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Job 38: 1 – 7, (34 – 41)
 Hebrews 5: 1 – 10

Ps. 104: 1 – 9, 25, 37b
 Mark 10: 35 – 45

**“For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve,
 and to give his life as a ransom for many.”**

We live in the Bible Belt. This is not a news flash for anyone here. But it means that we live surrounded by people from other Christian denominations who often have very different theological perspectives than we do, despite the fact that we are all Christian. In fact, even within the Episcopal Church there is a broad range of theological perspectives. We all believe that Jesus lived, was crucified, died and rose again in order to bring us into a right relationship with God. That idea of reconciling us to God is usually referred to as atonement – or we can think of the word as “at-one-ment,” or unity, with God. Sometimes, it is *how* we understand such a basic tenet of the faith that causes us to diverge in our theology.

Atonement is the act of being reconciled with God through the cross of Jesus. Perhaps the most common understanding that we hear around here in the Bible Belt, goes something like this. God is a just and punishing God whose wrath would consume us because of our sins if Jesus didn’t step in and “pay the price” for us. In theological terms, this is known as substitutionary penal atonement. By not doing things we should have done and by doing things we shouldn’t have done, so this line of thinking goes, we have, rightly incurred God’s anger, indignation and wrath. But God chose to punish Jesus instead of us in order to never have that chasm between divine and human again.

That’s not a theological perspective with which I, personally, am comfortable. It presumes a God who thinks and acts like us. It presumes a God whose anger and desire to punish are greater than God’s mercy and grace. But today’s Gospel, where Jesus says that “the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” begs the question *for* whom – and *to* whom – is this ransom paid and why?

Lutheran pastor, Paul J. Nuechterlein, compares today’s Gospel lesson to a “Who dunnit?” movie where a ransom is involved. The phrase “Son of Man,” he says, is somewhat vague, but most scholars agree that Jesus is referring to himself. So, Jesus is paying the ransom. And he is paying it for “the many.” That’s also rather vague, Nuechterlein says, but presumably it means us, humanity. So, Jesus comes to ransom us from whomever has a hold on us. But “who dunnit?” Who has a hold on us? From what is Jesus ransoming us? Who demands the ransom?

Nuechterlein writes that it is the most important “who dunnit” that we will ever have to figure out, because our very lives depend upon it. We are the ones being ransomed from death. But who – or what – holds us captive? Who or what might harm us or kill us if the ransom is not (or cannot be) paid? Nuechterlein suggests that some might say Satan, the adversary, is the one who receives the ransom, in order that we might be set free, but probably the most common answer is God, given the idea of substitutionary penal atonement being so prevalent. Jesus comes to satisfy and appease God’s anger at our sinfulness. Jesus comes to “pay the price” for our sins. That’s the common response.

Nuechterlein goes on to say that he thinks Jesus comes, not just to ransom us, but also to reveal the real culprit(s), the ones behind the demand for ransom. Many people perceive God as a stern

parent – demanding, authoritarian, but loving – albeit in a ‘tough love’ kind of way. God as a parent who won’t hesitate to punish us if we step out of line and misbehave in some way. But maybe, just maybe, Jesus shows us who his Father in heaven is, the one he sometimes calls “Abba,” or Daddy, in order to change our minds about God in this very critical way. Perhaps Jesus comes to show us that God is *not* the angry, judgmental, stern taskmaster whom so many of us fear.

Dennis Linn, a pastor and Christian counselor, recounts how his own mind was changed about God. A patient came in one day because her son had tried to commit suicide for the fourth time. She described how her son was involved in prostitution, drugs and murder, and then ended the litany of her son’s sins with “What bothers me most is that my son says he wants nothing to do with God. What will happen to my son if he dies without repenting and without wanting anything to do with God?”

Linn listened to this impassioned unburdening from the mother. At the time, he, too, shared an image of God as something like a stern parent. But as a counselor, he didn’t want to convey this to his patient. So, he asked her what she thought. She, too, was still trapped in that image of God. “Well,” she said, “I think that when you die, you appear before the judgment seat of God. If you have lived a good life, God sends you to heaven. If you have lived a bad life, God sends you to hell.” She concluded sadly, “Since my son has lived such a bad life, if he were to die without repenting, God would certainly send him to hell.”

Again, Linn as counselor didn’t want to agree with her, so he tried the indirect route. He had the patient close her eyes and imagine herself sitting next to the judgment seat of God. He also had her imagine her son’s arrival at the judgment seat with all his serious sins and without his repenting. Then Linn asked the mother, “How does your son feel?” “My son feels so lonely and empty,” she replied. Then Linn asked her what *she* would do, to which she quickly responded, “I want to throw my arms around my son!” She lifted her arms and began to cry as she imagined herself holding her son so tightly. Finally, when she had stopped crying, Pastor Linn asked her to look into God’s eyes and watch what God wanted to do. God stepped down from the throne, and, just as the mother had done, embraced her son. And the three of them – the mother, her son and God - all cried together and held one another. Pastor Linn said that what he learned that day about God was that God loves us at least as much as the person who loves us the most and that God loves us unconditionally.

So, perhaps the answer to the “who dunnit” is this: the ransom is not paid to an angry God as an appeasement. Instead, Jesus chooses to die at our hands in order to liberate us from ourselves and the messy world we have created. Jesus takes the worst we have to give, Jesus ‘pays the price,’ in order to free us from our addiction to power, prestige and hierarchy. Our insatiable need for control. Or our obsessions with stuff, money, food, alcohol, drugs, sex or whatever have become our little ‘g’ gods. We have been captives to this way of life, and Jesus comes to give us a new way. The cross is God’s way of redeeming the world, and each and all of us.

N. T Wright says that the reason John and James, the Sons of Thunder, so misunderstand Jesus (as do the rest of the twelve), is exactly why so many people, including many people today, are desperate to have Jesus without also having the cross. The cross calls into question all human pride and glory. It calls into understanding our idea of love. Jesus calls his followers to death and resurrection rather than greatness and privilege. Jesus calls us to the way of love.

The word translated as “ransom” really means to unbind or untie. So, in a sense, Jesus comes to unbind us from the knots that we have tied ourselves into by pursuing all the wrong things. All that

Jesus does, he does in love, and so Jesus comes to save us from ourselves so that we are free to love – and to love by serving.

James' and John's urge for power and greatness is universal. It's in every one of us in some way or another. It's on playgrounds and in conference rooms; it's in churches and in homes. Henri Nouwen wrote that ever since the serpent tempted Adam and Eve, humans have been tempted to replace love with power. The cup from which Jesus drinks is a Loving Cup in the best sense of that term. It isn't a trophy cup to be awarded for greatness. It is a cup of self-emptying and self-giving love, a servant love. May we drink deeply from that cup, so that we might resist the temptation to power and glory, and instead, do whatever we do in love. +