

A few weeks ago we wrapped up a 2-part message on the Nature of Sin. Hopefully one thing that came from that was the notion that sometimes we need to talk about those things that seem very generic, or obvious. There are certain things that Christianity is all about, and maybe we end up **not** taking a closer look at certain things because it seems so obvious. There is one really big thing in this room, with its own dedicated light control, something that seems so obvious that maybe we never need to really mention it. And yet it is at the heart of what we are. It is the big Cross in the center of our altar area. And it stands for something. In fact it must stand for something, right?

A moment ago we heard special words from St. Paul in Romans 5, which is probably one of the most quoted portions of Paul that people hear. Let me repeat every other verse...

6 For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. 8 But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. 10 For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life.

I am amazed as I hear these words once again, at something that we seem to miss in our culture: In the land of freedom and “do-it-yourself” I hear these words and I see that all the talk is about what GOD is doing. In our culture we hear so much about all the things that we have to do in order to achieve God’s Grace! Let us never forget that God is always the agent, God is the one who makes things happen. Our faith is always a response to what God has done

for us in the first place. And as Paul would remind us, our faith can never be a source of pride or accomplishment, because it is always simply a response to God. And we just don't get to brag about whatever faith that is within us.

I did some checking this last week and I was stunned by something: When people talk about Jesus dying on the Cross, they often end up talking about ATONEMENT. We hear this word ATONE sometimes, often in sports when a player does poorly and then later on has a chance to do much better and help the team win. People will say "He atoned for all his dropped passes." But we Christians look at the Cross and talk about how Jesus "atoned" for our sins. What is amazing in this is that this is not a word that is used much in the NT. We hear about "atonement" from Jewish people who have a high holy day called Yom Kippur. Through the years Christians have borrowed just the word atonement, although the word does not show up in our distinctly Christian writings of the NT. But it is still something for us to consider.

Once the Church was established about 1600 years ago, the teachers began to try to explain Jesus's death as a "Ransom Atonement" in which Jesus had to die in order to pay a ransom to death and evil. Humans were all held by death, so Jesus had to pay this big price to set us free from death. Well, time went by and another idea came to take the place of that one. Instead of Jesus being a ransom payment, another idea became the dominant belief of Atonement. Around 900 years ago another belief came along to change that. It is called the "Satisfaction Theory of Atonement" and it basically meant that God's honor had been wronged by all the bad things that humans do, and that justice had to be done. Due to

all the human evil in the world, there had to be a big price paid in order to satisfy God's honor and justice. Humans could not pay the price, so it had to be paid with something very big. What was the very big thing that could pay the huge debt owed to God? Well, Jesus. This idea is still taught and held in many protestant churches today. It is common for there to be lots of hymns about the blood of Jesus. They say that because of God's honor being tarnished, there must be blood! And so, in certain churches, they sing lots of songs about the blood of Jesus. What can wash away my sin? Nothing but the blood of Jesus.

I am here to offer another option on this idea of Atonement. Instead of seeing Jesus sacrificed to pay a ransom to death, or seeing Jesus sacrificed to restore God's honor and justice, maybe it means something else. Maybe God says to us in the Cross, "I love you so much that I will die for you. I know that you suffer in this human life. I came to suffer with you to show you my love, that I will go to the greatest lengths to reach you. You can put a spear in my side, and nails in my hands and feet, and I will not stop loving you."

John Wesley would remind us when we have Communion that Jesus would die all over again, just for one of us. And when we take the bread and the cup, we need to remember that. Maybe this is not about ransoms or satisfying God's honor or justice. Maybe it is about God's great love, and the love of Christ for all. In a moment I will be reading a special prayer. Listen to the words in that prayer. **God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.** Let us pray...