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Sermon
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Park Congregational Church
Worcester, Massachusetts

“In What Sense Was Christ’s Life a Ransom?”

Scripture Text: Mark 10:35-45

Dear people of God, there is the story about Cyrus, the founder of the ancient Persian Empire, who once captured a prince and his family. When they came before him, the emperor asked the prisoner, “What will you give me if I release you?” “Half of my wealth,” was his reply. “And if I release your children?” “Everything I possess.” “And if I release your wife?” The prince responded, “Your Majesty, I will give myself.” Cyrus was so moved by the devotion of this prince to his wife that he freed all of them.

My sermon this morning is a bit more theological than usual, but it deals with an issue that all of us as Christians must try to answer. In what sense was Christ’s life a ransom? In order to answer this question, we must look at his death. Why did Christ die? What did he hope to accomplish by his death? Why did he choose to go to the cross rather than to minister for a full lifetime?

What makes answering the question so difficult is that Jesus himself rarely comments upon his death as a redemptive event. Although he did refer in several places quite emphatically about his death, especially towards the close of his life, only on two occasions did he explain the purpose of his death, our Sermon Lesson this morning and on the occasion of his instituting Holy Communion.

All Christians believe in some way that Christ’s death resulted in an atonement,

that is, a reconciliation of God and humanity. The apostle Paul talks a great deal about the meaning of Christ's death and the atonement that he brought about for us. But it's also important to hear what Jesus himself says about his impending death. After all, he alone could fully experience what it meant to die for sinners. And though even Jesus might not have fully comprehended how his death could bring about the salvation of human beings and reconcile them to God, certainly we need to hear what he intended to do by going to the cross. After all, the atonement was not a mistake. Jesus had something definite in mind by giving his life as a ransom for the salvation of humans. We should not think that the apostle Paul was the one who came up with the idea of the atonement and that he invented Christianity, as some scholars today believe. Paul makes it very clear in his First Letter to the Corinthians that he was passing on to them as of primary importance what he in turn had been taught to be the Christian faith (1 Corinthians 15:3). Even though the Gospels, including the Gospel of Mark, were all written after the apostle Paul's letters, we should not think that the Gospel writers all carried back into the mind of Jesus the later doctrine of the great apostle.

To help us to answer this question about how Jesus's death was a ransom for many, we need to understand the historical context of this whole discussion. It is almost incidental that Jesus talks about his death as a ransom in our Sermon Lesson. He brings up the subject of the atonement not to begin a long discourse on it, but rather, as an illustration of quite a different subject, namely, the self-sacrificing service which should characterize the life of his followers in the kingdom of God. This again would be evidence that the writer is not trying to import the apostle Paul's

doctrine of the atonement into the teaching of Jesus. For if that were the case, then he would have had Jesus enter a lengthy explanation of the theological meaning of going to the cross. But the writer doesn't do that. The proof of this is that the disciples still do not comprehend what Jesus is saying. Jesus talks about his death in three places in this Gospel, today's passage being the third and final time. And in all three places, the disciples are dumbfounded. They don't believe it. That's why on Good Friday, the disciples all scatter. It's not only because of their fear of the Romans and the Jewish religious leaders who collaborated to put Jesus to death. It's also because of their incomprehensibility that this horrendous event happened. In a very real sense, the disciples were all in shock. They didn't expect this tragic ending to their Lord and master. In their defense, Jesus didn't make it unmistakably clear to them. That's why it's not clear to us today either. The author of the Gospel of Mark, indeed the authors of the other three Gospels also, do not outline for us in a systematic way the doctrine of the atonement and the meaning of the crucifixion.

Though this passage speaks of Christ's atoning death, it's also intended to place before the disciples an example to be followed. But what exactly is it that they are supposed to follow? Are they too supposed to die on crosses? I don't think so, though we know from church history that Peter in fact was crucified, upside down. The reason I say that we are not supposed to follow Jesus by also giving up our lives to crucifixion is because our death in that way would not be received by God in the same way that God received Jesus's death. We cannot atone for our sins. I don't care who you are: Mother Teresa, Francis of Assisi, even Mary, the Mother of Jesus. Their being crucified could not atone for their sins. Only a perfect human being's death would

have been accepted by God as a satisfactory sacrifice. And that could only mean the death of the Son of God, Jesus Christ. Jesus's life--and death--was unique in this way and not to be imitated. Our death would not be accepted by God as a ransom, and so, neither would our life be so accepted.

Nevertheless Jesus's followers are supposed to follow or imitate him in some regard. That's quite clear in this passage. What might that entail? As we read in the apostle Paul's letters that Jesus emptied himself and became poor when he was rich, so the reference in our passage this morning is to a certain kind of self-denial, a self-sacrifice, a self-humiliation that we are to try to copy.

I should remark at this time that when the so-called "Ransom Theory" of the atonement was first systematically articulated by Origen, a leading church father of the third century, it was understood to be a ransom to the devil. Origen believed that Christ's work was directed primarily to Satan, not to God or to humans. He believed that Christ was sent to earth in order to gain victory over the devil, sin, and death. Satan had gained a just claim on humanity in light of Adam's act of disobedience. The death of Christ was a ransom paid to Satan to cancel the just claims that Satan possessed against fallen humanity. Christ annuls these rights of Satan by offering himself as a ransom on our behalf through his being crucified, dying, and descending into hell. Satan was deceived, however, in this transaction. Thinking he could hold the sinless soul of Christ, he discovered that it was a torture, and so, he had to release his ransom. Thus Christ won a victory over Satan by his being raised from the dead by God, and released his captives, that is, all those who had previously died, leaving Satan empty-handed. As you can see, this theory of the atonement is quite

speculative and goes well beyond what the Bible actually teaches. It also lacks contemporary relevance, since few among us believe in a personal devil or Satan anymore. It also fails because the idea of Jesus directing the atonement of humans toward Satan doesn't shed much light on our continued experience of evil, sin, and suffering in the world. Even if Satan is a personal superbeing of evil, why does he or it need to be appeased and how would Jesus's life fulfill the conditions of that appeasement? More questions than answers are satisfied with this view of Jesus's life as a ransom to Satan, and so, that's a good indication that we're on the wrong track going in this direction.

Could Jesus's ransom then be directed toward God? How would God be pacified by Jesus's death? Here again, we run into difficulties. Does human sinfulness withhold the honor that God deserves such that God demands satisfaction? And what constitutes this satisfaction? Punishment of sinners? A sinless substitute offered as a sacrifice to appease God's wrath? The most prominent interpretation of what was going on at the cross is in fact this latter view. Because our sins separate us from God by offending God which prompts the divine wrath to be poured out upon all humans, Jesus, a perfectly sinless human being, was willing to be our substitute on the cross, dying in our place, thus paying for our sins--hence the idea of ransom--which satisfies God's sense of justice, who thereby accepts Christ's ransom and grants salvation to all for whom Christ died and who subsequently believe upon Jesus's atoning sacrifice and accept him as Lord and Savior.

Those are some heavy theological concepts, so I'll repeat that sentence. Because our sins separate us from God by offending God which prompts the divine

wrath to be poured out upon all humans, Jesus, a perfectly sinless human being, was willing to be our substitute on the cross, dying in our place, thus paying for our sins--hence the idea of ransom—which satisfies God’s sense of justice, who thereby accepts Christ’s ransom and grants salvation to all for whom Christ died and who subsequently believe upon Jesus’s atoning sacrifice and accept him as Lord and Savior.

Though this is the most popular view of the atonement today, especially among evangelical and conservative Protestants today, I’m not sure that this view is on the right track either. Is Christ’s death on the cross aimed at appeasing a wrathful, vengeful God who demands nothing short of the death of the sinner?

Or is the atonement primarily directed toward human beings? Who needs to be moved by Christ’s passion and suffering, God or us? Who needs to change in light of Christ’s dying on the cross, God or us? In order for redemption to be accomplished, who needs to appreciate more what Christ did on the cross, God or us?

Each of you must answer these questions for yourself. I can only help to guide you with the answer that makes the most sense to you. But I think you can see how important it is to come up with an answer. These questions and answers comprise life and death issues, Christ’s and our own.

Though there was something absolutely unrepeatable in the manner in which our Lord made the sacrifice of his life, it powerfully impacted others. Christ gave his life as a ransom in exchange for the lives of others. He died for their benefit. This was the transaction that took place on Calvary hill in 30 AD. Jesus gave himself as a ransom to buy our freedom, to give us an abundant life, and to grant us eternal salvation. Thanks be to God. Amen.