

At a recent coffee group, we were talking about religion, (as sometimes happens when I'm present!). We were talking about symbols and rituals, and someone asked why do Jewish men often wear that round cap? (Jews call it a Kippah or a Yarmulke). I started to explain that it was a sign of reverence or respect for God. Then someone else asked, "Then why in many Christian churches do people usually take OFF hats as we enter church?" Hmm... "also a sign of respect for God," I suggested. Rather than saying one way is better or worse, I found myself concluding that different customs are unique to different cultures! And... If it works for you, (if it makes you feel better or more spiritual) then great, go for it! BUT, acknowledge that something else works for someone else! How we use or view religious symbols really is a matter of personal choice and experience. Even our central symbol, the cross, has different meanings to different people ... To some, like me, it is the glory of Christ's *Love*, even a love that can give one's life for a friend, as Jesus once said. To others the cross is a symbol of pain and suffering, or even worse, a symbol of murder, as in the Holy Crusades, or perhaps Klansmen burning a cross on someone's lawn.

At Easter time, Christians are talking about death and resurrection; Granted, we don't say much about Good Friday, about Jesus' death, but we know that death and resurrection are connected: The wounded Jesus will conquer death, and the resurrected Christ still had his wounds, shown to his followers. So, someone also asked me recently if I would speak on the saying that Jesus "died for our sins." Fair enough at Easter time.

There are many interpretations (as well as distortions) of this short Christian saying. I think the best interpretation of Jesus' death on the cross has to do with **Love**. And it is about God and

Jesus' love *for the world* ("For God so loved *the world*"). This love kept Jesus on the path of being an *activist* for change, with the message of peacemaking and nonviolence. He had so many followers that he seemed a threat to those, especially the Romans, who ruled by power and oppression. The Romans killed him publicly, to make an example out of him, to stop any threat to their power. Sure, Jesus died out of love "for me and you," personally, as part of the world, but it is clear that he came to give new life to *the world*. (Again, "God so loved *the world!*")

Many Christians interpret Jesus' crucifixion to mean, almost exclusively, that Jesus died "in my place." This is called the "*substitutionary* atonement theory." I follow New Testament scholar Marcus Borg and many other progressive Christian leaders who do not find the theory helpful. Why? "Because of what it implies about the character of God; It portrays God as primarily a punishing God: "Somebody must pay a penalty for sin. And God requires blood - ours, or the blood of Jesus" (Borg, p.100, in his book "Speaking Christian")... In short, the substitutionary atonement idea is that "Jesus is the substitute who *satisfied God's wrath* by undergoing the punishment that we all deserve." (p.98) The primacy of punishment does not resonate with a God of Steadfast Love and Mercy. A God of great mercy means the primacy of forgiveness, even if full amends are not made, even if full payments are not made.

Sure, this understanding is in the Bible: that there are necessary punishments for wrongdoing (and every parent would probably agree, or at least say that there are "consequences.") In the Jewish part of the Bible, there were all kinds of offerings or blood sacrifices to God... a certain number of pigeons or doves or lambs, to appease the wrath of God, to avoid a punishment

from God. I return to my original proposition: If it worked for them at that time, made them feel forgiven of sins, good for them! But this system of payments, of sacrificial offerings, has been abandoned by our Jewish friends a long time ago. No longer are doves and bulls and lambs sacrificed on altars to appease the wrath of their God!

And in the middle ages, the Roman church had things called "indulgences" which were actual monetary payments to reduce your punishments, to reduce your time in purgatory. These indulgences were also abandoned by the church long ago, in part due to the challenge of Martin Luther (He was the reformer who started the Lutheran church and championed idea that we are saved by *Grace* through *Faith*, Ephesians 2:8.) Many Bible passages, both Hebrew and Christian scripture, also state that God does not require burnt offerings and sacrifices as in the ancient temple of Israel. "Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen is better than the fat of rams." (1Samuel 15:22). "I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God, rather than burnt offerings" Hosea 6:6). Blood sacrifices were becoming obsolete in Jewish worship!

Protestants also have put an emphasis on sin. One of the most famous sermons during the "Great Awakening" time, was by Jonathan Edwards, called "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God!" (1741). George Whitefield, who you may know preached long into the night and then died in Newburyportt on Federal Street in 1770, interpreted the scripture where Jesus says "I will give you rest" ... as rest *from the heavy burden of guilt for our sins*. (Jesus would forgive us and take away our guilt.) It has been said that a heavy emphasis on sin, whether Catholic or Protestant, means you may have a church that "guilt built!"

To say that Jesus is the "lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world" is fine as a *symbol* in Christian liturgy, but *literally*, it doesn't make much sense, that God requires a certain payment of life blood to forgive wrongdoing. The idea is that Jesus' sacrifice was so pure and so complete that it paid the price, the penalty...with blood, for past and future sins of the whole world! Sorry, this makes no sense literally. (It's too transactional or mechanistic: an exact payment, one pure life to erase the enormous sin of the whole world??? And the world just keeps on sinning and killing!).

And we have to remember that Paul was a Pharisee, schooled in the Law, so Paul's metaphors come from a legalistic interpretation of sin and punishment. Our Epistle this morning from Paul to the Colossians says that Jesus "cancelled the sentence" for our sin ("the bond which stood against us with its legal demands"), because he took it upon himself, and we see our punishment there, nailed to the cross! Pure metaphor from Paul! He used legal terms especially for those well schooled in the Torah, the Law. The lamb of God who "took away the sins of the whole world" makes no sense literally, but *symbolically*, it makes a lot of sense... that sacrifice is often needed to redeem a situation, that forgiveness can take sacrifice, a dying to self.

Again, the substitutionary interpretation of salvation does not make sense to me, and many other Christians, because it is mechanical or transactional: A certain kind of sin may need the blood of 2 doves and one lamb, plus 3 grain offerings (you can read about many kinds of sins and punishments in the book of Leviticus)... It sounds like what I've heard from my Catholic friends: that they had to go to a confessional booth, usually on Saturday. After confessing various sins in a booth (and making up

things, if they could not remember any particular sins), the priest would say something like: "Say 3 Our Fathers and 5 Hail Mary's"..... And yes, I hear that our Catholic brothers and sisters have mostly given up on this system! How can there be an exact payment, or an exact penance? King David, sensed this in Psalm 51, after his sin of adultery with Bathsheba, when he said: "O Lord, though hast no delight in sacrifice were I to give a burnt offering. Acceptable to God is a broken and contrite heart!" (What matters is feeling truly sorry!)

So, on the flip side of the coin, emphasizing good news, and I resonate totally with Marcus Borg on this, "What if Christianity and salvation are really about **transformation** - the transformation of ourselves and of the world?" The emphasis changes from Jesus' blood to Jesus' **love**. (In some of the old revival songs, I like to substitute the word love for blood!) In John 3:16, what is the key verb? God so *loved* the world!

And what is the direct object, or focus? The World! So "salvation" is also not just personal, and not primarily about where my soul goes when I die. And "sin" is not just about personal mistakes, trying to remember all the things I may have done wrong this week, as in the confessional booths. This is a very simplistic view of salvation. Sin is obviously also systemic, generational, encompassing so many things that separate us from God and our neighbors. So "salvation" (meaning healing in the Latin and Greek) has much to do with my relationships now with neighbors and with the world, not primarily about if I believe correct things about Jesus, my soul will go to a place heaven.

Let's look at the John 3:16 famous verse again... There are various interpretations, and I quote Marcus Borg, and resonate with him in these ideas: One problem is that God's love can be

seen as *conditional*. (Though God loves the whole world, only those who believe in Jesus, will be saved in the end). I agree with Borg that "in the Bible, for the most part, "believing" in Jesus does not mean believing theological claims about Jesus, but *loving* Jesus, giving one's heart, loyalty, trust and commitment to Jesus. Too often Christians try to make a litmus test of what exactly do you "believe" about Jesus... and one of the tests is the transactional question "Do you believe that Jesus paid the price for your sins?" It's a Total Metaphor! ... that Jesus paid the fine, the penalty, and gave a signed check to God, the courtroom Judge!

If that were all there were to the story, that Jesus died for, paid the price for my wrongdoings... in the Monopoly game of life we would have an infinite number of "Get out of jail free cards," and lie and cheat and oppress and kill others as much as we wished. That Jesus died for our sins is just one way of saying that the universal God is indeed primarily a forgiving and merciful God, always offering us new life. With such a loving God, forgiveness in this world must have primacy over punishment. But it does not excuse our behaviors, nor give us infinite get out of jail free cards. Jesus also said Repent, Change your ways, and Paul said ***Be transformed*** by the renewal of your minds. Rather than say we believe Jesus died for us, to save us from sin (and hell), we could say..... We love and trust Jesus, still present as risen Christ, and we seek undergone continual "*transformation*," by praying to be blessed by his love and grace; then we follow his way of *servanthood and sacrificial love*, the way of giving one's life for a friend. Amen.