

Church of the Savior-Episcopal
Orange City, Iowa
Dr. Donald Wacome, Lay Preaching
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The Ransom

The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many. MARK 10.45

To what can we compare the Kingdom of God? It's the last class of the term. The students have just taken their last quiz. Some have done well but many have struggled. The professor instructs the class: "Now everyone put a 100% on your quiz and hand it in." As she collects the quizzes from the grateful students, she asks, "*What about the students who aren't here, should we give them 100's too?*" There's an outcry "*No! Not fair!*" but it fades away. The professor is as wise as she is gracious. One of the questions called for the definition of a Hebrew term, *chesed*, the "lovingkindness" of God.

To what can we compare the Kingdom of God? It's early in the morning. Suddenly, you are being awakened. What's happened? What's the emergency? "*You've just won the Nobel Prize!*" You think you must be dreaming. "*The Nobel Prize? Me? What for?*"

To what can we compare the Kingdom of God? You're at O'Hare Airport. The anxieties and annoyances of delayed flights and missed meetings circle endlessly in your mind, like the plane you're waiting for. You go into a public restroom. There across the mirror with felt tip pen someone has written in large red letters, "*Judas, come home, all is forgiven!*"

Again and again in the Gospels Jesus tells us and shows us what the kingdom of God is like: a lost sheep, a lost coin, loaves and fishes, a mustard seed...God's grace breaking in upon us, at once joyous and offensive, inverting the world, disrupting our certainties and insulting our proprieties, deleting all the spreadsheets on which we have so scrupulously recorded who deserves what, simply saying "*Yes!*" to one and all.

And this all somehow depends on Jesus. He does not just announce that the rule of God is at last at hand. It's here *because* he is here, because of who he is and what he does. His life, death, and resurrection bring God's kingdom from future hope into present reality. But how? To ask the question whose very obviousness makes it hard to ask: *What did Jesus do?* The authorities put Jesus to death so we are saved. Jesus is condemned, so we are forgiven. Jesus is resurrected, so we live. *Why? What's the connection?*

It's remarkable that over the centuries the Christian Church found it necessary to formulate confessions about the nature of God—the doctrine of the Trinity—and about the nature of Jesus—the Incarnation—but it never fixed on an answer to the question: *What was Jesus for?* Of course, what the Church says about the Trinity and the Incarnation are not *explanations*. They don't give us *understanding* of these things. Those formulae—"Three persons in one God," "Fully human and fully God," "*Homousia* not *homoiousia!*" —don't *explain* a thing; they simply establish ways to *proclaim* the good news not obviously absurd, contrary to Scripture, or at odds with the practice and experience of the faithful. But when it comes to the very core of Christian faith, the meaning of Jesus' life and death, the purpose of his cross, we have not even gone that far. Here, the main Christian tradition has drawn back from the mystery of God's love for us. And perhaps rightly so, for here more than anywhere else one suspects that, as Leonard Cohen sang, Jesus sinks beneath our wisdom like a stone. I think of a New Yorker cartoon: Two

scientists ponder a blackboard covered with arcane equations. Beside them a dog goofily looks up at the board. One scientist says to the other, “*Dogs are so cute when they try to understand quantum mechanics!*” There’s no guarantee that we can comprehend what Jesus did, what his life, death and resurrection means within the life of God, and for God’s relation to the world. Maybe we should stick to what Jesus himself says and hope for just a bit of insight.

But it’s also remarkable how little Jesus says to explain himself. Leading up to today’s text in Mark, Jesus on three occasions (8.31, 9.30-31, 10.33-34) has warned his friends and followers that he is going to be arrested and killed, but that he will rise from death. The disciples are strangely obtuse, unable, or maybe unwilling, to grasp what Jesus plainly says. What Jesus doesn’t do is explain. He says almost nothing about the point of the suffering and death he foretells. So the words at the close of today’s lesson stand out: Jesus says he came to give his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10.45). That’s why he is going to die: he will be a ransom.

“A ransom.” Mark’s Greek term is *lutron* (λύτρον); literally “to loosen, to untie.” Thus to ransom someone: to give what it takes to get him untied and set free. I have it on good authority that this term bears strong connotations of the Jewish sacrificial system, which, when Jesus says this, is still going full tilt in the Temple in Jerusalem. Jesus is thinking about his impending death at the hands of the authorities in the context of the ancient practice of making sacrifices to God. (By the way, our English word “ransom” derives via Old French from the Latin word *redemption*, to buy back.)

Jesus gives his life to redeem us, to ransom us, but *from whom?* As I said, the Church at large has been reticent about coming up with an “official,” creedal account of why and how Jesus saves, and on the whole this is probably good, but a downside is that this theologically empty

space can get filled with things that are false and potentially destructive, things that make the good news sound like bad news, things that make people crazy. One big bad idea, one I—and maybe some of you—grew up with, is that it's *God* from whom we need to be saved...that *God needs* to punish us but doesn't *want* to punish us and doesn't punish us because Jesus is punished in our place, but this works only if we ask God to accept Jesus as substituting for us. The traditional way to work this out is to describe *justice* and *love* as two distinct motivations within God: in the sacrificial death of Jesus God's love found a way to redeem us while still satisfying divine justice. God loves you so much that he won't torture you forever if you trust Jesus.

This seems profoundly mistaken. The God of Christian faith is our savior. Period. Not the God who saves us from...*God*. There are a lot of things from which we need to be saved but God is not one of them. There is no daylight between God's justice and God's love: God's justice—the righteousness of YHWH—is precisely his faithfulness to his covenant, his commitment to his creatures, as wayward as they may be. There is no conflict between God's justice and God's love. There cannot be, for “*God is love*;” the everlasting communion of Father, Son, and Spirit is rock bottom reality, where no principle competes with love. God's justice emphatically is not the justice of the human heart, the insistent demand that everyone get what they deserve. Indeed, the cross where Jewish piety and Roman law puts the innocent Jesus to death is where God reveals the futility of all human allegiance to justice.

Is there an alternative? If Jesus doesn't give his life to appease a God who demands that *someone* pay, a God who needs the cosmic account books to balance, then what did he do? It is not easy for us, at our historical and cultural remove, to understand what Jesus and other first century Jews would have taken for granted about the sacrificial ransom. No modern scholar has fully figured out everything that was going on in the Old Testament sacrificial system, but one

idea about the meaning of the sacrifice of animals is crucial. When an individual sins, he cuts himself off from God and from the community of God's people. God is the source of life, so the sinner, one who has reneged on the covenant with God, has lost his life. He has acted in a way that makes shared life impossible. He is "dead" to God and everyone else. But God restores the dead to life. God takes the life (which is in the blood) of the sacrificial animal and gives it to the sinner. God forgives the sinner and restores him to fellowship. Sacrificing the animal is not a way to give God something in exchange for what we need. It's God giving us what we need, something we can't possibly come up with on our own.

This sharply contrasts with what everyone else in the ancient world was doing as they sacrificed to their gods. My assumption is that in inventing the Jewish sacrificial scheme God condescends to, and ultimately subverts, the deep religious impulses of human beings, hijacking them for his own purposes. In a world where everyone is constantly trying to pay off and placate imaginary gods, the one real God teaches some people to do something that looks very similar, but which is in reality the exact opposite. The true God is not to be placated, appeased, bought off: the true God loves and gives life; he does not take it.

Still, vivid as those sacrifices must have been—the sprinkled blood, the burning flesh—they were provisional, always *showing* that God's aim is permanently to restore lost humanity to life with God, but not effectively *doing* it for keeps. After all, the life doesn't really transfer from the sacrificial lamb to the human being who sacrifices it. That's mythological. What can God do to make something really happen?

A few weeks ago, Karen, Mike Kugler, and I went to Beth Shalom synagogue in Sioux City for *Yom Kippur*, the "Day of Atonement." The service is very moving, and for a mere gentile,

grafted onto God's people by grace, humbling. The ancient prayers (some exquisitely sung by Linell Moss, a cantor there) in which we call upon God for mercy go on at length. The truth is that after an hour or so of imploring God for forgiveness, I became keenly aware of the absence of any response from God, some good news that God has acted in a decisive way to reconcile the world to himself, and that we are left with more than the hope—or maybe just the wish—that this year we'll do better, and maybe please God. The audacious Christian claim, of course, is that God has so acted. Jesus gave his life as a ransom for all and this does not just *show* us what God is like, but he really gives us God's life, not in some metaphorical way but in reality.

We go further with this by bringing in the rest of our lesson. Jesus has just spoken more explicitly than ever about what awaits him:

They were on the road, going up to Jerusalem...He took the twelve aside again and began to tell them what was to happen to him, saying, 'See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again.'
(Mark 10.32-34)

The disciples' appalling response is to get into an argument about who will have the top jobs when Jesus ushers in the new administration. Peter and James try an end run around the others and try to get Jesus to promise them the prestigious places at his side when he comes into power. They are so focused on the glory they think lies ahead that Jesus' words about humiliation, suffering, and death haven't registered. This elicits a rebuke:

Among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. (10.42b-44)

For Jesus himself came not to be served but to serve. God himself is with us, not as powerful ruler but suffering servant, not to demand sacrifice but to be sacrificed, to give himself and, in

doing so, to invite us into the life of God. Here we see what the old sacrifices pointed to, the God who defeats our expectations, giving where a god is supposed to take, offering life just where a god is supposed to demand death. We see God's own life of love in the flesh, here on earth, saints and sinners, insiders and outcasts, those on the left and those on the right, invited willy-nilly to the table. What Jesus told his ever obtuse disciples then is what he tells us now: we are bound with fatal attraction to power over others and to whatever else we imagine makes us safe and free, but Jesus, the first born of many servants, offers his life to unbind us, to ransom us free to love and free to serve, called

to share in the very life of God.

Amen.