

Sermon - October 11, 2009

Limited Atonement:

All-Guilty and Forgiven. Some-At One with God. Calvin Says the Bible Says
Isaiah 53, John 17

Just a brief personal note – I'd rather be preaching next Sunday's Sermon than this Sunday's. The last two Sundays we looked at the first of two of five key Biblical Teachings that help to outline the thinking of John Calvin, the great religious thinker of the 16th Century, one of the leaders of the Reformation and one of the parents of the Presbyterian Church. And next Sunday we will look at the last two main points in John Calvin's understanding of the Christian faith. First we looked at Total Depravity, and then Unearned Election, and next week we will consider Irresistible Grace and Perseverance of the Saints - those who believe in Christ will not lose their faith.

Total Depravity - yes, we pretty well understand that. Unearned Election – loved by God not because of our loveliness but God's love. Yes. Irresistible Grace – Yes. Forever children of God – Yes.

But what about this week and Limited Atonement. What about the idea, the Bible's message, Calvin said, that Jesus Christ came and lived and suffered and died on a cross, was buried and rose again to cover our sins with his sinless suffering, but that in God's plan some but not all accept God's gift to be at one with God.

Not everyone, only some, will believe in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. Not everyone, but only some will want to know God's will, and will want to walk in God's way, and so, only some will be At One with God forever?

How to preach this hard message – even though, deep down, I wonder, don't you wonder, too, why it is – for all God's goodness in creation and in Christ, why everyone doesn't want to be blessed by God's grace and a part of God's community.

And Calvin says, the Bible says, some – but not all. God calls some, but not all.

And even though, from what I see it makes some sense, some of God's folk truly seem to be at one with God – and some don't. Still its hard to preach that some will be at one with God and some will not - unless - unless – there is the rest of the story.

Please pray with me.

Lord, we cannot say – say it isn't so – because we know, we know, some are at one with you by faith, and some are not. May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of these your people, give us wisdom to better know your will for us this day in Christ. Amen.

Surely he has born our sins, and by his bruises we are healed....the righteous one shall make many righteous.

I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their words - that they may all be one.

A savior died for us. And - some are chosen. Some are not. And yet... and yet... Sinners all - Christ died for all. To cancel our sin. But many, not all are made righteous. Christ prays for the righteous - and - aha - and - for those who will believe in God because of what the righteous do.

Calvin's right. A limited at- one- ment with God - only those who believe know such closeness to God. But that's not the end of the story.

Let me try to describe this Atonement stuff with an analogy.

What's the safest place to spend your time?

In your car? No. 20% of all accidents happen in cars.

At home - snug as a bug in a rug. No. 19% of accidents happen there.

Traveling - No - 16% of accidents happen then.

Walking / jogging - No - 14% happen there.

And of the 33% left - 32% die in hospitals - not a safe place to be.

But - that 1% of accidents - where do they happen? Where - in the Church. It's the safest of all places to be. Well done in your choice this morning.

And you can only do better by attending a Bible Study - no body dies there.

Whatever it was that gave you faith that led you to believe in Jesus Christ and to follow him.

Whatever that force was, it has led you to the safest place in the world to be - the place you can be the closest you can be to heaven.

And - its pretty obvious - because not everyone is in church this morning - even a few Presbyterians are missing, its pretty obvious that not every one has yet been saved, chosen, led to be at one with God.

But we know the safest place to which to guide people.

God made it possible by a cross, for us to cross over and cross out the gap between us.... A sinless God and us sinful folk. And some, a limited number, have, by faith, crossed over.

And it would appear - by the signs around us and by the way we've seen the way this world works,. It would appear that those who've found this safe place called Church, have both a special At One Ment with God - and - have a mission, a witness to take on.

Clearly Jesus spoke of his disciples and early followers as people God had given him, given him to teach and lead and empower to be his witnesses to the truth of God's amazing grace and love.

And clearly, Jesus says it, those disciples, and we their descendents, are to help others know the wonder of God's love for them, and God's call for them to be At One.

Do I understand this mystery and the means by which it all works? Not at all. Do I sense its truth and am I willing to trust it. Yes.

It feels right. Because I do feel at times like the Apostle Paul felt. The good that I would do, I do not. The kindness I wish were more often on my tongue and part of what I do each day. The selflessness I know would make the world a better place to live - if I, and all of us, shared more of what we have and used less of what there is.

And the evil I would not - I do. The harsh words I use, the grudges I carry, the envy I feel. I can't get past my feelings.

Like a golfer, in spite of my best intent, I find myself in sand traps and three putting. O wretched person that I am - who will save me? Paul said. And I say. And Paul said, Thanks be to God. And so do I. God covers my sin - his cross crosses it out.

And yes, the truth of the old poem that touches on how frail we are - Our little systems have their day, they have their day and cease to be, they are but broken lights of Thee, and thou O Lord, art more than they.

In my sin, and in my illness and aging, in my dying, and yours, we are more than conquerors - how? Through Jesus Christ our savior.

Separated from the Good, from God, I cannot be good. I cannot cross over from this sinful life. But - in Jesus Christ, by his cross and his resurrection I see and know God who crossed over for me and who says to me and to you, simply follow him.

And here is this daunting, demanding, difficult but doable task and charge we've been given as followers of Jesus Christ - Live so others who see you will see in you, through your lives, God's love for them.

Our sins covered - at one with God in Christ - we are empowered to bring good news.

And - The astounding truth is that no one is born a Christian. And so the Christian faith needs to begin all over again in the life of every new person born. And the truth is - there is no limit on how many may be touched by the witness of our words and our works.

In our recent evangelism class on sharing our faith, Dick Mudge challenged us to be witnesses. In a simple way - when you are eating out - take time to pray – and more – take time to invite your wait staff to share and prayer concerns.

And one of the members of the class did just that. And to her surprise the wait staff poured out some deep and painful concern and asked for prayer with tears and words of thanks.

At One with God in Christ, we can extend the call, the touch of God, beyond the limit of our own Atonement.

In the strange wonder of our world, and God at work in it, Atonement, at one ment with God, is a 3step process:

- 1.) All of us are guilty. And in Christ all are forgiven.
- 2.) Some are called by God in Christ into a new relationship – an at one ment - with God. Some.
- 3.) And those at one with God, those who've found safety in the Church, are called by God in Christ, to share their story, to share the Good news!

And wonder of wonders, it keeps on happening. Prayers at a restaurant. And - Year after year after year, the Church of Jesus Christ keeps on being reinvented as new disciples share their faith and touch new lives with God's call, with the promise of at one ment.

And in this way, the promise, the wonder of God's grace, goes beyond any limits - reaching toward the day when all will be one in the wonder of God's love.

But this day - this day – celebrate the grace by which you have been called into this safe place – into an at a one ment with God - that is yours for a promise, and for you to share. Amen.

David Robertson, Pastor