

“More Than The Greatest Love”

April 11, 2010

Rev. Thom Larson

There is an old story that comes to us from India about an elephant and six blind men. Chances are that you have heard the story before. But it's a good enough story, with an important enough lesson, that it can be heard more than once. So I'm going to tell the story this morning, and when I continue the sermon, I think you'll know why.

Once upon a time there lived six blind men in a village. One day the villagers told them an elephant was coming to their town. They had no idea what an elephant was. But they all agreed that even though they wouldn't be able to see the elephant, they should all go and feel it to discover what an elephant was. Every one of them touched the elephant.

“Hey, an elephant is a pillar,” said the first man who touched the elephant's leg.

“Oh, no! it is more like a rope,” said the second man who touched the tail.

“You are both wrong, said the third man who was touching the trunk. “An elephant is like the thick branch of a tree.”

“I think an elephant must be like a big hand fan used to cool the rajah,” said the fourth man touching the elephant’s ear.

“No, it’s not like a fan at all,” said the fifth man, “but it’s like a big, solid wall.” He was touching the elephant’s broad, rough belly.

“You’re all wrong,” said the sixth man who was touching the elephant’s tusk. “An elephant is like a sharp, solid spear.

The six blind men began to argue about the elephant with each one of them insisting that they were right. They became more and more agitated in their debate about the elephant. A wise man was passing by and saw the blind men arguing. He stopped and asked them “What is the matter?” The blind men said. “We cannot agree about what an elephant is like.” The wise man calmly listened as each man shared their experience with the elephant. When he had heard each man’s opinion he gently explained to them, “All of you are right. The reason every one of you is telling it differently is because

each one of you touched a different part of the elephant. So actually, an elephant has all the features that you have so rightly described.”

“Oh!” the blind men said. Their fighting ceased and they all felt happy because they were all right.

This story came to my mind a couple of Sunday’s ago when Bob Browne asked me to preach a sermon about the atonement. He shared that in their Disciple Bible Study the class had been discussing what we mean when we say that Jesus died for our sin. Evidently there was a wide ranged of opinion in the class about that classic belief of the church which is so straightforwardly expressed in our reading from Revelation for today. Bob thought that if the class was experiencing such confusion, then chances were good that the larger congregation was confused as well.

One of the best and most thorough discussions of the atonement that I’ve discovered is presented by Brian McLaren in his book, The Story We Find Ourselves in. The discussion involves a woman with terminal breast cancer, an evangelical pastor and his wife, and a religious studies preacher. The woman with breast cancer is a lapsed Christian who because of her disease is seeking to reconnect with God and is

questioning the belief that Jesus had to die for the sins of humankind. The pastor's wife shares with her the most classic theory of the atonement which the breast cancer patient remembers from her Sunday school days. It is the theory that because God is just and God's laws cannot be violated without some natural consequence for breaking God's law, someone has to pay for Adam and Eve's choice of eating the fruit in the garden of Eden. If God really is just and really does love us, God can't let us go on sinning. On the other hand, if God punishes us for the things we do wrong, we are in a hopeless situation because we can't stop sinning. So God sends Jesus into the world to receive the punishment for our sin. Jesus' death on the cross fulfills the requirement for punishment that God's justice and righteousness requires. Jesus accomplishes for us what we can't do for ourselves. This theory of the atonement is called the 'substitutionary theory' and raises even more questions for the woman with cancer.

So the pastor continues by explaining to the woman other theories of the atonement. He starts with the most ancient theory which he calls the 'ransom' theory. This view says that we humans, through our sin, place ourselves under the authority of Satan. Jesus comes and makes a bargain with

Satan, his life for our freedom. Satan agrees to the bargain. Jesus is taken and tortured and killed and sets us free. But in the end, God double-crosses Satan by raising Jesus from the dead. This theory is even more troublesome for the woman than the first so the pastor continues with a third theory which he calls the “Christus Victor” theory. It is the theory that in his opinion has been the most dominant throughout church history. In the ransom theory, the enemy is Satan who holds humanity as prisoners or kidnap victims, and Jesus’ self-giving is the key that sets us free. In the substitutionary theory, the enemy is God’s just wrath at our sin, and Jesus’ death absorbs God’s wrath. In the Christus Victory theory, our enemy is death. By entering into our world by taking on human flesh and by overcoming death, Jesus is the perfect revelation of what it means to be fully human and leads us to victory over death when we follow him.

The fourth theory the pastor offers is called the ‘perfect penitent’ theory. This theory argues that for our forgiveness to be real and legitimate, a sincere expression of repentance is required from the wrongdoer. Because none of us are very good at repenting, because deep down, some small part of us still loves to sin, our best repentance is always ambivalent, partial, or withheld. Jesus’ acceptance of

death, which he could have escaped any number of ways, is Jesus' enactment, on the behalf of the whole human race, of perfect repentance. Jesus becomes the representative of all humanity, and willingly submits himself to being condemned and punished on our account, in spite of his true innocence, as a way of acting out real repentance for the human race. Jesus is the new Adam, whose obedience and submission to God's will results in our salvation, just as the old Adam's sin resulted in our condemnation. The pastor reminds the people that he's sharing with that this theory of the atonement was the one preferred by C.S. Lewis and that he developed in his writings in the middle of the twentieth century.

Then he goes on to share the fifth theory of the atonement, one he calls the "moral influence" theory. In this theory, the cross demonstrates Jesus' self-giving, his complete abandonment to God's will, his complete self-devotion for the sake of the world. Jesus' death completes the whole message of his life: he makes visible the self-giving love of God. When Jesus' sacrificial love touches us, we want to join him in self-giving. We want to give up being self-centered and selfish so that we can be like God, loving the world and loving others. Jesus invites us into his devotion, both to God and to humankind. We are invited to abandon our selfish and loveless

ways so that we can be back on God's side and be part of the creative, saving process that Jesus has started by the example of his life.”

The woman with breast cancer tells the pastor that she really likes knowing the different theories about the atonement and of all the ones he has shared so far, it is this last one that she identifies with the best. By coming to us in such pure, vulnerable goodness and then letting human being kill him, Jesus shows us, not just as individuals, but as the whole human race, just how destructive our selfish ways are. But she's curious about the sixth theory.

When the pastor can't remember the sixth theory, he turns to the religious studies teacher for help. The teacher says that he doesn't have a name for the theory. But if he had to come up with one he would call it the “powerful weakness” theory or the “foolish wisdom” theory. It works like this: by becoming vulnerable on the cross, by accepting suffering *from* everyone, Jews and Romans alike, rather than visiting suffering *on* everyone, Jesus is showing God's loving heart, which wants forgiveness for everyone ... not revenge ... not punishment. Jesus accepts suffering and transforms it into reconciliation. In this theory, the cross shows God's rejection of human violence and dominance and oppression that have spun the

world in a cycle of crisis from Cain and Abel down to the headlines in this morning's newspapers. The cross calls humanity to stop trying to make God's kingdom happen through coercion and force, which are always self-defeating in the end, and instead to welcome it through self-sacrifice and vulnerability.

After a brief moment of silence and reflection, the teacher speaks up and says, "I guess I might have one more theory of the atonement that comes from my own life. It's probably more biographical than it is theological. But maybe it connects somehow with the ones we've already been talking about. When I was married, my wife – my ex-wife – had an affair. More than one actually. It was ... devastating. I was a pastor and a good husband, I think. Unless you've experienced it, you never know how *physical* betrayal feels. You trust someone, you think you know them, and then you find out you've been fooled, used, taken for granted, taken advantage of. You feel cheap, and violated, and your whole body ..."

The woman with breast cancer reaches out with her hand and puts it on the teacher's shoulder. She leans forward to try to establish eye contact with him and says, "Yes, I know. Your whole world goes empty, and your stomach burns, and your legs feel

numb, and your neck feels cold, and your lungs feel like you're breathing poisonous gas, and your brain is like one big fire alarm buzzing so loud you can hardly stand it. It's exactly as you said: betrayal is something you feel with your whole body. Believe me. I know about betrayal and I'll never forget it either."

The teacher takes a deep breath and continues with his story. "Anyway, we got counseling, and we talked. And she said she was sorry. She said all the right things. And I loved her, and I had made solemn vows to her. I really believed in marriage vows and I still do. So I forgave her. And that was the *hardest* thing I ever did. I don't know how to make this into a theory about why Jesus died for our sins, but ever since that day, when I think about the cross, I think it's all about God's agony being made visible – you know, the pain of forgiving, the pain of absorbing the betrayal and foregoing any revenge, of risking that your heart will hurt again, for the sake of love, at the very worst moment, when the beloved has been least worthy of forgiveness, but stands most in need of it. It's not just something legal or mental. It's not just words. It has to be embodied, and the nails and thorns and sweat and tears and blood strike me as the only true language of betrayal and forgiveness."

There are seven theories of atonement. I'm guessing that you resonate with one more than the others. And I'm guessing that none of us would agree about the one that fits us best. But none of us is wrong. I'm guessing that the theory that works best for someone who has spent time in prison would be different from the one that works best for someone who's life has been well ordered and responsible. I'm guessing that the theory that is most right for someone who has struggled with addictions would be different from the one that is most right for someone who has always been on top of things and in control of their habits and appetites. Our experiences in life have a profound affect on how we see things. But maybe all the theories are right. Maybe we need them all to have a complete picture of how it is that God takes care of the brokenness in our relationships with God and with each other. Maybe we need them all to get the full vision of how much God really loves us.

For each theory is a revelation of the greatness of God's love for us. Why did Jesus have to die for our sins? The simplest answer is to show us the wonder, and the power, and the majesty, and the faithfulness of God's love for us. Imagine the quality of the love of the person in your life who has loved you the most. It may be your spouse ... it may be a parent ...

it may be a friend or a sibling or a teacher. The love of that person is the very minimum of the love with which God loves you. God's love is more than the greatest love the world has known. You may have heard a pop song with that title before. It's been recorded by many different artists, but I think the most popular recording was done in the 1960's by Bobby Darin. Listen to the words, and think of them as God's words to you ...

song

Why did Jesus have to die for our sins ... because no one else could love you more. There is no greater love. Amen.