

November 14<sup>th</sup>, 2021

## Hebrews 10:11-25 “Making Up for Mistakes”

Last month we visited the book of Hebrews to ask the question, “What does it mean for Jesus to be our high priest, and how do we as the church live out our call to be the priesthood of all believers?” This week the lectionary gave me the option of re-visiting Hebrews and I said, “Sure, why not?” See, I’ve been having a lot of fun with this unintentional, “If you want to start a lively discussion in church” theme. So far, we’ve covered, “talk about how God does or does not answer prayer,” and “bring up the subject of life after death.” Now some of you who know how my brain works might’ve thought, “Oh come on. These are wimpy topics Jesse ... when are you going to tackle something that’s *really* provocative?” Fine. You want to start an *exceedingly* lively discussion in church? You want to start a discussion that *really* gets people talking? Bring up the subject of what Jesus’ death on the cross means. Yeah? You want to play ball now? Fine. Batter up. Let’s visit the book of Hebrews again and talk about atonement.

What is atonement? The simplest definition for atonement I think is “Making up for mistakes.” “Making amends” is a term that’s often used in the 12-step program. I like that one too. Restitution is another word that comes to mind. For quite a while in Bible study we’ve been talking about the Jewish temple and the importance of sacrifice. The problem is, it’s easy to characterize the Jewish religion as being obsessed with sin and atonement. What the Jewish sacrificial system looks like at a glance is: You break the law; you’re in trouble; you go to the temple; you make the required sacrifice to appease God; then you’re okay again. Now, if that’s the only way you can get your head wrapped around what sacrifice meant in the Jewish temple, then you’re going to look at the book of Hebrews and say, “Okay, that must mean that Jesus’ death on the cross was meant to be a human sacrifice on our behalf to appease God’s wrath.” And don’t feel bad about coming to that conclusion either because in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, Catholic theologian Anselm of

Canterbury advocated for that interpretation too. He called it the “ontological argument” and all of a sudden, the church had an official doctrine of atonement to work with. Here’s where it falls apart though. Part of Anselm’s argument assumes that Jesus was also God and before we know it, we’ve tied ourselves up in knots trying to explain why Jesus’ sacrifice was even necessary if it means God sacrificed God’s self because God was angry.

You know, I talk a lot about how my early dabbling in the Christian faith was so great because of the rice krispy treats I earned for memorizing scripture ... but those rice krispy treats disappeared quickly when I went to VBS or Sunday School and started saying things like, “Wait a minute ... now what?” That’s when I learned the phrase, “Sit down, shut up and have more faith.” Thank God for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) who welcomed my questions and gave me the tools to discover answers that would actually *increase* my faith in God.

So ... what is the book of Hebrews trying to do here? Especially in this section that Mary just read. If we’re going to answer that question, we’ve got to re-visit the Jewish sacrificial system. The first thing we’ve got to acknowledge is that it wasn’t all about making up for sin. Were there sin offerings? Of course. But there were also thanksgiving offerings, food offerings, purification offerings and others that had nothing to do with sin or guilt or getting out of trouble by appeasing anyone’s wrath. We humans have been gifted with a sense of self-preservation that has contributed to our survival for hundreds of thousands of years. It’s literally written in our DNA. It’s a part of our “lizard brain” that helps us avoid dangerous and potentially life-threatening situations. If we did not have this sense of self-preservation, we would not have survived this long. But our sense of self-preservation has, unfortunately, become a part of our understanding of God and how we even relate to God. And it has led us to entertain such questions as, “How much do I have to give up to get God to let me off scot-free for all the bad stuff I’ve done and fully intend to keep on doing?” It’s like a weird life insurance scheme, or maybe a fire insurance scheme. And I

believe there have always been people who approach the Jewish sacrificial system this way, even back when it originated. And we Christians aren't immune to this either.

Ask someone who *isn't* a Christian about what they think the central message of Christianity is, and most will say, "It's all about dealing with sin and forgiveness." Ask someone who *is* a Christian what they think the central message of Christianity is, and you'll find plenty of folks who will say the same thing. They believe that the good news of Jesus Christ is *only* about Jesus' life, death, and resurrection having no other meaning than to atone for our sin and that all God asks of you is to declare your belief so that you can be forgiven. Or else. And if that *is* an accurate summary of what God is most concerned with, then maybe it is true that Christianity is narrowly obsessed with sin and atonement for sin. But is it? This is where the book of Hebrews comes in handy.

The Book of Hebrews is named after it's intended audience which are the followers of Christ steeped in Hebrew tradition. And in order to explain God's identity, the writer uses language and concepts that are familiar to that audience. And because sacrifice and offering *is* a central part of Jewish tradition, that's what the author uses to help this audience figure out what God is doing and to how it relates to Jesus' death on the cross. The game changer for me that finally helped me understand what the Book of Hebrews was all about was when Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crosson came along to helpfully explain that sacrifice was never about the death of what was being offered. It was about the gift given by the one making the sacrifice in order to maintain the relationship between God and humanity. When you look at it this way, we can move away from this bloodthirsty yet popular view of Jesus' death.

Does Hebrews address the issue of sin and atonement? Yes it does. No doubt there. This book gives the reader a detailed series of comparisons between the old Jewish priests with *their* work of offering sacrifices to atone for sins, and Jesus with *his* priestly work offering the one perfect

sacrifice for sin. Over and over the author says that compared to the old priests, Jesus is much better qualified for the job and that his access to God is more direct. That's what we talked about last month. Because Jesus is the better high priest, the effects of his atoning work as a high priest are more permanent and all-inclusive. Everything the author says about Jesus relates to how effectively he can deal with sin, guilt and indebtedness as our high priest.

The whole buildup in the book of Hebrews was designed to remove any lingering doubts that there might still be sins that haven't been dealt with that are going to be suddenly recalled and used to sentence us to eternity weeping, wailing and gnashing of teeth. As priest, Jesus has done such a perfect job of dealing with the problem of sin that there is no possible way that anything you've done could have slipped through the net. If you've entrusted the job of high priest to Jesus, then you can be absolutely one hundred percent sure that it is done, completed and perfected. So put it all behind you and get a life! And not just any life – *the* life. The writer of Hebrews urges us to go for it and to make every attempt to live out our faith to its fullest. The Book of Hebrews encourages us to try to come up with more and more creative ways of stirring one another up and to love more in word and action. So if you're really looking for a quick little summary of the good news of Jesus Christ, this is where the emphasis falls: The good news is about what Jesus has set us free *for*, not what Jesus has set us free *from*. Sin was just an obstacle that had to be removed so that we could approach God with confidence and live the life of love and joy and peace that we were created for. The life we are set free to live is the *real* good news. The writer is telling us that we don't need to go on and on about sin and atonement every time we get together. We don't need to keep making offerings to try to make up for our mistakes. It's done. It's finished — we can forget all that and get on with a life that is marked by love put into action.

Now that being the case, it would be a perfectly fair question to ask why we include prayers of confession in our worship. If Hebrews is telling

us that we don't need to keep doing that over and over again, why do we do it? The reason we include confession is not because we still need to be put right with God or because we are worried that we still might not have said sorry enough to persuade God to forgive us. We do it for quite different reasons.

One of the reasons we do it is because forgiveness is part of what we are expressing our gratitude for. We might already know that we can walk confidently into the presence of God, but do we remember that that this is a gift from God? Did we deserve this gift? No. Could we earn it? Of course not. But we were created in the image of God, which means we were created with the capacity to live a life of grace and mercy. The reason we have prayers of confession ... the reason we observe Lenten season is because God has generously given this gift to us. Our gratitude needs context or it doesn't make sense, which is the reason we include it in our worship. This is where our gratitude is given context, especially when we come to the Lord's table. When we come to the Lord's table, we are sharing the story of Jesus' sacrifice. And that story shapes the way we approach God. In other traditions, the Lord's Table is called the Eucharist which literally means, to give thanks.

And in our church, we act out this story every week because on any given Sunday there may be someone here who has not understood this story and this may be the first opportunity they've been given to get caught up in the story and experience the freedom of being forgiven in and through Jesus Christ which then sets us free to get a life. Our forgiveness is not under threat – the freedom 'from' is still there, but that freedom 'for' needs to be embraced again and again. We gather here each week and in confession remind ourselves of where we have come from and celebrate the freedom we have found in Christ. If you want a quick way to sum up the Book of Hebrews, here it is: "Stop worrying about forgiveness and move on to living a life of forgiveness." And if you want an even shorter summary of Hebrews try this: The theme of Hebrews is, "get a life!"