



Sermon by: Rev. Dr. Randy Bush
Text: Hebrews 10:19-25

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Positive Provocation

In the year AD 312, Constantine won the Battle of Milvian Bridge and became the new Roman emperor. He brought with him a commitment to the Christian faith, and as emperor he insisted on “one God, one Lord, one faith, one church.” The problem was the church at that time was not united. So Constantine brought the leaders together at the Council of Nicaea in AD 325 to create a creed upon which everyone could agree. Out of that process came the Nicene Creed – a baptism creed similar to the Apostles’ Creed many of you have memorized. The Nicene Creed is in our Presbyterian Book of Confessions and it starts like this: *We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.* So far so good: an opening statement about God being the Almighty Creator of Life both physical and spiritual.

Next comes this: *We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one Being with the Father.* Now this seems like a very wordy way of saying that Jesus is the Son of God. In truth, this language relates to a messy theological argument happening back in Constantine’s time and to explain more about it would require a lecture in and of itself. The part I’m interested in today is the next sentence: *For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven and became truly human.* Jesus came to earth, became human, “for us and for our salvation.” That is good news! But being curious Christians, we need more information. So we raise our hands and ask, “Excuse me, how exactly does Jesus bring about our salvation? How do we move from our old worldly life to a new life sanctified and saved by Christ?”

That is a great question and the answer to it is contained in one, fancy, theological word: atonement. Atonement is basically about how Jesus helps us get right with God. Rob, Teresa, and I, and all the retired clergy in this sanctuary, had to talk a lot about atonement when we were in seminary. So here’s a crash course on the subject today. Imagine walking down a hallway and coming to a large lecture room labeled “Theories of Atonement.” You open the door and see tables set up around the room with people behind desks in heated discussions with one another. The question you hope to have answered is this: “How did Jesus Christ bring about our salvation?” You first notice Old Testament scholars with research papers about animal sacrifices in the Jerusalem temple, talking about how Jesus was the sacrificial lamb who atoned for our sins. You also see New Testament scholars pointing to verses in Colossians and I Corinthians about how Jesus came to earth to defeat Satan’s power.

Nearby there are old church fathers like Origen talking about how, because of the fall in the Garden of Eden, all human beings are slaves to sin whose freedom had to be bought; so Jesus paid a ransom by his death to do just that. Other scholars like Anselm talk about how God alone is holy and perfect, so only when someone like Jesus takes away our sin is God satisfied that humans can once more enter into God's holy presence. Now across the room, scholars like Abelard and Martin Luther argue that God's love is what is most important; and salvation comes when we accept this love as revealed in the suffering of Christ, which sets us free to feel compassion for all who suffer and thus to love one another. Søren Kierkegaard and Paul Tillich nod in agreement with this, saying that Christ's unity with God is what saves us, for when we participate in Christ's very being by faith we too enter into that same unity with God. Martin Luther King, Jr. goes even further, preaching that by being one with Christ in this way, we are not only saved, but we now have the power to conquer evil in society around us.

It's a lot to take in; and it's hard to sort out which are the best answers. But then you notice something subtle about how the room is organized. Remember, the question we wanted to answer was: How does Jesus bring about our salvation? Everyone on the left side of the room seemed to suggest that Jesus' death and resurrection changed something in God. God wouldn't accept us as slaves until someone paid a ransom for us. God in God's holiness couldn't be in communion with us until Jesus' washed away our sin and impurity. But it doesn't make sense to believe God is the one who needs to change in order for us to be saved.

Over on the right side of the room, Abelard, Luther, Tillich and Dr. King, seem closer to the right answer. God's love has always been there for us. And the suffering and resurrected Christ models how oneness with God is truly possible in this life, which gives us hope for our own relationship with God. Hearing Christ say, "*I am the vine and you are the branches; those who abide in me and I in them will bear much fruit*" is when we realize that it's not God who needs to change. Salvation comes when Christ changes us; when by his loving example we now have the courage to feel compassion and to love others. We become new creatures altogether. By grace and God's steadfast love, we are atoned for, saved, and set free.

We needed to spend time grappling with the whole idea of atonement this morning, because until we'd done so, the richness of today's reading from Hebrews couldn't speak to you its life-giving message of hope. In those verses, there's no mention of devils, ransoms, or a God who needs to be appeased. The verses take the Old Testament language about sacrifices and transforms it into something that focuses on how we are made new by the loving example of Jesus Christ, our Savior. Listen: *Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood (by the sacrifice) of Jesus, the new and living way he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh), and since we have a great priest over the house of God (namely Jesus Christ), let us approach God with a true heart in the full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies*

washed with pure water (baptism). Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful.

These verses aren't about an angry God we are unworthy to approach. These verses call us to enter God's house with confidence through a doorway opened by Christ, who is one with God, true God of true God. And to do so without wavering or hesitating, not because we are perfect, but because the one we worship and trust is perfect. Abiding in Jesus now and, by God's grace, trusting that he is with us even to the end of the age, in that is our atonement. In that we are saved.

Which begs a second question: If we are saved, what should we do now? This question is answered beautifully in the last two verses of the passage: [Now] *let us consider how to provoke one another to love and [do] good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but [always] encouraging one another.* Simply put, we are to meet together, worship together, and literally provoke one another to do what is good after the example of Jesus Christ. The author Kathleen Norris was once asked by a college student how she could stand to go to church or stand the hypocrisy of Christians. In one of those rare moments when she knew the right thing to say, she replied, "The only hypocrite I have to worry about on Sunday morning is myself." She went on to say that even when she finds church boring or uninspiring, she's there in the pews because, as she put it, "I need to be reminded that love can be at the center of all things, if we will only keep it there."¹

As today is Pledge Dedication Sunday, I should include a sentence about why giving to the church is important. It's quite simple. We don't ask for pledges because we need your help to pay our bills, our wages, or our mission commitments. We pledge because it is a tangible way to push back on a world that doesn't care about one another, that doesn't want you to see yourself as part of a larger salvation history, and that doesn't want you to remember that love is at the center of all things. Pledging is a provocation to love and do good deeds, just like it says in this letter of Hebrews. And as part of the church of Jesus Christ right here at Immanuel, we are called to positive provocation every day. We are to be encouragers of one another, like spectators on the sidelines of a race encouraging the runners to keep pressing on to the finish line. We are to speak up and break the silence whenever fear and evil think they have the final word. We are to trust in a holy grace that makes us more than we could ever be alone, abiding as branches in the true, living vine that is Christ the Lord, who came for us and for our salvation.

That's the good news revealed to us long ago. That's the message Constantine asked the church leaders to compose in the Nicene Creed. So they boldly proclaimed their belief in God the Creator, maker of heaven and earth, all that is seen and unseen. They professed faith in one Lord, Jesus Christ, eternally begotten of the Father, who for us and for our salvation came down from heaven. And then they ended their creed by saying, We believe in the Holy Spirit, the giver of life who proceeds from the Father and the Son, as we await the life of the world to come. May that same Spirit move you forward this day

by faith, as you look to Christ whose example and atoning love has won your salvation. And as you're positively provoked, may you provoke others to love, to do good deeds, and to walk humbly with your God. AMEN

¹ Kathleen Norris, The Cloister Walk, 1996, p. 346.