

## **“Why Church? The Truth About the World”**

*Reading: Mark 10:35-45; Hebrews 2:14-18*

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For a few weeks now we've been exploring answers to the question, “Why church?” Why do what we do every Sunday? Why be a part of this strange group of people with strange beliefs and practices, when it would be so much easier to spend your time and effort doing something else? That question is necessary, in part, because so many people have so many arguments against the church and against the very existence of God Himself. One of the most persistent and common arguments people make is related to the problem of evil. Many people in the world have examples of such powerful evil, such surpassing wrongness, that they conclude a good, powerful God cannot exist. Many of us here in the church, even, have stories in our own lives, or stories from friends or family members, of times when things simply did not make sense. There are tragedies and crises that strike, and meaning and hope seem to be nowhere to be found. Sometimes we cry out to God in those times and it seems as though God is silent and absent, maybe even to the point of cruelty, and it seems better to conclude that He simply doesn't exist. Or some people conclude from any number of world tragedies, wars, famines, or diseases, that there cannot be a good, powerful God. If there was, how could He allow the things that happen? The world must be random, cruel, and impersonal. Why church, when we live in such a world?

We've been trying to provide some answers to that question by traveling through the book of Hebrews, which may have been written to encourage a group of early Christians who were considering walking away from Jesus in favor of their previous ways of belief. For them, it seems that the argument against Jesus was that they were being persecuted for following Him, and it's not unreasonable to question why you should keep serving a Lord who keeps getting you into trouble. If this God is not so powerful or so present as to save His followers from persecution, what sort of a God is He? So far we've answered our question by insisting that Jesus is Himself enough of an answer; that He satisfies and completes our desire for an object of worship. And more than that, the message of Jesus that the church proclaims tells us the truth about ourselves, that we're not okay, but there's hope because of what Jesus does.

And today we're taking it a step farther. Why church? Because the church tells the truth about the world. People are right to feel as though there's something wrong with the world. It's true that injustice and suffering really are wrong; they weren't meant to be. They're not just the way things are. But the church knows where evil comes from and what to do about it. The church wrestles with the messy reality of evil in the world; we don't deny it, we don't pretend that it isn't really evil, and we don't minimize its effects. We hold in tension the proclamation that God is indeed powerful enough to defeat evil — God is not responsible for evil, and He is present enough that He will defeat evil. The world is indeed a mess in many ways, but God is still good, and in fact He has already acted decisively to defeat evil and set the world right.

I want to emphasize the tension and the mess of this answer. It's so easy to miss how God's people actually deal with evil, because it's so easy to oversimplify the problems. For example, after one of the many recent mass shootings in our country, presidential candidate Mike Huckabee made the comment that we don't have a gun problem, we have a sin problem. That type of comment is not uncommon in some of these national debates; we don't have a racism problem, we have a sin

problem, or whatever. And that is certainly true; this issue of sin, this defect of the human soul that comes from rebellion against God, is certainly at the root of our problems. But to take a massively complex problem like gun violence in our country and reduce it down to only a “sin problem” is far too simplistic. The church does not look at the evils in the world and tell people that they just need to get saved and everything bad will go away. At the same time, it’s also easy to oversimplify the problem of evil by removing all responsibility from the equation and saying that people are purely the product of their circumstances or upbringing; on some level there is also the reality that people have free will and can, at some point, choose their course.

No, one of the reasons for being a part of the church is because the church is one of the few voices in the world that tells the truth about evil in the world, the truth about sin in the human heart, the truth about the complexity of unjust systems and structures in society, and then the church enters into that messy reality of evil and confronts it with an answer. Why church? Because the church recognizes that the world is not as it is meant to be, but we know that it’s in the process of being redeemed, and we join in with that messy, difficult, self-sacrificial work of redemption.

I draw that answer, once again, from the message of Hebrews. One of the central images the author of Hebrews draws from to describe the work of Jesus is the image of the high priest. Like we described last Sunday, the high priest was the one who was primarily responsible in Israel’s religion for mediating between the people and God. There is this problem of sin that separates us from God, and God set up a system of sacrifices offered by the people through the priesthood to atone for their sins. And again like we said last week, Jesus fulfills and completes this work of the high priest, showing that we do have a problem with sin, but there is a solution through the work of Christ.

But what we see in our passage today, and indeed in the Old Testament itself if we’re paying attention, is that there’s much more to the work of the priesthood than just that. Sometimes people understand sin to be a sort of debt we owe God, as though when we commit a sin, there’s an amount of punishment that we owe God associated with that sin, so that over time we build up this huge debt. And, in this thinking, the Old Testament sacrifices were almost like payments against that debt — I commit a sin, then I go sacrifice an animal so that the punishment can be paid. And then, following that logic, the price Jesus paid with His life is so great that it was enough to pay for everyone’s sin forever.

But there’s really much more to the work of a priest. Sacrifice wasn’t meant as *payment* for sin, it was meant as *atonement* for sin, which is not the same thing. Atonement makes things right, covers over the sin, and restores the broken relationship. And in fact the work of a priest in the Old Testament went far beyond just offering sacrifices (though that was the main thing) because their work involved making people and the nation right with God, and that’s a much bigger task.

So, for example, the priests were leaders of the worship of the people. They were involved in community life, in the complicated business of keeping neighbors and families in order. If you had a dispute with someone, you couldn’t worship until you had resolved it, and then once you had resolved your problem, you might go and share a sacrificial meal with your neighbor. Priests were involved in their society’s version of health care: if you were healed of a disease, you might head to the temple and offer a thank offering to God out of gratitude. In some cases they were even involved in the justice system, by arbitrating disputes and determining fault. The point is that the work of

atonement for sin went far beyond just dealing with the spiritual effect of sin, it also involved getting into the complexity of making the world a place of redemption and reconciliation. So yes, there was a “sin problem” that the priests were dealing with, but dealing with it involved the nitty gritty of people’s lives, relationship, and society.

That’s true in the ministry of Jesus, too. You may have noticed that the gospel books have quite a few chapters in them before they get to the part about Jesus dying on the cross. Yes, the crucifixion of Jesus is the single greatest act of salvation He accomplished, but He announced that the salvation of God had arrived in all kinds of ways. He healed the sick, He gave sight to the blind, He ate with sinners, He cast out demons, He taught and preached, He confronted injustice and called the powerful to account for their actions, He built up a community of faithful believers who would do similar works, and He forgave His enemies. The work of salvation — the work of confrontation and defeat of evil — involves much more than just being forgiven for doing something wrong.

This is why, in our passage of Hebrews for today, the author describes Jesus’ priestly work of atonement in terms of breaking the power of the devil and freeing God’s people from slavery and fear of death. The work of Jesus did more than just pay our debt of sin and let us sneak into heaven by the skin of our teeth after we die; the work of Jesus confronts the evil of the world and defeats it. The church’s proclamation is that yes, the world is broken and infected by evil, just as the human heart is, and just like the human heart, it was made by God to be good and beautiful, and He is doing mighty things to redeem it. And how is this evil confronted? By God humbling Himself and becoming incarnate as one of us, by being tempted as one of us, by suffering as one of us, and by giving His life.

This is how God’s kingdom operates. This is *why church*, because when we are listening to God’s call, we are realistic about the evil of this world in ways that no one else is, and we confront that evil in ways no one else does. In humility, we climb into the mess of the evil, and we give sacrificially of ourselves. This is at the heart of the conversation in our reading from Mark for today: James and John are looking for honor for themselves, and they ignorantly tell Jesus that they’re even willing to “drink the cup He drinks” if that’s what it takes. And Jesus knowingly says that yes, they will drink that cup, though they don’t know what that means, because there will come a time when they, too, will give of themselves to confront the evil of the world with the righteousness of God. And that confrontation comes this way: “whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all.” This ethic of servanthood is what defeats evil and sets the world right.

Just as Jesus followed the example of the priests and confronted the evils of the world in a variety of ways, the church has been at her best when she has done the same. We have been most effective at proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of Jesus Christ when we have been knee-deep in the muck of the world, engaging the complexities of the messes of society and individuals, offering hope and redemption to the lost not only through our preaching but also our personally costly actions. Engaging the world’s brokenness, in whatever form it takes, has always involved more than just saving souls: the church’s best witness comes when it faithfully preaches the word of God, *and* prophetically call the powers and authorities of the world to account, *and* meets the physical needs of the poor and sick, *and* uses the gift of beauty to add redemptive music and art to the world, *and* engages in the prophetic act of prayer, *and* builds redemptive relationships with those of other communities of faith and belief, and on and on.

The contrast comes from the Pharisees, those stock villains of the gospel accounts. Not all of them were evil, certainly, but there were some of them in Jesus' time who focused themselves obsessively on purity above all else. Their sole concern was maintaining the bounds of ritual purity, following the commands of God to the letter and beyond. They thought that the work of God of redeeming the world was this all-encompassing practice of personal piety. The result, of course, was that when the greatest work of God in history, the work of Jesus Christ, was standing in front of them, they couldn't see it, and in fact they fought against it. And likewise, the church has historically gotten into trouble when it has reduced this messy, self-sacrificial engagement with evil down to only personal holiness, or only social action, or only personal belief, or any other oversimplification.

So why church? Because the church is realistic about the fact that we live in a broken, imperfect world, but there is hope because of what Jesus does, and that hope calls us to participate in the messy, difficult work of redemption. How is God calling you to participate in confronting the evil of the world today?



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