

**Sermon Preached March 30, 2014**  
**Year A, Lent 4**  
**St. John's Episcopal Church**  
**Beverly Farms, Massachusetts**  
**The Rev. Stephanie Chase Bradbury**

Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, Oh Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

A blind man and his guide dog enter a bar and find their way to a barstool. After ordering a drink, and sitting there for a while, the blind guy yells to the bartender, "Hey, you wanna hear a blonde joke?" The bar immediately becomes absolutely quiet. In a husky, deep voice, the woman next to him says, "Before you tell that joke, you should know something. The bartender is blonde, the bouncer is blonde, and I'm a 6' tall, 200 lb. blonde with a black belt in karate. What's more, the woman sitting next to me is blonde and she's a weight lifter. The lady to your right is a blonde, and she's a wrestler. Think about it seriously, Mister. You still wanna tell that joke?" "Nah, I guess not," the blind guy says, "not if I'm gonna have to explain it five times."

But imagine the poor man in our gospel story! He was born blind and had no one to heal him. That is, until he met Jesus. He could see for the first time in his life! One of the unusual points to this story is that after the healing, the disciples ask Jesus whether the man's blindness was caused by his sin or his parents'. They make a connection between sin and sickness. The really amazing thing is, Jesus' response doesn't refute this. He says that the answer is neither, it was for another reason entirely, but he doesn't discount that they asked a

logical question. For Jesus and his disciples there can be a connection between sin and sickness.

Today is the third in my preaching series on the atonement and we are going to look at the “Healing View” of atonement. Atonement is a fancy word meaning “reconciliation.” In other words, what was it that Jesus did in his life, death, and resurrection that reconciled us to God? How did Jesus atone for our sins? Many of us have been taught only one model, or hear of only one model, and assume that there is only one way to look at what Jesus did on the cross, but the truth is, there are dozens of models out there. Some are better than others. I am having us look at some of the most prominent.

Two weeks ago we looked at the Christus Victor model, the primary view for the first 1,000 years of Western Christianity. In this view humanity is good, but the world is under the control of Satan. Some more modern views would simply say that we are under control of evil. We have free will, but are often tempted to do wrong. This is sin and we and all creation are held in bondage to this evil. This evil which traps us is the root cause of everything from corrupt governments, pollution, poverty, and broken relationships. There is a cosmic battle going on between good and evil. Because God loves us, he wants to free us from evil, so he sends Jesus to help us.

Jesus does two things: 1) His life models what actions in the Kingdom of God look like. He shows us how to oppose evil with good. 2) By his death and resurrection he takes our sins on himself and tricks the devil, causing our sin to die with him, while he himself rises again, conquering evil.

Last week we looked at the Penal Substitution model, which is the model most people in the West think is the only model that exists. It was popular for the next 900 years, but is currently losing ground because of its many flaws. It is a very legalistic view and not one I advocate. This model says all humanity is basically evil and sinful. This separates us from God, who is deeply angry with us. God needs to judge us and the punishment for sin is death. God cannot forgive us because our debt to God, our sin, is too great. So in his love God sends his son to die on a cross on our behalf, therefore taking our punishment on himself and setting us free to be in right relationship with God.

The atonement theory we're exploring this morning will move us from Western Christianity to Eastern Christianity. This model is found in the Eastern Orthodox churches and is known as the "Healing Model." The East never followed the Christus Victor or Penal Substitution models, but had their own separate understanding from the beginning. It is a model that has been going strong for 2,000 years in the churches of the Middle East and Asia. This model doesn't look at the issues of good and evil so much as sickness and wholeness. In this model, our sin, our disobedience to God and our own best interests, cause us and our world to be sick. Oppression, poverty, and injustice are signs of how sick our world is. But God created us and the world to live in "Shalom", wholeness, completeness. Salvation isn't just about our spiritual life, but our physical life as well. They are connected. This is not to say that all sickness is caused by sin. My failing eyesight is just what happens with age. But rather that sin has consequences, and some of those consequences may include physical

illness. If we smoke, if we don't treat our body like the Temple scripture says it is, it is likely we will get lung cancer.

There is also a connection between people. When one person sins, we all suffer for it. Sin creates a toxic atmosphere which has consequences in the community. Sin is not a private event. Sin is a poison which infects us and all around us.

There is a story from the radio humorist Garrison Keillor which illustrates this well. "He told a story about a man considering adultery, who contemplated how one act of betrayal can unbalance an entire community: 'I saw that we all depend on each other. I saw that although I thought my sins could be secret, that they would be no more secret than an earthquake. All these houses and all these families, my infidelity will somehow shake them. It will pollute the drinking water. It will make noxious gases come out of the ventilators in the elementary school.

When we scream in senseless anger, blocks away a little girl we do not know spills a bowl of gravy all over a white tablecloth.'"<sup>1</sup> Sin causes sickness for us and others, which manifests itself in spiritual and physical ways.

So Jesus came as the great physician, to heal us of this sickness. He didn't come to pay a debt, or to take a punishment on our behalf. God is not angry with us. God is worried about us. "The penalty of sin is not a debt we owe the Father; it is the soul-death that is the immediate and inevitable consequence of sin. We need healing and rescue, not someone to

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<sup>1</sup> Copyright © 1989-2009, Frederica Mathewes-Green. All rights reserved.  
<http://www.frederica.com/writings/sin-infection-or-infraction.html>

step in and square the bill. The early Christians always saw the Father pursuing and loving every sinner, doing everything to bring us back, not waiting with arms folded for a debt to be paid. When the Prodigal Son came home, the Father didn't say, 'I'd love to take you back, but who's going to pay this Visa bill?'"<sup>2</sup>

This model stands in stark contrast to the Penal Substitution model. The world is out of whack because of our sin. So salvation in this model means healing from our sickness: body, mind, and spirit. In fact, in Greek the word for salvation can also be translated as "to heal." Christ saves us from sickness, death, demons, and sin. Sin is the root of all the others. It is about restoring wholeness. This is one reason Eucharist, communion, is so important in Orthodox churches. Jesus is taken into our bodies through the bread and wine. Our physical selves, not just our spiritual selves, participate in salvation. In Jesus we are made whole. We participate in this healing whenever we turn to God and repent of our sins. Her arms are always open.

There is an important holiday in the Jewish calendar called the Day of Atonement. Like Lent, it is a day of fasting and prayer, to confess our sins, and to ask for God's forgiveness. In ancient Israel, it was the practice to bring a goat in the Temple in Jerusalem. The priests would lay a hand on the goat and then name all the sins of the community. In the meantime, the people would kneel and say aloud all their own personal sins. This caused these communal and personal sins to be transferred to the goat. The goat was then released to the wilderness to die, taking their sins with it. This is where we get the expression, a "scapegoat." In the healing model Jesus as physician takes on our sin, our sickness, on him, like the goat. But rather than having to do it year after year, it is done once for all.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

Imagine someone out in the wilderness being bitten by a poisonous snake on their leg. A healer would need to suck the venom out of the leg by his mouth and then spit it out. The only way to get rid of the sickness is for the physician to take the poison in himself, to risk his own life for the other. This is what Jesus did. He took on all our sins, all our venom, and he healed us. But sin is strong poison and it caused him to die. God doesn't kill Jesus to pay a debt. Our sin kills Jesus, which he takes on to heal us. God brings him back. The sin dies, but Jesus lives.

In the healing model humanity is not evil, nor is God angry with us. Quite the contrary, we are deeply loved, but very sick. And God, desiring our healing, sends Jesus to save us and the world. Like it says in Isaiah 53:5, "But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed." Through the work of Jesus, we are now restored to shalom with God, ourselves, and our community. We are made whole. Amen.