

Could everyone please take a deep breath, and let it out. No one here has an axe to grind. There is no competition. We are each just trying to do the very best we can to help one another. We need to give one another permission to be human! Most of those who have been in leadership here have served multiple terms on Session and multiple terms on Deacons and on Patio Sale, Stephen Ministry. Similar to how we respond to those who have served as Veterans of War, we need to find a means to sincerely express Thank you, and to empower and train others to lead after us, knowing there will be mistakes.

Last Sunday, after having gone over cues in advance of our worship of God, following a week of Holiday Sale, Reception of new members, preaching the sermon, knowing we still had the Sacrament of Communion, I took things out of order

What was wonderful was that no one crucified the pastor, when I did so!

Some were far more surprised, than I, that I am human. Some questioned how to get the appropriate musicians on the right benches. One of the trays of Communion was dropped on the floor, and many questioned: the elements are sealed in baggies, do we pick up the elements or leave the body of Christ? Everyone laughed in recognition of our humanity trying to do something sacred and holy. We have expectations of "perfection;" sometimes our expectations need to be questioned if they/we can be real.

One of our flock affirmed: "The Peace of Christ was shared; Sins were forgiven; Mission work celebrated; the Word of God was rightly read and preached as Good News; Communion was served to all; beautiful music filled our hearts with comfort." This from someone who worshipped, watching on-line at home.

Oddly while some question my skip of the 2<sup>nd</sup> hymn & Offertory, no one questioned skip of the offering!

Other Christian denominations and other religions are much more simple than the Presbyterian Church. We are the only church, the only religious institution of any kind, which has a Book of Discipline to make certain we are within the Theological Boundaries of the Church, but does not have a Book of Prayer. If we had a Book of Prayer we could simply follow the directions, recite the litany for that day, we could follow the Koran, but we do not. Instead, our community of faith describe: who we are and what we believe, and each believer needs to decide how we are Called to work together, what we can offer as our best to God at this time.

Throughout history Preachers have struggled with The Letter to the Hebrews, not because we are unclear who wrote this, or to which congregation, when; not because it is neither Gospel nor Epistle, but a sort of Sermon. No, the reason Preachers struggle with The Letter to the Hebrews is this emphasizes a Theology of Substitutionary Atonement, we are uncomfortable with explaining.

Solomon's Temple and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Temple at Jerusalem fit within an ancient Atonement theology. God is God the Creator of everything seen and unseen, Giver of Law, Maker of Kings, who with thunder & lightning was quite frightening in holy "otherness." People are people: human, we fall far short of the glory of God. Priests are of the bloodline of the Levites, descended from Moses' brother Aaron, Ordained by God, but human. Therefore Judaism of the Old Testament through the life of Jesus, revolved around humans regularly making sacrifice through the Priests at the Temple, to pay God for what happened in our lives.

Once while pledging a multimillion dollar Capital Campaign, a couple came saying that the evening before their dog had protected their grandchild from falling off a dock and drowning, so they were offering a significant pledge. One woman told me that she went to the Casinos each week and she tithed her winnings. You found the love of your life, you sacrificed a Ewe sheep. Your crops are to be harvested so you give a bushel of grain as offering. As demonstrated by Mary & Joseph, when a woman gave birth to her 1<sup>st</sup> born, the offering was to sacrifice 2 turtledoves. If this were carried through into the current era:

If you had a fight with your Spouse this week the required offering is \$100. A fight with your children \$50, your neighbor \$20. What is the Sacrifice for fearing if someone you trusted gave you COVID? Being a Veteran is a noble identity of Patriotism, but at times required the taking of a life; you found balance by making an offering to God.

But our sense of Offering has changed. Up until the 1940s, many congregations expected Rental of your Pew. Not such a wild idea in that everyone sits in the same place each week! But the Session took the Operating Budget and divided that by the number of persons or families, and you reserved your seat by paying your percentage of the Budget... Missions were considered a tithe of 10% on top of that.

So Why do we no longer practice an Atonement Theology? While the Gospels report the Birth of Jesus, his teachings and conversations, as well as his death and being resurrected, there comes a different awareness about the Scriptures when scholars tell us that the earliest of these The Gospel of Mark was written in the year 70 and published because at that time the Roman Empire had destroyed the temple at Jerusalem. If according to Judaism, we went to the Temple to make a sacrificial offering to atone for our sins, but the Temple was destroyed, how can our sins ever be atoned for? As there was no longer a Priesthood, Judaism shifted to Rabbis (Teachers) in a Synagogue (a Cultural community center and school) so how do we Confess our humanity and become at one with God?

The Letter to the Hebrews is a sermon to those who intimately know the Hebrew teachings and traditions, explaining that Priests, while learned and ordained are human; making offerings in Sanctuaries built with human hands, all of which is very tangible and earthy. However, the Good news of the Gospels preached at the very time the Temple was destroyed, declared that WE DO have a great High Priest, who was both fully human and fully God. This High Priest has made a sacrifice, as an offering for our sins, not with barley or turtle doves, or even an unblemished lamb, but sacrificing his own life, in perfect atonement for our sins. "Perfect" meaning that nothing was left out, it is complete, there is no need for repetition or ratification by any other.

Earlier we stated that Preachers struggle with The Letter to the Hebrews, in part because this names that we are human, which most preachers know all too well, but we do not like it written down as Scripture! Far more because this is describing an Offering so much more than what any Priest/Pastor can ever offer, Jesus' Sacrifice for our sins is thoroughly outside the control of even the most righteous among us. But as a Preacher we also love and revere this passage, because it describes better than any words we can offer what the love of Jesus, the love of God is all about. However, Preachers also agonize over this passage, because if Jesus has already offered this sacrifice for our atonement, what are we to do?

A few years ago a woman shared with me she had inherited from her Great Uncle a suitcase filled with large linen diagrams. Her Great Uncle had been a Missionary in India, and for the walls of his Evangelism tent meetings, he had drawn out Humanity's fall from Grace, first with Adam, then over and over throughout human history, as well as how Jesus atoned for our sins to sit at the right hand of God. This missionary had hand-drawn and painted each of 180 scenes, complete with paintings of Solomon's temple drawn from the descriptions in the Scriptures. The woman had taken these to "The Antiques Road Show" when they lived in Texas, and the appraisers had said, "These 180 panels represent a life's work, they attempt to describe the fall of humanity and the grace of God. How could we ever put a value on this!"

I was Ordained and began in pastoral ministry about the same time this congregation began. My first call had been to a small church in suburban Milwaukee. At my first Session Meeting, the treasurer presented me with a grocery bag, filled with unpaid bills, and on top was the checkbook which not only had no balance, there were no checks. She had her expectations of where this church was going.

Another Elder at the same Session meeting was the Chairperson of the Building and Grounds Committee,

a woman in her 80s. She asked a question, and she asked it repeatedly with differing emphases:

“HAVE YOU looked at our church lately?”

“Have you LOOKED AT our church lately?”

“Have you looked at OUR CHURCH lately?”

“Have you looked at our church LATELY?”

What she was asking was for us all to question our expectations and what we are willing to do about our relationship to God and to one another.

God does not expect us to expect PERFECTION in one another, only to hope for our best and to forgive as we are forgiven, each and every day.