing into the things of God. One of his wonderful thoughts is he says, "The world is beautiful. It's delightful. If this world is so delightful, think how delightful the creator of the world might be." We want to think about this delightful creator, because he is beautiful. In that sense, once he has touched us, we long for the beauty of the Lord.

He is working from an idea of Augustine, but he inverts it. Augustine talks about he beholds the glory of God, and he's overwhelmed by God's beauty, but in the moment of beholding God's beauty, he beholds his own sinfulness, and he falls to the earth. That's when he cries out for mercy. Anselm says, "Then again, it may look more like this, we sense a longing for God. We cry out for God, and we feel nothing. We feel empty."

Here's one of his prayers, he says, "Oh supreme and unapproachable light, oh whole and blessed truth, how far art thou from me, who in so near to thee, how far removed art thou from my vision? Though I am so near to thine, everywhere thou art, holy present, I see thee not, in thee I move, and in thee I have my being, and yet I cannot come to thee. Thou art within me, and about me, and I feel thee not."¹

I think that prayer describes many 20th century Christian's experience better than Augustine's experience, is the sense of God's absence. Where is God? Why have you forsaken me? Anselm says that it is ultimately our sin that separates us from God. This is one of the things he begins to

wrestle with, is sin, and how sin separates us from God. Also, that God is free. We don't ... God is not some kind of a mechanistic being, that we use some kind of rituals to make him come to us. He's a completely free being. He's free to come to us as he chooses. We cannot force him to encounter us. We can only wait for him.

As he begins to meditate on the sinfulness of man, he says it's really only God that can cross the gulf, which is now we're getting into evangelical ways of thinking, God can build a bridge between heaven and earth through the cross: you may remember this in the old tract on the Four Laws. There's an image of the cross between the gulf, this all Anselm-type of thinking. He writes a treatise on why God became man.

He says, "Why couldn't God just have compassion and wipe out the sin?" He says, "Because that would mean God is not just. There would be no justice. There must be some kind of recompense for sin." He says one thing that is puzzling to us, which most people are not aware of with his understanding of atonement, which I'll say, and then we'll continue, but he says ... 'Cause he's living in a feudal culture, so he basically says, "The great sin we've committed is not giving God the honor that's due him," which we might phrase it differently. We might say we've turned from God, but God, by virtue of creating us, is due a certain amount of honor, and we have not given it to him. We cannot give it to him, because of our sinfulness. We cannot honor him as our Lord.

He says, "That payment cannot even be made by humans. We are so far in debt, the debt of ingratitude, that we simply cannot pay it." It takes a non-human to pay it, someone that's not stained by humanity. Yet, God himself can't pay it, and so God has to become man. So God comes pure out of ... into humanity, and he can offer the honor due, which ultimately is the realization of the cross, he bears the sin on the cross. He steps into our sinful place. This is the way we often have heard atonement, that Christ ... We are on trial for our lives. We are subject to death, Christ steps in and says, "Give me the death instead." He dies on behalf of humanity. That's the great gift that Anselm gives the church. He is the first one to really verbalize it that way.

There's some beauty to that, because he gets to the heart of us being forgiven for sin. Christ bears the complete judgment for all our sin, and in the same moment, his righteousness imputed to us, so that we are made righteous at the very moment in Christ. He heals the breach that we cannot heal.

There are things to talk about in relation to resurrection, but one of the things Anselm does is, he says, "This whole movement of God restoring the breach is what is based on," what he calls Concordia, the mutual love between the Father, Son, and Spirit. It's a perfect concord. God created us to be in this, what he calls Concordia, that we are to be in this beautiful, loving community, but we can't be in it, we have no capacity to, because of sin. It is truly this Concordia, this desire to heal that mutuality of love. The son, and this is where people misunderstand atonement today, the son is not doing a legal act when he goes to the cross. The son is doing an act of love. He knows the father wants to heal the breach, so the son freely says, "I will heal the breach. I can heal the breach. I will enter in to the humanity's death," so that it is all about freedom.

The son freely gives his life for us. The father freely resurrects the son by the spirit, and we are freely caught up in this movement of love. Our life then becomes a movement of love toward God, and toward one another. That's one of the most beautiful things I think about his notion of atonement, is that we are made free to move toward love. We are made free to meditate on the beauty of the Lord. We are made free to have our minds transformed, that we can behold the Lord, that we can hear the Lord, attend to the Lord, that we can apprehend him, and that we can have just a glimpse of Christ.

He says this, he goes, "Just a glimpse of Christ will burn in the soul such a longing for the vision of Christ, that it will carry us through the rest of our lives. The vision of Christ being fully unveiled, which is what we truly long for." In Anselm as we celebrate communion, in one way his ideas are coming into our communion. This is the longing of the people of God to be restored in Christ fully, and to behold the whole communion of saints, the full concord of God's people united in Christ. That's the beauty of just one of God's many saints from across the ages we can celebrate this morning.

Amen

¹ Sidney Norton Deane with Saint Anselm, *Proslogium; Monologium; An Appendix, In Behalf of the Fool, by Gaunilon; and Cur Deus Homo* (Chicago: The Open Court Publishing Company, 1939), 22–23.