

## The Lamb of God

As many of you know, I did my seminary training with the Roman Catholics. When it came time for ordination to the Episcopal priesthood, Bishop Chang, in his wisdom, sent me to an Episcopal seminary so I could get dipped in Anglican theology. Sort of like the bronzing we used to do with our babies first shoes.

So off I went to Sewanee, Tennessee. The deepest of the deep south. I made good use of my "English to Tennessee" dictionary so I could understand what the locals were saying!

While there, I took a course on the Atonement. The atonement asks: What does it mean when we call Jesus the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world? What did John the Baptist mean when he said it in this morning's gospel? What does it mean to you, to me?

Many people have grown up believing that it means this: People sinned, causing God to get mad. God needed a sacrifice to get over being mad, but since the sin of humanity is so huge, no human sacrifice can cut it. So God sent the Son to be the sacrifice. Christ dies a brutal death, God is satisfied, and we are saved.

Does that sound sort of familiar to you?

If not in the details, then in the general sense of it all?

That way of thinking has been around for about 900 years, since around 1100 AD when a church father gave this as an explanation for what it means to say: "Jesus is the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."

It leads to a rather bizarre picture of God though, doesn't it? A God who can't get over being mad unless a sacrifice is made? And not just any sacrifice, but his own son? The same God who stopped Abraham from sacrificing Isaac now demands the blood of his own son?

It points to a God who is frightening and to a God who is stuck. Stuck in anger. Stuck in rules that require a ghastly death by crucifixion. In the

eyes of some people, it makes God a monster, a monster in need of a sacrifice.

But there is another way to understand “Jesus the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” It is much older than 900 years; it goes back to the earliest followers of Jesus. It is this.

Rather than an angry God who, in order to forgive sins, requires sacrifice; we are invited to come and see the God of Jesus himself. You know that God. He is the God who loves his enemies. The God who is kind to the unjust as well as the just. The God whose power is found in weakness.

This way of coming and seeing Jesus as the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world has its challenges for many folks. A God who forgives, who embraces the worst of us, the worst in us, who is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked, well, that just sounds insulting to many folks.

Many people want and expect a God who rewards the good, and punishes the bad; who vindicates his people and eliminates his opponents. But in Jesus, God shows us that these ideas of God are our ideas, and we have been wrong.

When God determined to become one of us, the sacrificial monster waiting for this offering was not God, it was us.

It wasn't God yelling: “Crucify him!” It was the crowd. It wasn't God calculating that one should die rather than the whole nation: it was the religious leaders making that calculation. We priests did that. It wasn't God who sneered at him and gambled for his clothes, human beings did that.

As Pogo famously said: “We have met the enemy, and he is us.”

Perhaps then, the meaning of Jesus as the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, needs to be reconsidered, and instead of skewering God as the one responsible for Jesus' death, what we are invited to come

and see is that God will not let our “no,” to his love, to his reality, to his open hand, be the last word.

Instead, by remaining faithful in the very midst of abandonment, of torture and of execution; Jesus opens our eyes to the Way of God: a Way so different from what we expect, so different from what we practice, so different from what we think we want.

To be a follower of Jesus is to come and see that “there is no pain, no humiliation, no distress, no hunger, no temptation, no suffering which God has not known and borne for humankind in Jesus Christ. God has borne even death itself on behalf of humankind, and in that event, God has broken the power of death once and for all.” Stringfellow.

That lesson requires a lifetime of learning, a lifetime of training; so that we may come to welcome the truth that strips away our old notions of God; strips them away to the bone.

Be patient if you have a hard time with this. Even John the Baptist couldn't swallow it all. Did you hear it in the lesson? He watches as two of his disciples leave him to follow Jesus. John himself doesn't follow. John himself can't follow.

For John, God is ready to wipe out all evil, all sinners. John sees the world divided into wheat and chaff; and the chaff is in big trouble!

For John, the judgment of God looks a lot like what the fundamentalists promote: some are in, the rest are out, and woe to those who are out. It will not be a pretty sight when God's judgment comes rumbling through.

So perhaps John can't follow Jesus, because John has trouble swallowing the truth Jesus brings.

For Jesus, God's judgment is not the end, it is the beginning. Penance is not a fire that consumes but a fire that purifies; it doesn't destroy, it redeems.

Jesus brings the judgment of God into our lives today. It is like one, curled up on her couch, staring through a window, watching as the

needs of the world are played out, only to have the light shift, and the window becomes a mirror, and she sees the truth about herself; and in that seeing, is met with the unexpected and unmerited gift of God's grace.

Here is the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. He comes among us not to satisfy an angry God; but from the God who, out of overwhelming love, is even willing to die for you, for me.

As we behold the lamb, nailed to the tree, the monster within us slinks away. As we come and see that love is stronger than hate; that compassion trumps judgment; that forgiveness defeats revenge, we slowly learn that it is not sacrifice, but a broken and contrite heart, which is pleasing to God.

"It should have been me up there, it should have been you, but it was not. It was him, the great High Priest [given for us, given over to us]. Behold the lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world."

Rutledge.

+amen

