

Sermon Notes – March 11, 2018
“What does it mean to be saved?”
Brian Walton

I take seriously the call to “preach the gospel”. The word Gospel translated means, “Good news” and so I worried after last week’s sermon. It is hard to raise the topic of sin without leaving people in a place seemingly absent of Good News. Last week I left you with my definition of sin (the relentless pursuit of self-interest to the exclusion of others) and my personal angst related to having thousands of dollars in a retirement fund while aid agencies beg for contributions to support the destitute and starving. The prudent among us likely dismissed my worries convinced that preparing for retirement makes sense. The pragmatists likely concluded that, as Jesus once observed, “the poor will always be with us”. The evolutionary biologists would likely argue that every specie is oriented towards self-preservation making thinking of oneself first, almost innate. The fact remains: children die and I amass wealth.

Is there any way out of this dilemma? For some Christians the reality of sin is offset by the death of Jesus and belief in his atoning sacrifice. Atonement is another of those churchy words. Although I believe that the word sin still has a place in the vocabulary of Christians, I have concluded that the idea of atonement is outdated. Despite this, almost every Christian – at some point in their life – has been exposed to the idea of atonement. My simple explanation of atonement is as follows:

1. Original sin plagues everyone and we can never completely escape from sinful behaviour.
2. God who is perfect love and justice condemns us for our sins.

3. In order to forgive us or 'save' us, God requires atonement, or compensation, for our failures. In keeping with the tribal logic of the Old Testament, compensation was made in the form of material goods (offerings) or animal sacrifice (sacrificial lamb) or, ultimately, human sacrifice.
4. Atonement suggests that God sent Jesus to become that once and for all human sacrifice; his death compensates or pays the price for our mistakes; and all who believe in Jesus are saved.

This idea of atonement has been with us since the beginning of Christianity. It is hinted at in Paul's letter to the Romans which we read this morning and even more so in the New Testament Book of Hebrews ("It is by God's will that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once and for all"). The idea of atonement has continued throughout the centuries expressed especially in our old hymns - "Just as I am without one plea, but that thy blood was shed for me".

Frankly, I don't buy it. This understanding of atonement just doesn't make sense to my 21-century mind. It sounds more like magic or a fairy tale than the God I know or the theology I want to live by. I don't believe that God sits like a judge on the bench demanding the death penalty as the price for our wrong doing. One contemporary theologian concluded that the idea of atonement made God into a divine child-abuser, who punishes an innocent son for the mistakes of others.

And so, is there a way beyond relentless self-interest? Does the phrase, "Jesus saves us from our sins" make any sense? Is there a different way of thinking about salvation than atonement? I believe there is and that it is revealed in the familiar story of Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus was an extortionist

and he was hated by the people because of it. Sometimes he is more politely called a “tax collector” but the term extortionist is more fitting. He did collect taxes for the Romans. The Jews already hated him for representing the Roman invaders and taking their money to support Caesar, but that wasn’t all. Zacchaeus inflated the amount of their taxes at his whim charging an additional 25 or 50% for Zacchaeus. He made the taxes even more unbearable by skimming off the top. His relentless self-interest was at the expense of others.

Then Jesus comes to town and Zacchaeus scales a tree to get a view of him and Jesus spots him and invites himself for supper. The people grumble, “he eats with sinners”. Encountering the pure love of Jesus Zacchaeus has a conversion. He comes face to face with his relentless self-interest and feels love pull him toward the good. His heart changes and he reaches out to those he has extorted and rights his wrongs.

In my life this is salvation – when we encounter the pure love of Jesus and are pulled toward the good. Confronted by a man who lays down his life to advocate for the good, for the love of neighbour, for the love of self, for the love of God, my heart is wrestled from relentless self-interest and freed to love. Eschatology is the fancy word that theologians use to describe God’s commonwealth – a place where justice reigns and love abounds. Theologians say that eschatology is “already” and “yet to come”. In our meeting of Jesus we are “already” drawn towards love; even though love’s transformation of the world is “yet to come.”

“Already” I donate to charities that support hungry children, already I lobby for a more equal distribution of wealth, already I work to pursue love and justice in my interactions with other but my complete conversion,

indeed the conversion of the human race to love, is “yet to come.” The power of love is always at work pulling me away from unrestrained self-interest. This is amazing. Some call it grace.

History describes John Newton as crass and foul mouthed. He had little interest in others – he abandoned his parents and flaunted authority. All he wanted was to make a buck and when he discovered that transporting Africans as slaves was profitable he signed on. For years he sailed the seas on slave trading boats until one day he read the gospel and his encounter with Jesus, with the power of love saved him from this relentless self-interest. He abandoned slave trading, enrolled in seminary and joined forces with the English abolitionist William Wilberforce working to eradicate slavery. Even though abolition was “yet to come”, John Newton was “already” captured by the power of love causing him to write the familiar hymn “Amazing Grace.”

It is amazing that the inspiration of love can work wonders in the world. I saw it on Friday evening attending the Grandmothers for Grandmothers banquet. There it was – salvation at work. Women, our women, older women, even elderly women, mostly middle-class women were saved from self-interest by love, by their love for children, by their solidarity with grandmothers thousands of miles away. Working with grace-filled and dedicated hearts they were doing what they could to save lives. “Already” they were saving the lives of children; “already” they were standing in solidarity with Elders like themselves a world away. A cure for AIDS is “yet to come” and an equitable sharing of resources is “yet to come,” but already love is at work. And so I say praise and thanks be to God and to

the saving son Jesus Christ, who “saves us from relentless self-interest” by calling us forward in love. It is amazing. It is amazing grace. Amen.