

The Reverend Mike Riggins

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.Atonement

Psalm 32
Romans 5:12-19

Life is a balancing act. Almost every morning I go online to check our expenses and account balances. Families with children in the home often balance jobs, studies, sports, dance, Scouts, chores, caring for pets, etc., etc., etc., and—somehow—sleep. As Christians, one of our trickier balancing acts is figuring out how sorry to be for our sins. On the one hand, we disobey God and ought to hold ourselves accountable for it. On the other hand, Jesus has already paid the price for our sins. We know we ought to feel grateful for that, but how much thanksgiving ought we add to our sorrow?

The Apostle Paul wrote what we call the book of Romans as a letter to the churches in that city. It might have been the last thing he wrote that got included in the New Testament. Various evidence in it points to authorship between 54 and 58 A.D., which dates it to about twenty years after Jesus walked this earth. By that time Paul had spent years traveling around the eastern Mediterranean world, walking into cities where he knew not a soul and preaching the Gospel. He had been imprisoned, beaten and scorned for his faith in Jesus as the Messiah. Trained as a Pharisee, a rabbi, he had adopted the radical idea that his Jewish faith had been completed by Jesus, whom he saw as the fulfillment of the prophecies of Isaiah, Zechariah and the rest of the Old Testament canon. Romans, in other words, represents the mature

thinking of a seasoned evangelist.

And what does the seasoned Paul write about? Romans is complex.

Commentator Everett Harrison writes, “The thought in this passage (Romans 5:12-19) outruns the structural capacity of language.” Yet paradoxically, we can summarize it in one word: *atonement*. Jesus has atoned for our sins, Paul, maintains. Our verses weave in and out, but they find clarity in Romans 5:18: “Then as one man’s trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man’s act of righteousness led to acquittal and life for all.” Adam, one man who in Paul’s mind stood for all humanity, sinned. Thus, all humanity sins. One man’s trespass serves as an illustration that we all sin. Therefore, we are all condemned by the law of God. Consideration of that law occupies a great deal of Romans. Now that Christ has come, what place does that law occupy in the lives of the people of God?

John Calvin found three uses of the law. (And first, we need to stipulate that for Paul and Calvin, “the law” means the Old Testament, especially those parts of it that contain rules for living.) First, the law serves as a mirror. It gives us insight into our own behavior. Second, the law restrains us from acting as badly as we would without its guidance. Third, the law reveals God’s will for our lives. Note that none of these uses of the law involves our salvation. For Paul and Calvin, our salvation comes from the atoning work of Jesus Christ. He is the *other* man, the “one man (whose) act of righteousness leads to acquittal and life for all.” And to what act of righteousness does Paul refer? To Christ’s death on the cross. This unbelievably generous sacrifice made

it possible for, “grace (to) reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.” Jesus restored us into relationship with God by paying the price we owed—death—for our disobedience, our sin.

The old children's moment on atonement puts dividers between the first T and the O, and then between the first E and the M, thus producing at, one, and ment. Jesus has made us at one with himself, with God. He has atoned for our sins and reconnected us with our Creator. By so doing, he has also modeled for us the method by which we can restore all sorts of relationships. Whether a troubled marriage, a former friendship, a strained situation with a work colleague—all of them can find healing through atonement. And this kind of atonement does not require death. Not literally. It does require that we put any arrogance or anger or other cause of estrangement to death. True atonement relies on true repentance, that we be genuinely sorry for our part in harming our relationships. But when we repent and atone we perform acts of real grace. And we can even effect this process vicariously, for people we know and love who struggle in other relationships.

Linda and I go to read to Kristin Darke's 1st grade class once a month. Last Friday we read a book about a perfect square that keeps getting cut up, or crumpled, or otherwise mangled; but which always finds a way to build something out of the mess. After we finished, three different children told us about friendships lost. One little girl told of a supposed friend who, the last time she saw her before moving to another school, told her she hated her. Tears came into her eyes. Silence followed.

And then the little girl next to her gave her a hug. That gracious act did not take away the pain. It did convey love and the hope of having other, better friends.

What a friend we have in Jesus! His gracious sacrifice on the cross offers us the opportunity to enter into relationship with himself. Through this one man, Paul tells us, we all have that chance. And all we have to do is let him, as it were, hug us. Jesus atoned. We're saved. Thanks be to God. In closing, allow me to share a half-formed vision I have for this church. We are all squares, but none of us are perfect squares. We've been crumpled, torn, mangled. Yet so long as we remain in relationship with Jesus and with each other, we can build something beautiful. And we do not really have to do anything new and different to accomplish it. We already have a healthy fellowship, composed of dozens of caring duads and triads. And from this positive foundation we accomplish a great deal in ministry. As the Book of Order says, we "maintain worship", we present worship services in a traditional style and with quality. We support a wide range of missions, near and far. We sponsor an active youth program and offer our children teachers, prayer partners and role models.

My vision is that we expand what we are already doing. That we reach out to those who have once participated with us but have now fallen away. That we invite folks who have never come here before. That we continue to use our energy, imagination and love to sustain our current fellowship. This is a good church. I want to see more and more people blessed by and through it. Jesus set the table through his atoning sacrifice. Let more and more of us gather at that table.