



October 23, 2011

Sermon by Rev. Nancy Talbot

“The Jesus that Didn't Die for My Sins”

Readings: Mark 12: 28-34; Mark 8: 27-29a)

Meet the Jesus of my childhood. (image of Jesus standing at the door knocking.) Any day of the week I could be sure to find him hanging on the wall of the ladies' parlour in Trinity United Church in Ingersoll Ontario in his 5 x 4 ft frame.

What I knew about this Jesus was that he loved me and he loved all the little children of the world. Red or yellow, black or white we were precious in his sight. I knew he wanted me to shine for him like a clear, pure, light and to be a sunbeam for him. And I knew that I was a bright jewel in his crown. At least that's what all the songs of my childhood taught me.

And maybe because I was raised in the United Church I don't ever remember singing about him dying for my sins as a child. That's something I learned about much later.

I'm not exactly sure when it happened, but I'm fairly certain it was around my 13th birthday. That was when I and other early teens in the church met with the minister in confirmation class (as we called it in those days) to prepare to receive our first communion. I can remember my minister going on (and on) in a rather monotone voice about blood and sacrifice, forgiveness and sin. I'm sure I didn't understand a word of what he saying, but I knew I wanted to join the church with my friends and so I'm grateful there was never any big exam to test my knowledge.

And yet just a few years later when I became involved with a more conservative element of the church, I became convinced that believing that Jesus had died for my sins was the most important part of what made me a Christian.

It would be many more years before I intellectually understood what that statement really meant. But I don't think I have ever understood the concept of Jesus dying for my sins at a heart or at a deep knowing level, not ever. It just doesn't make sense to me

And I know I'm not alone in that. Often when I am leading groups where we are discussing theology, Christianity, what it means to be part of a church I'll ask the question “Why did Jesus die?” Like Pavlov's dog people respond “He died to save us from our sins. That's what we're supposed to believe in isn't it?”

When I ask people what they think that actually means they usually start to fumble their words as if they are searching for the right answer to the test. Rarely do the responses come an integrated sense of belief.

Even Jesus in today's first reading questions this sacrificial way of understanding him when he affirms that loving god, our neighbour and ourselves is more important than any burnt offering or sacrifice.

So just where did this idea come from?

The practice of making sacrifices in the temple to atone for one's sin, to repair one's wrongs, was a common one for Jews in the time of the historical Jesus. (let's not forget that Jesus himself was Jewish) I once read that during the week of Passover, which was the week in which Jesus was executed, a Roman census accounted for 250,000 lambs being sacrificed in the city of Jerusalem. That's not to mention birds, goats and other animals that would have been laid on the altar that week.

The practice is a very ancient one. Rene Girard who is one of the foremost scholars on religion and sacrifice says that the practice is rooted in the awareness in early communities that when violence resulted in someone being killed, the death would cause a temporary halt to further violence. Bruce Sanguin calls this a "holy hush." Everybody would get control of themselves at least for the time being. Noticing this early tribes began to ritually re-enact this by making regular human sacrifices.

But when the early Hebrew community began to take shape at some point they decided to turn away from the practice of sacrificing humans and they turned towards the sacrificing of animals instead. I'd like to think this was due to an evolution in their consciousness.

Over time the explicit connection between sacrificing and controlling violence, or causing a "holy hush," became forgotten and instead these sacrifices became associated with purification, pleasing god and atoning for people's sin. It wasn't until about 30 years after Jesus' death that the practice of sacrificing animals in the temple finally came to an end.

So it's understandable that Jesus death would get associated with the notion of him being a sacrifice for our sins, the lamb of God.

Yet this was not a popular understanding of Jesus' death for the early church. In fact it was around 1,000 years after Jesus' death that the theory was first articulated by Anselm archbishop of Canterbury. It is not, according to Marcus Borg, a New Testament understanding of Jesus' death.

And yet this has become the common way of understanding why Jesus died.

The irony of this is that some believe it was the action of Jesus overturning the tables of the moneychangers and the vendors selling animals for sacrifice in the temple that led to his crucifixion. This suggests Jesus was not just against the way the poor were being gouged by the temple system of charging more money for larger sacrifices or the way the temple leaders were in the back pocket of the Romans. He was against the entire notion of any kind of sacrificial violence towards humans or animals.

The last thing he would have done then would have been to give himself as a sacrifice in that way.

Jesus did not die for our sins so that we could be personally saved from the lies we told last night or the income we failed to report to the government. Jesus died because he opposed the political and social system of domination of his day. He was executed in part because he was a pacifist, because he refused to play by the rules of the Roman Empire which sought after peace through violence.

And when he forgave the perpetrators of his suffering, he gave us a new strategy for ending the cycle of violence in our world. (A strategy that has yet to take hold)

His invitation to us I think is not so much to believe in him or perhaps even to be saved by him but rather to believe or to follow in his way: a way of non-violent resistance to anything in the world that is oppressive or maliciously harmful or unjust; a way of unboundaried love and loving wastefully; a way of dying to self-interest and self-preoccupation and embracing self-giving; a way that leads to wholeness and to healing not only to individuals but to all creation.

In a metaphorical way of speaking we might say that when we choose not to follow this way whether we call it the Jesus way or not, justice and love continues to be denied, continues to die, continues to be crucified.

Dominique Crossan says that to speak of Jesus' sacrifice is really to speak of the way he made his life sacred by giving his life for what he believed in. It's how we make our lives sacred too, by living fully and by loving what God loves.

So Jesus was and still is a revolutionary who still wins causes and who is still put to death until his spirit rises once again.

Jesus is all of this and he is so much more.

My own deepest encounters with Jesus came almost 10 years ago now. Over the course of 40 days in silence I was led in a process whereby I prayed through the biblical stories of Jesus life. In my mind's eye I imagined that I held him at his birth; walked beside him along the seashore as he invited the most unlikely characters to join his cause; I sat with him at table as he broke bread and passed it even with those who would betray him; watched him go to his death surrounded by hatred and betrayal without raising a hand or uttering a threat; I tended his broken body as it was lifted down from the cross with a deep awareness of the wounds I and we continue to inflict on one another in our world. I met him in the garden with Mary and with the disciples behind closed door and then again on the hillside when he commissioned them and me to walk in his footsteps and deliver his message.

Somewhere in those 40 days I experienced the presence of one whose love for me was so radically inclusive that I knew that no matter what anyone else ever thought about me I would also know that I was loved and that I was called to love others with the same kind of love. Somewhere in there I was empowered to be who I was made to be even if I fall short of that more often than not. Somewhere along the line I embraced a conviction to follow in his way of nonviolent opposition to injustice even though I spend much of my time on the sidelines of that way.

There have been other times in my life when I have come to know Jesus, the one who didn't die for my sins, as the great healer, at other times as a teacher of wisdom, still other times as a prophet.

He has been for me all of these things and much more.

For me he is a figure of history, a living presence of unconditional love and forgiveness and a cosmic power of boundless possibility and rebirth.

Through scholars such as Marcus Borg I have come to learn that there are many ways to experience his “salvation” meaning to be healed or to be made whole. I have come to learn that there is precious little in the bible that Jesus is quoted as saying that he likely actually did say. I have come to appreciate through engaging writers such as Tom Harpur that there may have never been an actual man named Jesus who walked the face of the earth and that he could be almost if not entirely a mythical construct. Even that makes him no less real to me.

I have come to know that for Christians Jesus is a window into the heart of the Divine, a primary way for us to know God. Like God, Jesus, The Christ can be experienced and known in many, many, many different ways. Which is perhaps why Jesus asks the question “Who do you say that I am?”