

**“Tulip = Total Depravity, Unconditional Election,  
Limited Atonement, Irresistible Grace,  
Perseverance of the Saints”**

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This passage from John 3:14-21 talks and eludes to the atonement of God. God “atoning” for our sins. I kind of like the phrase instead of “atonement” - which I have always struggled with - I like “at-one-ment,” with God. We become one with God in that act of the cross, somehow. It’s trying to figure out what that means - why the cross and how the cross symbolizes unity and oneness with God - that is the hard part to figure out.

Now, when I was in confirmation class up in Minnesota I had an associate pastor (I guess he was an assistant pastor at that time), and he was tough. He was going to show us kids what we needed to learn and, boy, we memorized parts of the shorter catechism. I tell you, if you are a Westminster person here and you are going through confirmation, you are so lucky. Those of us who are older - we *suffered*. We had to memorize all of those passages of Scripture. I mean, OK, we had to go through and learn theological things, and one of them was, as you will notice from the sermon title today, was TULIP. (Now, that is not a flower that you get in Pella, you Dutch people. [Laugh]) TULIP was a theological thing that John Calvin made up: The “T” stands for Total Depravity; the “U” stands for Unconditional Election; the “L” stands for Limited Atonement; the “I” for Irresistible Grace; and, the “P” for Perseverance of the Saints. And, we had to repeat all of that individually, in front of the Elders. Horrible stuff. [It’s] amazing that I ever went back. [Laughter.] So be thankful, you confirmands.

But, in a weird sort of way, it kind of helped as I went through school and was a religion major, and then went to seminary, to figure out what part of that I really appreciated, and what was a bunch of hokey that I didn’t really care about. Part of it was trying to figure out what the cross means to me – because, for most of us, we found the crucifixion and the concept of Jesus’ death as having [representing] two things: One, it frees us from our sins and [two] it gives us a free ticket into Heaven. Hee-haw, we are there.

But, it should be more than that. Parts of this cross - this crucifixion - really bothers me because, why should we have to sacrifice Jesus in order to appease an angry God, so that the rest of us can get a place in Heaven? That just doesn’t quite feel right. I have always struggled with that and I think that, in some ways, we have missed the theological understanding about why that happened.

I even liked what Beth [this Sunday’s liturgist] read a whole lot better in the Old Testament where the staff was lifted up. They were in the wilderness. They were being bit by snakes and they put together this symbol (which became the symbol for the American Medical Association, by the way). And you lifted that up, and when you got bit you looked at that snake mounted up there - American Medical Association - and you were healed. Hence, [that’s] why it’s the symbol for the American Medical Association, but also, you were saved from death. That’s why when Jesus hung on that cross. They remembered that passage and they said, we can look up at that cross, and, in the same way, we were freed from certain death to life. The same thing could happen on that cross.

Then we took it to this kind of difficult place, because once you used that as your illustration then you are stuck with this whole expanding idea of - well, something had to happen - well, Jesus must have been put up there for a reason - well, it must have been that Jesus was the atoning sacrifice.

Now you remember, we have, thank goodness, a communion table. We do not have an "altar." Every time somebody calls this [pointing to the communion table] an altar, I cringe. This is a communion table. An altar is a place where things are sacrificed to God. For at least Presbyterians and for people who had to follow the TULIP theology, we have a communion table, because we do not continue to sacrifice Jesus when we take communion. That was done.

Now, we *remember* the act of Jesus sacrifice, the breaking of his body and the shedding of his blood - and that is what we share on a communion table, the same way Jesus did on a table with the 12 apostles at the Last Supper. It is about a supper, not a sacrifice.

I can understand why many people would have an altar, because in the Old Testament they sacrificed animals. You had cattle, you had dogs, you had lambs, you had everything sacrificed on this altar. I tell you what, you don't see many pictures painted about this, because it was mess. It was like a Tyson butcher shop going on at the Temple - because you had all of these animals and there was blood everywhere. I mean, I don't want to get into it anymore, because it was gross what happened at the Temple, with all of the sacrifices on the altar.

So, many Christians thought Jesus must have been the last sacrifice that was done on the cross. But for us, we remember that event - but for some Christians, they fall on an altar because every time the words of institution are used, every time the bread is broken and the blood is poured into the cup, Jesus is *re*-sacrificed - over and over and over again. So, you have that emphasis of needing to sacrifice Jesus again for our sins. Thankfully, at least in my opinion, we don't go there. We don't have to. Jesus doesn't need to be *re*-sacrificed and so for some they are misunderstanding, or we are.

And that reminds me of a story about Boy Scouts. I don't know if any of you guys were Boy Scouts, but I was for about a minute and a half. I wasn't good enough to stay in. But there is a story about three boy scouts who were kind of naughty. They didn't do a very good job. On their way to the Boy Scout meeting, they realized they hadn't done any good deeds this week; because the first thing the scout master asked them at every meeting was, "Tell me about your good deeds." So, this week they had to improvise, so that when they got to the meeting they realized they had done a good deed. And, sure enough, the scout master said, "Boys, what was your good deed?" The one boy said, "I walked an old lady across the street." And, the other boy said, "I walked an old lady across the street." And, the third boy said, "I walked an old lady across the street." The scout master kind of chuckled and said, "Well, did all three of you walk the same lady across the street?" And they go, "Yeah." [Laughter.] And, the scout master said, "Well, boys, I do not think all three of you were needed to walk that old lady across the street." And, the boys said, "Oh yes!" And the scout master asked, "Why?" And the boys said, "Well, because she really didn't want to go." [Laughter.] The boys understood that they needed to do good deeds, but they got messed up on what was a good deed in that moment.

We get confused about what the cross means to us. I don't think that what was intended was that God expected blood, and so we needed to slap someone on a cross in order to free us from bondage and sin; or even worse, that we had to slap someone on a cross and let them bleed to death, so that we could appease an angry God.

I think that kind of theology that we've kind of taken for granted so that we can get ourselves into Heaven, has created an environment for a whole lot of people who are beginning to ask some of the same questions I'm asking, and they have found the Church to be in contempt of brutality; in contempt of wanting to worship an angry, vengeful God who wants blood - and I don't think that's what God intended at all.

I think the cross happened, just like snakes happen in the wilderness, and then God responds by turning something horrendous into something powerfully meaningful. That is all I can come up with.

While being reconciled to God and being invited into Heaven is important, it is not the whole story.

So, let's talk for a moment about what that whole story might just be. The cross had a horrific, horrific history and, ironically, or in some sort of weird way, the cross did for the Romans kind of what it is trying to do for us: The Romans used that cross beautifully. It was extremely effective. They figured out unlike any others: The Roman's weren't the first to use a crucifix - the crucifixion cross - but they used it and figured out how to use it amazingly.

They could keep a person alive on that cross for days. It was easy to kill someone, but to torture them for a long period of time - now, that took skill. So, they would do that, in order to put the fear of the gods into anybody who would misbehave. It allowed them to keep control and to retain power. And they would place their crosses on the most traveled roads in and out of any major city, so that everyone else would know, and fear, and behave, and do whatever the Romans wanted. That was their way of keeping society faithful. I mean, it wasn't all bad. It kept laws intact. It protected people against bad people. There were any number of reasons why people could affirm the crucifixion. That's why it was able to go on for so long, and yet, they couldn't see the brutality that was right in front of their eyes. It took someone like Jesus to turn that horrible, horrific thing around and make it a symbol for transformation rather than death.

Now, one of my favorite authors (and he has a ton of books, so you can go anywhere - Barnes and Noble or where ever else to find them) is N. T. Wright. He writes amazing theological things in reasonably understandable ways. He believes that the crucifixion for Jesus was actually a revolution - that more was done, not just to save people from their sins and give them a ticket into Heaven, but it was a revolution that would take place - and we have missed those passages that talk about the revolution.

We forget, for example, that what actually happens is not that we get a ticket into Heaven, but that God creates a new Heaven and a new earth. In Revelation 21:1, it says that *behold I have made a new Heaven and a new earth; for the first Heaven and first earth have passed away and the sea is no more. And I, John, see the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming*

*down out of Heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.* It is the new Heaven and the new earth that takes place. That is the revolution.

We are not trying to get away from the earth so that we get the free ticket into the good place. We make this place, God's creation, as good as the way human beings originally found it. We are making, or supposed to be making it anyway, into the recreated Garden of Eden, - where Heaven and earth collide and where both are Heaven. That is the experience that we look forward to. So, the cross' goal is not to a ticket into Heaven, but it is a call to a new vocation. We are called to make Heaven and earth one place. Rather than run away, we are here to rebuild. God took that fear of the cross and turned it into a vocation.

So, N. T. Wright calls the traditional understanding of atonement, where you get freed from your sins and get into Heaven, a works contract. He said, you follow the moral code to behave; you worship God; and, you get your ticket punched for Heaven. He said, I have never much liked that traditional doctrine of atonement. Think about what that says about God, as I have already said. He said, you need to behave, or God will kick you out of Heaven and into eternal damnation and hell. Is that the picture of God you really think is accurate for the Almighty One who is Divine love? If love must be earned is it really love at all? I would say, "No." As N. T. Wright puts it, "I'm suggesting," he said that, "in the Bible humans are created in order to live as worshiping stewards within God's Heavenly and earthly reality, rather than as beings by moral perfection qualified to leave earth and go to Heaven instead."

So, the new vocation God has in store for all of us, is to be part of the royal priesthood. That's biblical and brings about the new Heaven and the new earth.

Now, in Exodus 19:5-6, the people were rescued, and they will be his treasured possessions in the priestly kingdom or a Holy Nation. That was what was said: a priestly nation. That means every one of us in the nation, is priestly. You and I are all priests. Cared for, called by God, to take care of God's creation - this world. Now a royal priesthood is to guide people away from the world's idols - [to] call them to their priesthood, to walk with them in their ministry, and to bring the new Heaven and the new earth.

He said, the real sin isn't the moral code that we break, or the sins that we have, necessarily - like doing something naughty or wrong. The real sin is idolatry: worshiping the wrong thing. The way to overcome that is by going back and becoming priests anew. So, 2nd Corinthians agrees with this whole idea and has a deeper calling, not just in Revelation, where it talks about the new Heaven and the new earth. In 2nd Corinthians 5:18 it says that *God reconciled us to himself through the Messiah and gave us the ministry of reconciliation.* That ministry of reconciliation is the Royal Priesthood. You go again one verse later in verse 19, *God was reconciling the world to himself and the Messiah, not counting their trespasses against them, not worried about their sins and entrusting them with the message of reconciliation.* Priests shared the message, and that message of reconciliation is reconciling Heaven and earth as one, rather than thinking about this place as a place we have to flee from, now we're bringing Heaven to this place. Heaven isn't always just up, it is all around, and Paul is doing what Revelation is doing: celebrating the fact that Jesus' reconciling death freed all of us to take up our new vocation to be the Royal Priesthood.

Now, the death of Jesus launched that vocation, that revolution. It got rid of the road block between Divine promises and the nation's intent and opened the way for the Holy Spirit to be poured out and to equip the saints. Now, through the Holy Spirit - because of the cross - we are no longer bound by sin; but not to get us into Heaven necessarily, but we are freed from our sin through God's grace on the cross so that we can be priests; so that we can take up our crosses to transform this world.

Now that is a revolution. Everyone stepping up and moving, and powerfully making a difference in our world. You are fulfilling your call to Priesthood by simply sitting here and worshipping God today. You are a Priest for sitting here and worshipping God. It's what Priests do. You are fulfilling the call of the Priesthood by participating in Eliza's [child baptized today] baptism, because that is what we Priests do. It wasn't that I was the Priest for putting water on her head. That doesn't make any difference. What really mattered was that all of you said, "We do," and, "We will." You are making the promise to raise Eliza in the faith. You have promised to be Priests to her, and that fulfills what God and Christ called for in the cross.

You fulfilled the call when you opened God's Church - your Church - to Family Promise to care for the least of these. Every person who comes out of Family Promise begins homeless [and] ends with a house and a job - sees Heaven, instead of hell. And you brought that because of your Priesthood.

When we fulfill our call to teach the Scriptures to our children, and to our youth, and to each other, we fulfill our Priestly function. When we fulfill the call to participate in that Procession of Peace, and we walk so that all can see our commitment to Peace and God's Holy Name, we are Priests. And in many ways you participate in Westminster's ministry, you are fulfilling your royal Priesthood, and you fulfill what God intended when Christ died on that cross - not to just get a ticket into Heaven, but to bring Heaven to what God intended for this earth: to be the Garden of Eden.

Our work is not yet done. We have children to raise. We have people to care for and we have a God to honor. Let's continue our work in Jesus name. Amen