

“Ten-Foot Pole”

1 Peter 3:18-22

Sermon notes from the pulpit of
First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois
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In this four-part sermon, I’m going to make three big turns. I don’t want to lose you, so I’ll tell you went to make those turns with me.

PART ONE:

This text offers insights into a theology of Atonement: That is, our sins have cut us off from God, but Jesus makes things right. Jesus reconciles us to God. Because of Jesus, we are now at-one with God. Think, “Atonement”/ atonement.^[1]

The mechanics of atonement differ from theologian to theologian, and from various points in church history.

Some theologies of the church espouse a view that something needed to be sacrificed in order to make God happy. Something needed to be “paid” in order to cover human debt. This might be called “vicarious satisfaction” or the “satisfaction” theory of the atonement.

We might discuss this at-onement in terms of some cosmic battle of good against evil. God won the battle over evil through Jesus. This might be called the “victorious Christ” or *Cristus Victor* model of the Atonement.

There are many models of atonement, including:

- Recapitulation theory
- Penal substitution
- Governmental theory (Arminian)
- Moral transformation (Abelard)
- Moral example theory
- Embracement theory
- Shared atonement theory

The Confession of 1967 puts it this way (and we’ll share these words as our affirmation of faith this morning):

*God’s reconciling act in Jesus Christ is a mystery which the Scriptures describe in various ways. It is called
the sacrifice of a lamb,
a shepherd’s life given for his sheep,
atonement by a priest;*

again it is

*ransom of a slave,
payment of debt,
vicarious satisfaction of a legal penalty, and
victory over the powers of evil.*

These are expressions of a truth which remains beyond the reach of all theory in the depths of God’s love for man (humankind). They reveal the gravity, cost, and sure achievement of God’s reconciling work.

The point is, God makes things right between us. Proof of this gift is the life, death, resurrection, and reign and Jesus.

My old minister, Rev. Andrews, put it this way to us teenagers in youth group: God doesn't look at us without also seeing his son, Jesus. So, there's never a doubt that God loves us.

PART TWO (Big Turn #One):

At the center of our theology of the atonement *and* at the center of all our Christian theology is Jesus. *Jesus is the reason for the season*, we rightly say. And that doesn't just apply to Christmastime, but to all time. *Jesus is the reason for the season*. We might say that in song with words like these: *In the morning when I rise, give me Jesus. You can have all this world, but give me Jesus*. Or, *On Christ the solid rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand*. Or, *The church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord*. Or, *Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so, little ones to him belong, they are weak but he is strong*. Or . . . You get what I'm saying: At the center of our faith is Jesus.

PART THREE (Big Turn #Two):

Arguably the most universally recognized symbol for Jesus is the cross. We protestants might say that the mystery of God's love is best summarized by an empty cross. (Not a crucifix, with a dead or dying Jesus on it, but an empty cross symbolizing Jesus' victory over the cross. Jesus isn't on the cross, he has risen from the grave and lives and reigns in glory.)

I have told you before about the silver cross I wear around my neck.

When Rachel and I left the seminary and began our drive west to Rachel's first call in Arkansas, we stopped by the office of the best man at our wedding, my friend Jeff Kellam. At 45-years-old, Jeff was practically elderly. I was 25 and I respected Jeff's work as a teacher and minister, as a radio producer and conference speaker.

He gave me a small box in which I found this small cross on a chain.

He told me that he hoped this cross would "remind me who you are and whose you are." He said there would be days as a young minister when I'd need to be reminded. There were days and weeks and seasons when I might forget who I was and whose I was and what it is I was called to do.

Don't forget, he said.

Be encouraged. You're in good hands. Don't forget who is holding you. Don't forget why you are doing this. Don't forget who you are. Don't forget whose you are.

I take this cross off only for medical Xrays and surgeries. (And conjugal relations with my wife.) Otherwise, I never take the cross off my neck.

The cross brings the church together.

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PART FOUR (Big Turn #Three):

There's not a lot of coming together these days in our world. Many things divide us, and the divides (there are many) seem to be getting deeper and more jagged.

Notice how we as a nation seem to be keeping our distance. We keep each other at a distance.

It's like we keep each other away with a Ten Foot Pole. (I've shared this story with you before.) Politics, race, language, culture, even sports affinity divide us, and we keep those who think differently than us away, as if by some ten-foot pole.

This is what Jesus thinks of our Ten Foot Poles. (BREAK the pole, TAPE it into the form of a cross, Put a stole on it)

This is what Jesus thinks of our Ten Foot Poles:

18 Christ died once for our sins.
An innocent person died
for those who are guilty.
Christ did this
to bring you to God,
when his body
was put to death (on a cross)
and his spirit
was made alive.

Forever.

AMEN.

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1. ^[1] According to Richard Rohr, "[t]hese theories are based on retributive justice rather than the restorative justice that the prophets and Jesus taught." OFM, Fr Richard Rohr (January 21, 2018). "[At-One-Ment, Not Atonement](#)". Center for Action and Contemplation. Retrieved May 30, 2023.