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## **“At-ONE-ment Moments”**

Luke 19:28-40

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After he had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, saying, “Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, ‘Why are you untying it?’ just say this, ‘The Lord needs it.’” So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, “Why are you untying the colt?” They said, “The Lord needs it.” Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, saying, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!” Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, order your disciples to stop.” He answered, “I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.”

Today on Palm Sunday and Passion Sunday, I want to talk about and reinterpret two theological words: atonement and passion. These are the words of Holy Week, which begins today.

We are so fragile. Every human being is fragile. Everything can change for anyone in a moment... just around the corner on a day like any other day. One moment we are going about our lives in ordinary fashion and the next moment:

- a car wreck
- a cancer diagnosis
- a mother or a brother dies

Our heart sinks and we walk through a door through which we can never return. In a breath, a heart breaks for the inability to make it right for our most cherished.

Holy Week commemorates Jesus' last days on earth; his death and sacrifice - a time of atonement. For theological conservatives, "substitutionary atonement" is a key article of the faith. In response to Darwin in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, fundamentalists named atonement as one of the most important tenets of the faith. Substitutionary atonement says that we all owe a debt to God which we cannot possibly repay. Jesus, however, was the "perfect sacrifice" because he himself was sinless. His sacrifice--the shedding of his blood--appeases God, so says substitutionary atonement theology.

According to this theory, dying "for our sins" is the main reason Jesus was here. In fact, for some, it's the only reason he was here. You have to wonder: If this is the case, then it really wouldn't have mattered if Jesus had actually been killed during Herod's slaughter of young boys and had never really lived at all. If all that matters is Jesus' death, you also have to wonder why Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John even bothered to tell us anything about his life.

*<http://www.progressiveinvolvement.com>*

It was the conviction that humans were terribly sinful and in need of redemption that enabled guilt and religion to be so closely tied, says John Shelby Spong. Furthermore, the idea that "Jesus died for my sins" proposes that God becomes an ogre guilty of child abuse, he says.

*John Shelby Spong, "Why Christianity Must Change or Die", pg. 83-99*

Instead of this pre-Darwinian interpretation of atonement, let's look at the word itself. Taken apart into three words, it becomes at-one-ment. It is not a frivolous play on words to understand the doctrine of atonement as at-one-ment.

When I was critically ill six years ago, I re-learned something beyond description. I will try to explain it, but putting words to unconditional love and goodness is difficult. Through the haze of pain and medication, I remember a few snip-its in time.

- Two friends ministering to me by rubbing my painful, swollen belly for hours while I cried.
- A son who made no complaint about my request to wash my hair even though it was the middle of the night and there was no facility for bathing.

- Several friends who gave willingly of their time way into the night to be an advocate for me while I was out-of-my-head and talked nonsense, while I cried, and while I demanded help when nothing could be done.
- A step-father, who himself was not well, but spent the night in a chair and in no uncertain terms told the nurses when they were slow to react with medication.
- A daughter who held up under pressure, played nurse, advocate, liaison with the physicians and family, who slept very little and who lied to make me feel better.
- Two friends who shaved my legs while I lay in bed.

I was blessed by good and compassionate people who knew what at-one-ment meant. They made themselves at-one with me as much as they could and they walked with me through the valley. This is what we learn from Holy Week – that Jesus made himself “at-one” with people, even people who betrayed and murdered him.

Did Jesus die because of our sin? No, say modern scholars. He died because of the way in which he lived. His atonement is about his ability to connect with people, and to offer something most sacred – his time and his love. He became at-one with the suffering and outcast of humanity.

Our second word is “passion”. Too often we associate the word “passion” with the events leading up to, and including, Jesus’ death. Robin Meyers wrote about this in *“Saving Jesus From the Church”*. Rather, he suggests, it is more accurate to say that Jesus’ passion had to do with the revelation of God that consumed him. Justice was his passion. Healing was his passion. Gathering up the last, the least, and the lost and helping them to stand up straight in a world that kept them from doing so was his passion.

Robin Meyers, *“Saving Jesus From the Church”*, p. 71

So often people are good. So often they are more than good – even heroic. A father puts the braces on his daughter's legs as the child resists. The leg braces hurt, and she has to sit in a wheel chair when they are on. He puts them on in spite of the tears, promising his lovely child, later she can wear her sparkling dress and take the braces off and move on the floor in the way she knows how to dance. I cannot fathom such heroic goodness. But love makes it so.

A mother waits in Guatemala, fostering a child whom she hopes to adopt. She waits while the paperwork is tied up in bureaucracy and her husband tries to travel each month to see his beloved and the child in another country. They maintain homes and jobs and relationships from miles apart on the hope that they will have a child. I cannot fathom such heroic goodness. But love makes it so.

An 85 year old man shows me his blood donor award – 100 gallons he’s given. An old nun, stooped and tired, comes into the ICU again and smiles at another family as she prepares to minister to their dying loved one. She’s done it for decades with the same compassion and love over and over and over again. I cannot fathom such heroic goodness. But love makes it so.

Every human being has inherent worth and deep possibility for goodness. We, like the Palm Sunday crowd can celebrate and praise and be bearers of hope. But we can also, like the Good Friday crowd, be severed from our own goodness; from God. As Christians, we are called to be “at-one” with other humans – friends and strangers – and to demonstrate our passion for justice and healing.

And as we yearn to understand what at-one-ment means in this mutilated world, let us say, in great humility that we can all be severed from our own goodness and from God. Fear and war and poverty and misuse of power and profit not aligned with fairness and humility...all these are a travesty of truth.

Things may not have changed so much since that first Palm Sunday. Humanity continues to be fickle – turning from praise to jeers in just a short time. But the groaning world asks for us to humbly see the whole world (not just our friends) with the eyes of compassionate wisdom and daring creativity, and seek to walk a loving global path. It is not an easy path, but it humbly holds itself before us, because it knows how beautifully fragile humanity is and how precious and filled with saving goodness. Amazing.

We still have a way to go to stretch our wisdom to own the ways we all perpetuate the reality of a broken world...and seek the deeper causes that bring this hatred to the fore in our web of interdependence. Sometimes we cannot imagine the heroic goodness it will take; but love will make it so.

Jesus taught us -

- when he healed the blind man,
- when he held the children,
- when he spoke with the woman at the well,
- when he taught the disciples,
- when he submitted to the authorities,
- when he carried his cross,
- when he forgave those who were not sorry,
- when he empathized with the robber,
- when he died

– Jesus taught us what it is to be “at-one” with another and what it is to have passion. Let us also learn how to be “at-one” with the stranger, the child, the sick, the poor, and the outcast so that we can be “at-one” with God.