

Mayflower Community Congregational Church
 August 7, 2022
 Good Theology and Bad Summer Series
 Rev. Charlotte Frantz

It Began in the Garden
 Genesis 3:1-7 and Mark 10:42-45

Thank you for this invitation. . .

I don't know how young I was when I began to wrestle with theology, but according to my grandmother, I was pretty young. She and my grandfather lived in the Appalachian foothills where summers are hot and humid and where mosquitoes thrive. Every summer, I thought I was being eaten alive.

One evening I asked my grandmother whether there were mosquitos in the Garden of Eden. Her answer apparently didn't satisfy me, so I continued to think out loud. "Maybe there were," I mused. "And maybe they didn't bite." And then I continued, "Or maybe they bit Adam and Eve, but the bites just didn't itch so much." And then, "or maybe they bit, but Adam and Eve just didn't know they itched."

Thus, I began wrestling with the problem of pain and the meaning of salvation. According to my Sunday school teachers, the Garden of Eden was perfect. Nothing untoward would happen there. My 4- or 5-year-old mind was stymied. Surely there must have been mosquitos. Why was it that their bites inflicted no hurt or injury?

Little did I know that a quest to understand the presence of pain and ponder the meaning of salvation would wind itself through my Sunday school education, confirmation instruction, teenage angst, college courses in theology, and eventually a profession that has spanned more than forty-five years.

And—just in case you are wondering, I have not solved the riddle. But I have learned a few things along the way. I want to thank you, Mayflower, because for ten of those forty-some years, you gave me permission to ask questions, to think out loud, to experiment theologically, to reinterpret old paradigms and to learn with you.

I grew up in a conservative Christian home. I learned that the Bible was the inerrant word of God. I was taught that the Old Testament was precursor to the New. I learned that all of us human beings are sinful, from the very moment of our births. I was taught that salvation through Jesus Christ was central to Christian faith. I learned that such salvation was accomplished in Jesus' death on the cross and made available to me by the pure grace of God.

It is this theological view of sin and salvation, often called atonement theology, that I want to focus on today. It is a theological perspective for which there is Biblical basis, and that basis has been amplified by theological argument since the second century. It has shaped much of Catholicism. In the late nineteenth century and early twentieth, it dominated American Protestant theology. And, I believe, it is a theology with which, progressives still wrestle. In those moments when we hardly have words to express a theological stance, progressives know they aren't "that" kind of Christian.

I was never quite comfortable with this theology my parents taught and the church in which I grew up espoused. I asked more questions than my Sunday school teachers appreciated. I felt as if my confirmation vows were slightly fraudulent. Yet, in spite of my doubts, I never could quite let go of the church or faith.

I left home to attend a denominationally related college and ended up with a major in theology—only because my spiritual quest had garnered me more than enough credits to claim a major.

Close to the end of my college career, an epiphany of sorts finally dawned. I'd taken an Urban Immersion Course in Chicago. I'd spent a spring registering voters, black voters. I'd marched in protests of the Vietnam

war. I'd witnessed the television coverage of Martin Luther King's assassination. I felt as if the world was in the midst of moral upheaval—and I noticed something.

The same folks, the same church, who claimed John 3:16 as the Gospel in a nutshell offered no leadership in the midst of the turmoil. They spoke the words, "For God so loved the world. . ." Yet in the face of civil unrest, economic and racial injustice, militarization and immoral war, they had nothing to say. They exerted no leadership. They didn't want to talk about what was happening.

On a spring break trip home, this much became clear to me: If God so loved the world, then our faith should call us into that world. The world was obviously full of pain. It need salvation. The faith in which I had been raised seemed far more concerned with the fate of individual persons in some world beyond this world.

For me, that insight was a pivotal moment. I didn't recognize it at the time, but it was my first step in understanding that traditional atonement theology is not only inadequate, but downright harmful. And, it was for me, the first step in deconstructing a world view and reconstructing a faith that might offer hope and consolation, courage and grace, and yes, even some sort of salvation—for me and for the world.

I did not know where to get help in this reconstruction, I contemplated going to seminary—with no intention of entering the ministry. That possibility never penetrated my consciousness. I just wanted to figure out this theological puzzle that had inextricably attached itself to my heart. I wanted to do that within the context of the church and Biblical studies, which is why I chose a seminary rather than a graduate school of theology.

The rest—as they say—is history. Eden Theological seminary gave me a place to start. The United Church of Christ clearly demonstrated a faith-based engagement in the world. The congregation I served as a student trusted that I was called into ministry and loved me into answering that call—despite the vehement protests of my family and the communities in which I'd grown up. I found congregations like Mayflower, willing to help me learn and articulate and practice a more progressive Christian theology. Theological work is not just done by scholars and preachers, it is done in the context of congregational life. You do that work here, and I believe it is part of your congregation's ministry. As I look back over now more than 50 years in ministry, I think I have learned a few things:

- 1) Theology begins with our understandings about what happened in the Garden of Eden. Traditional atonement theology names that story as "The Fall." Sin enters the world. Evil ensnares the hearts of God's creatures. As punishment for choosing evil, human beings are exiled into life outside the Garden; a life that is difficult and full of pain. The stage is set for a mighty confrontation. The promise is made: someday God will win back the hearts of God's creation.

In a reconstructed theology, the Garden of Eden story is the story of humankind's growth into consciousness and the ability to make moral choices. There are consequences for those choices. Living outside of Eden is not punishment for wrongdoing, but a release into freedom and responsibility. The consequence of human choice most often leads to separation from the Creator and that separation is experienced in many ways.

Some years back, members of Mayflower produced a musical, *Eden Principles*, that offered this re-interpretation of Genesis 3. In the final scene, God sits, crafting warm clothes for the beloved creatures. It was a poignant scene—Nancy Grundahl, one of three of God's persona, was silhouetted on stage, quietly sewing. The verse is right there in Genesis 3:21, "God made garments of skin for the man and for his wife and clothed them." This is not an angry, punitive God. Even as creation is now free to exercise its own will, God remains present, provides protection, and years for the lost glory of Creation.

- 2) There is a cosmic consequence to what happened in the mythical garden. In traditional atonement theology, the consequence is sin. All human beings are born sinful and the cosmos itself is inevitably scarred by the presence of evil. The church has traditionally identified this as "original sin."

I am grateful to Matthew Fox who reconstructed this story with an emphasis on the original blessing—life itself. The consequence of the Garden is that human beings are born with some seemingly innate power for love and goodness. And though evil may often seem to gain an upper hand, the cosmos itself is marked by the presence of good and the power of hope. I love the baptismal liturgy that we used when I was here at Mayflower, because it explicitly names that original blessing in which all children are born.

- 3) Because humankind is blessed with freedom and moral choice, the world is full of contradiction, ambiguity, and yes, even sin. Martin Luther wrote that we are all of us, both saint and sinner. A much more recent Facebook post reads: “Every saint has a past and every sinner has a future.” In atonement theology salvation is often about rescuing individuals from this contradictory, ambiguous, evil environment or somehow purifying them as they live within it.

For some years, progressive theologian seemed hesitant to talk about sin and evil—I served a congregation where there was serious conversation about what to do with Jesus’ references to sin and evil in the Lord’s prayer. (After thoughtful discussion, we decided to keep them.)

I am now pondering our reckoning with generational trauma, inherited privilege, toxic environments and systemic injustice—are these reconstructed ways of acknowledging that there is a pervasive and persistent power at great odds with God’s yearning for good?

Salvation is not just a matter of rescuing individuals from these powers. Nor is it solely about transforming individual hearts. Nor is it primarily preparing for a never-ending existence in another realm.

Salvation must come for the entire cosmos. Salvation is about mitigating the effects of and finally defeating these powers affect all of us and the entire creation.

- 4) In traditional atonement theology, redemption, transformation, and never-ending life is intimately tied to Jesus’ crucifixion. The cross becomes the locus of a cosmic battle between good and evil, between God and Satan. It’s the struggle required by what happened in the Garden before the beginning of time. In some versions of the atonement, Jesus is the ransom Satan requires; when Jesus died, that ransom was paid. In giving up a part of Godself, God is able to reclaim all of humanity.

A reconstructed theology understands the cross somewhat differently. Jesus died, not because Satan required payment, but because the way Jesus lived so offended a particular political and religious coalition. If there was purpose in Jesus’ death, it was a demonstration of how utterly committed he was to radical love. He was not the ransom paid for guilty souls; he was the martyr who gave witness to a new way of life—even as he was threatened with execution.

Here's the rub, my friends. A great deal of theology and spiritual understandings are communicated in the arts, especially music. The kind of atonement theology that damages spirit, portrays us as guilty individuals, and lifts Jesus as the propitiatory sacrifice required by Satan is deeply embedded in our hymnody. Even folks who scarcely ever set foot in churches recognize the tunes and sometimes can sing the words of hymns written to promote this theology. I give thanks for Nancy Grundahl and Marty Haugen and Dana Blank and Bill Peterson and Mary Keepers and other Mayflower musicians who offer alternatives—but in the scope of American hymnody, we have a long way to go.

This may sound a bit heretical to some, but reconstructed theology also recognizes that salvation comes in many forms and not all of them require the story of Jesus’ crucifixion. The liberation of slaves from Egypt and the return of exiles from Babylon, the restoring of sight to blind Bartimeaus and the raising of Jairus’ daughter are all salvation stories.

- 5) Easter—all those triumphant hymns we love to sing—In a reconstructed theology, Easter isn’t so much about a victory over death as it is about the continuing presence of God. It is not that death is

finally defeated as if it were an alien force, but that God is present with us “in life, in death and beyond death,” as the United Church of Canada puts it. “Nothing can ever separate us from the love of God”; wrote Paul. That line he got right. The powers that be could not tolerate the radical love taught and demonstrated by Jesus of Nazareth. Even execution does not create a chasm between humankind and the loving One who so carefully sewed garments just outside the gates of Eden.

- 6) Finally, the word sacrifice often signals atonement theology, as in “Jesus was sacrificed for our sin.” Sacrifice is so much a part of atonement theology that it gets read in where it is not explicitly stated. That favorite gospel text, John 3:16, has been so identified with this theology, that the words, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son” almost invariably conjures up for casual readers an understanding that God gave up—as some sort of sacrifice—the one named as God’s Son. Giving does not necessarily imply this kind of sacrifice.

In a reconstructed theology, sacrifice denotes what we do for each other. The word “sacrifice” is rooted in the word “holy”. Sacrifice is about putting aside self-interest in order to look out for another’s interests. Sacrifice is about giving up power and being vulnerable. Sacrifice is about desiring and working for and insisting upon the best—not as we might measure it, but as we see it from God’s holy viewpoint.

Justice is what love looks like in public, wrote Cornel West. And sacrifice is often what is required to bring justice. Love without sacrifice is hardly ever holy love; Jesus was not sacrificed for us, but in both word and deed, he showed us how sacrificial love creates space for changed lives, healed bodies, transformed spirits and a more just social order. He told the disciples and us— “This is the way to live. This is how to love.” This is why we say we are “on the Jesus path.”

Frederick Buechner says that in spite of all the variety in the Bible, there is an underlying theme: That we are lost. And that the Creator yearns to return the earth and us to our original glory.

In my understanding of a reconstructed Christian faith, we join a loving God in the work of liberating, healing, protecting, saving, and redeeming a beautiful Creation.

And as for mosquito bites—I recommend my grandmother’s solution: baking soda paste.