

I have told this story before, but I trust your memory is no better than mine and that you've forgotten it. An engineer, a psychologist, and a theologian were on a hunting trip deep in the Canadian wilderness. They knocked on the door of an isolated cabin seeking shelter and rest. The cabin was not, at the moment, occupied, but the front door was unlocked. They entered the small two room cabin and notices something very unusual. A large heavy potbellied cast iron stove was suspended in mid-air by wires attached to the ceiling beams.

Why would someone hang a stove from the ceiling? The psychologist shared his idea, "It is obvious that this is the lodging of a lonely trapper. Isolated from humanity he has elevated his stove so that he can curl up under it and vicariously experience a return to his mother's womb."

The engineer rejected this idea as nonsense and concluded, "This man is practicing the laws of thermodynamics. Though counterintuitive at first, he has obviously discovered that by elevating the stove the air currents in the room disperse the heat more evenly."

The theologian rejected both of these ideas. He said, "I'm sure that hanging the stove from the ceiling as a religious

meaning. Fire lifted up has been a religious symbol for centuries."

The engineer, the psychologist, and the theologian continued to argue for some time without coming to a conclusion. They argued so long that the trapped finally returned. They immediately asked him why he had hung his potbellied stove from the ceiling. He replied, "I had a lot of wire, but not much stovepipe."

It is easy for experts to come to spectacular answers to very simple problems. Pastors are no exceptions. Yet at the risk of doing just that, I want to look at what we call "atonement theories." Atonement is an easy work to define. Just take it apart. It means at-one-ment; or being at one with God.

The question Christians have always had to face is how on earth does Jesus' crucifixion connect with our lives today? It's a fine thing to say that Jesus died for you on the cross, but what does that really mean? How does it work? I've said before that at the core of your Christian beliefs is a really bizarre thing. To put it bluntly, you believe that somehow, someway, some guy getting publically nailed up to a stick in Palestine some 2000 years ago has some sort of relevance for

your life today! When you put it that way, it can seem like a pretty silly thing to have as the core of your religious understanding. Therefore we have atonement theory - these attempts to make the connection.

There have been three major atonement theories developed by Christians over the centuries. The first one is often called the classical view. In this theory humanity is regarded as enslaved by sin, death, and the devil and cannot free itself. God in Christ accomplished the work of defeating these powers thereby setting everyone free. It appears as if the earliest Christians theologians (St. Paul among them) and Martin Luther held to this theory. If you have been a long time Lutheran you are probably very familiar with this. It permeates much of the theology I do.

The second one is called, "Substitutionary" or "sacrificial victim" theory. In this theory the disobedience of humanity is seen as nothing less than an affront to God, and this requires satisfaction. Because no creature can properly offer such a satisfaction, God had to do it. This theory was developed about 1000 years ago. If you have a Roman Catholic background, Presbyterian, or United Methodist background you probably heard a lot about this theory of atonement. If you've ever come

across a critique of the crucifixion as being a sort of child abuse by the God the Father to Christ the Son, it is based on this. Similarly, most theologies that talk about God being vengeful or making demands of humans come out of this atonement theory.

The third atonement theory is called the "moral influence" theory. Here the idea is that Jesus' death is a model of moral behavior because it reveals to humans how much God loves them. People should then live in a similarly sacrificial way. This theory has also been around for about 1000 years but it wasn't until you get to late 19th and early 20th century liberal North American Christians, especially those in the social gospel movement, that it became popular.

The thing is, each of these theories has its strengths and weaknesses. None of them are perfect. For centuries theologians have argued in circles over them. I bring all this up because our gospel reading for today can give us significant insight into all of this.

You don't have to worry about understanding the finer points of each of these theories. Just note this. In the first two I mentioned - classical and substitutionary - it is all

God's actions. Humans are helpless and incapable. In the third one - moral influence - it is all about *your actions* embracing God's love. Our gospel reading teaches us to hold both of these ideas in tension.

In verse 31 Jesus says, "Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I when I am lifted up will draw all people to myself." There you have *God's actions* in saving you. In verse 26 Jesus says, "Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am there will my servant be also." Here you have *your actions* in the relationship with God.

And that may bring us to the overarching thing we learn from John's gospel. John depicts faith as *relationship* with God. Relationships, at least any healthy ones, are two way streets. Both parties must be engaged. Both parties must work at it. Both parties must want to be in it. As John portrays it, the life of Jesus witnesses to the relationship that exists between himself and the Father.

John's gospel doesn't worry a whole lot about a future judgment day. He quotes Jesus as saying, "Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out." As John was writing he sense that a possible future judgment

event didn't matter all that much. Ultimately it was secondary. What was primary was how a person responded to an encounter with Jesus, and thus the love of God. That is primary because how that occurs determines how any future judgment will go.

I think the way John's gospel puts ideas of atonement in tension is both a healthy view for us to have and an authentic experience of what it means to live as a Christian. Sometimes we feel God's love pushing us forward with boldness and confidence. We can make great sacrifices for others, yet feel powerfully nourished as we do it.

Then there are other times when God appears distant. We wonder what God is up to. We may even question whether God exists, or if God is even loving. Yet out of a sense of duty we continue on being faithful. It feels like work. It feels like sacrifice; and we certainly hope God will reward us for it.

Ultimately it is God's work, and we are honored to have a significant part in it. May your relationship with God grow and strengthen every day. Amen