

March 10, 2024

Season: Fourth Sunday of Lent

Theme: Season of Lent: *Reset Button*

Scripture: 1 John 4:7-12

7 Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. **8** Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. **9** God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. **10** In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. **11** Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. **12** No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

Sermon Title: Carrying Too Much Atonement Cache

Sermon in a Sentence: We desperately need a reset on our understanding of atonement, specifically what occurred on the cross.

Call to Worship - Traditional

ONE: To God be the glory!

ALL: With joy and reverence, we gather together today.

ONE: To God be the glory this day and always.

ALL: Our hearts are filled with gratitude for all we have received.

ONE: To God be the glory, for there are great things God has done.

ALL: We shall praise the Lord with both our voices and choices in daily life.

ONE: To God be the glory! Let our worship begin...

Call To Worship - Contemporary: What makes a person feel separated from God? If we were spend some time on the question, the list would be extensive. How often does our own guilt or guilt imposed upon us leave us feeling separated from God.

Opening Prayer: Lord of Love, O God of Grace, we gather to pray and praise, to learn and to find new and healthy ways of sharing the Gospel. As we continue to move through the Season of Lent, through this time of preparation, make us more and more aware of the impact our words and teaching have upon the world around us. Forgive us when our impact has been unhealthy, even damaging to both individuals and society. With a spirit of repentance, we pray for guidance in our pursuit of what is healthy and life-giving to the world. These words are offered in the name of your embodied love, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Traditional Prayer for the People:

ONE: With gratitude for the love of God,

ALL: And for the immeasurable mercy that embraces us,

ONE: We join our hearts in prayer.

ONE: The Lord is with you,

ALL: And also with you.

ONE: Let us pray...

Holy and Gracious God, when so many things seek to distract us from what is truly important, we pray for discerning spirits that continue to recognize you through the fog of diversion. Let us not

only see you but also draw ever-so-close to your limitless love that is undeterred by even the most misguided teachings and practices. Bring us to the story of the cross, not out of fear, but with both curiosity and humility. Whatever explanations we have heard, if they do not communicate your amazing grace and that alone, provide us the space in which our curiosity can move to skepticism if necessary. If the story of the cross leaves us afraid of you and uncertain about our own value as human beings, then turn our questions into cynicism, for we are on a search for you, Gracious One, and any understanding of you begins with Jesus, whose love and welcome were beyond measure.

Generous God, continue to create within this community here at Cypress Creek Christian Church a spirit of grace-filled hospitality, where those who are feeling hurt and those who have been made to feel worthless can find time with you, time in which they are reminded of their belovedness. And if there are things we do around here that cause harm to the souls of individuals, we pray for clarity and confession that will lead to repentance and a new way forward. We continue to strive toward that ideal of *Putting Love First In All Things*, and I pray for the strength to try again when our attempts fall short.

Now continue to bless us as you always do, but especially in this Season of Lent. Make within us a spirit of expectation, preparing ourselves for the challenges of Holy Week, including the unimaginable pain of the cross. And yet, we are people who know the whole story. So keep us in the joy of knowing that nothing can separate us from your love, not even death. This is the conviction of our faith and the hope to which we cling. Amen.

Call to Communion: The Communion Table is open to all, for though the practice of sharing in this meal of remembrance might not be understood by all, there is something that occurs in the unconditional welcome. Jesus understood the power of making space for everyone, even those who might have misconstrued or even disagreed with him. If we are going to have healthy and honest conversations about the most challenging parts of faith, including the cross, then we cannot weaponize our beliefs. Participation at this table should not be determined by anything other than the grace of God. Let us all prepare to share in this amazing and holy experience...

(Explain the process of communion and offering)

Background: The damage is significant, and people are leaving church because of it—the traditional or even neo-traditional understanding of atonement, specifically (penal) substitutionary atonement theory. It would be one thing if people simply didn't like it, as there are some pieces of Christian theology and Jesus following that are hard, but much of the spiritual and emotional damage caused by the church has been directly or indirectly related to theological ideas that did not really come into existence until the 12th century, with additional theological troubling layers brought into play during the Reformation, specifically Calvin. The line "Jesus died for my sins" has become a central part of Christian theology, but Jesus was really killed *because* of the sins of the world. The Franciscan teacher, John Duns Scotus (c. 1266–1308), said that Jesus' crucifixion didn't solve any problems with God or change God's mind about us. God's mind didn't need changing. Rather, Jesus was changing our minds about God! The love Jesus lived undermined social, political, and religious systems of power, and those systems pushed back. A lot of people's understanding of the cross has Jesus taking the brunt of God's anger (wrath) that our sins deserved, but how does that hold up with a God that so loved the world? Some have argued it is a justice problem, that God wanted to forgive, but could not forgive because our sins wounded God's infinite nature; such a wound could only be mended with something infinite. Yet what does that teach us about forgiveness? The world likes division, hierarchy, and power structures, yet Jesus and even the cross

are God's way of displaying the depths of love to bring an end to systems that seek to control God and leave humanity in a space of uncertainty with regard to God's love. The word atonement in 1st John has been translated as: "propitiation" or "expiation," but it literally means a place of mercy (pointing to the mercy seat on the Ark of the Covenant). It is the meeting place between God and humanity, and Jesus is this meeting place—God's removal of every human barrier placed between God and humanity. Historically, the church has been terrified of such openness and free access, for the church is no longer a gatekeeper... and without this purpose (built on old systems of hierarchy and control), the church was left wondering what its purpose would be. In many ways, the church became the very thing that Jesus came to transform.

Key Words/Phrases:

Reset, Restarting, rethink

Atonement, penalty, wrath, anger, pay the price, ransom

Systems, control, power, unhealthy, damaging

Separated, disconnected, left out

Love, mercy, kindness

Freedom, unleashing, access

Music:

Opening: *To God Be the Glory* #72

Prayer Response for all of Lent: *This Is a Day of New Beginnings* #518 (vs.1&3)

At the Cross (Love Ran Red) by Tomlin

Way Maker