

Title: Jesus' Nonviolent Atonement

Text: John 1:19-34

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What do we do with all the violence in the Hebrew Bible, our Old Testament? Most Christians simply duck the issue. Bible scholar Raymond Schwager points out that there are six hundred passages of explicit violence and over one thousand verses where God's own violent actions of punishment are described. He says there are over a hundred passages where God expressly commands others to kill people. I think there was a lot of projecting of human feelings of anger and condemnation onto God.

Of course that's just half the story. There are a number of expressions of God's tender mercy and love in the Hebrew Bible as well. God is often depicted as patient and gracious and forgiving in his relationship with Israel and in some Scriptures, even those not in covenant relationship. Jonah, is one of my favorite Old Testament books, because it depicts God's compassion and love for a wicked, violent people who were not in a covenant relationship with God. God still cared for them

Theologian Walter Wink puts it this way: "The violence of the Bible is the necessary precondition for the gradual perception of the meaning of violence. It should come as no surprise that it was in a violent society that the real nature of violence was revealed. The problem of violence emerged at the very heart of violence, in the most war-ravaged corridor on the globe, among a repeatedly subjugated people unable to seize and wield power for any length of time. The violence of Scripture, so embarrassing to us today, became the means by which sacred violence was revealed for what it is: a lie perpetrated against victims in the name of God."

When we embrace the sacred violence we read about in the Bible we perpetuate their mistakes. We not only project our fears and anger onto God, we project onto one another as a way of trying to justify it and get rid of it. This process is called scapegoating because it is the process of transferring our guilt and sin onto someone else. Unfortunately, it is a common human pattern.

Projecting our sin and shame onto others as a way of dealing with our guilt and sin does offers a kind of temporary lift. We convince ourselves that the other is the enemy and the other deserves our hate, so we can hate without feeling guilty. It doesn't seem to matter how educated we are either, we still do it—the educated, however, do it with more sophistication and subtlety. When Hitler came to power in Germany and made scapegoating official policy Germany was the most educated nation in the world.

There is no end to the cycle once you are committed to it. Chauvenists hate women; radical feminists hate men. Liberals hate conservatives; conservatives hate liberals. The wealthy despise the poor and the poor despise the rich. There is no end to the divisions and the animosity.

Religion becomes evil when we use religion to disguise hate and prejudice; when we hate and despise others under the banner of God and theological correctness. And I am saddened to say that Christians have been just as guilty as anyone. There are those who worship Jesus as the one takes away our sin and then we make scapegoats of people who are different than us. We divide the world between 'us' and 'them,' the pure and impure, the saved and unsaved, our friends and our enemies.

Jesus, of course, refused to do this. Instead of dividing the world between the righteous and unrighteous, Jesus welcomed all people as his brothers and sisters. I am reminded of a group of American soldiers in France in WWII. One of them was killed and his friends wanted to bury him in the cemetery there, which was a Catholic cemetery. They went to the priest and he refused because their friend was Protestant. But he allowed them to bury him in an open space just outside the fence that enclosed the cemetery. Before the Americans could get the grave dug darkness fell and they decided to stop for the night and finish it the next morning. When they came back the next morning they couldn't find the grave. They went to the priest and he said, "Well, last night I couldn't sleep. I kept thinking about what I told you. So I went out and moved the fence. You can bury your friend in our cemetery." This is what Jesus does, he moves the fence, so that no one is excluded. Actually, Jesus tears down the fence, he tears down the walls that divide us.

In the Gospels you never see Jesus upset with sinners; you do, however, see Jesus upset with people who don't think they are sinners. But even then, Jesus never projects his anger onto others. Instead he bears it, just as he bears the hate and anger of others.

He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. He takes it away by absorbing it in himself. In bearing it he exposes it and ends the cycle of scapegoating, the cycle of denial and projection, the cycle of hate and violence.

Though Jesus dies a violent death, he doesn't take away our sin through violence. He bears the violence of the Roman soldiers, some of the Jewish leaders, and the crowd—but it is not the violence that is redemptive. There is no redemptive violence—there is only redemptive suffering. In the kingdom of God there is no redemptive violence, only redemptive suffering.

The mention of Jesus as the Lamb of God might recall to those familiar with Israel's story the Passover lamb, the blood of which marked the houses of the people of Israel and represented their deliverance from bondage and the beginning of a new way of life in a

covenant relationship with God. This may seem rather crude to us today—killing animals as a part of a religious ritual—as it should, because we live in a different time and culture. Animal sacrifice was common to ancient religion.

The point of connection between Jesus and the Passover lamb is what Jesus' death points toward. As the blood of the Passover lamb symbolized God's deliverance of his people from bondage and the beginning of a new way of life, so the death of Jesus points the way to our deliverance—deliverance from our bondage to hate and condemnation. We experience this deliverance by trusting in the way of the cross—which starts with forgiveness. Forgiveness puts an end to the cycle of hate and violence. Jesus died as a scapegoat to put an end to all scapegoating. Jesus bore the violence and returned good for evil.

In identifying Jesus as the Lamb of God there may also be an allusion here to the suffering servant song in Isaiah. Like a lamb led to be slaughtered Jesus does not retaliate or seek revenge; Jesus does not wish curses upon his enemies. He goes to the cross—a cruel means of execution devised by the Romans not only to kill but to humiliate those so sentenced—without wishing harm upon his enemies. The reason the cross becomes sacred is because here is where Jesus exposes the evil of scapegoating, the evil of transferring hate and projecting fear onto others. And it is where Jesus chooses the higher way, the way of forgiveness and peace over the way of revenge and retribution.

Forgiveness is at the very heart of the gospel and is among the most powerful human experiences. Richard Rohr remarks that forgiveness is probably the only human action that reveals three goodnesses simultaneously. When we forgive, we choose the goodness of the other over their faults, we experience God's goodness flowing through ourselves, and we also experience our own goodness in a way that almost surprises us. Rohr says, "That is an awesome coming together of power, both human and divine."

Ernest Hemmingway tells a story about a Spanish father who decided to reconcile with his son who had run away to Madrid. Now remorseful, the father takes out an ad in the newspaper: "Paco. Meet me at Hotel Montana noon Tuesday. All is forgiven. Papa. Paco is a common name in Spain, and when the father goes to the square he finds eight hundred young men there waiting for their fathers.

Hemmingway knew from his own family what the lack of grace and forgiveness could do. His parents were Christians and they detested Hemmingway's lifestyle. After a time his mother refused to allow him into her presence. One year she wrote him a letter explaining that a mother's life is like a bank and every child has a bank account. The child makes withdrawals during his years at home, but no deposits, so in the later years he is responsible to replenish the supply he has drawn from. Hemmingway's mother went on to point out all the ways he should be making deposits that would keep his account in good standing.

Hemmingway never got over his negative feelings toward his parents, and toward their Christian faith.

But we must not reject Jesus just because some of his would-be followers have misrepresented him and misunderstood him. Jesus was a revolutionary; but not the kind we normally think of. Most revolutions simply replace the people in power and use basically the same methods of power to enforce their will, which is about like rearranging the chairs on the Titanic. Jesus built a new boat. The power of the cross is the power to transform human relationships through forgiveness.

Jesus is the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world—and he does that by bearing it, by absolving it through forgiveness, but it is not forgiveness unless it is received with a forgiving spirit. As we share this bread and cup, let us remember how Jesus bore the hate and enmity through forgiveness and now he invites us to drink of the same cup and eat the same bread—the bread and cup of patient forgiveness.

Our gracious God, as we remember our Lord's death and the way he bore the anger and hate of those who crucified him, give us the grace to be steadfast and faithful in the way of Jesus, bearing the anger and hate of others through forgiveness.